



ANGELS
& ASSASSINS
BOOK EIGHT

REQUIEM

FOR LOVE

K. ALEX WALKER

REQUIEM FOR LOVE

A DARK ROMANCE

ANGELS AND ASSASSINS

BOOK 8

K. ALEX WALKER

SAGE HILL ROMANCE

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For Maui

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requiem (n)

an act or token of remembrance

CHAPTER 1

They'd perfected acting normal.

They'd convinced those around them, and at times, even themselves, that they were stable, sane, and non-threatening, all because it had been a few months since their last assignment. Yet, the silence came with its share of uneasiness, and being still was a skill they were beginning to realize they might never hone.

Central, they could leave behind.

Black Ops, not so much.

However, like stable, sane, and non-threatening people, they made innocuous plans for holidays, birthdays, and vacations. Currently, they were in Fiji to get a break from the frigid weather in Sweden.

Joel looked around the villa and understood why Julien had picked up on communications that suggested they'd gotten too powerful. To them, they were friends who'd grown as close as family. On the outside looking in, they were forming a syndicate.

Gage joined him in the kitchen, holding a glass bottle of a non-alcoholic drink ironically named ginger beer. "Mate,

you're scaring the kids," he said. "Is there a reason you're staring and not speaking?"

The crystal clear waters through the open doors behind Ayesha's head returned. Children's screams, along with splashing noises in the pool, rose from unknown depths. Breezes blew, tossing about the fronds on the palms surrounding the property.

She was so damn beautiful.

It was hard to notice anything other than her sun-kissed brown skin, glossed lips, eyes like the horizon at dawn, and the braided strands that fell about her shoulders. The tropics had welcomed her with open arms from the top of her head down to the decorated blue polish on her toes.

"Lattimore."

"Uh," Joel cleared his throat, "I don't know what you mean."

"We're back to doing this again?"

"And what's 'this'?"

"Pretending that you're not in love with Ayesha. Come on, Lattimore. The only person who's spent more time with Eesh is Curtis."

Joel leaned back against the kitchen cabinets and folded his arms. Ayesha glanced at him for all of two seconds, and a sensation sparked in his chest he was pretty certain was a small heart attack.

"I'm working on it. I have a strategy."

"At my wedding, you were ready to kill Tayler's cousin for *dancing* with her," Gage added. "I know you're worried about the future, but we all could die, and not from the job. We could

go out there, get in a wreck, and never come home. Would it have been worth it, then? Spending all your time looking at her from across the room rather than waking up next to her in the morning?”

He slid a glance in Gage’s direction. “Could you write me one of those? I need a sonnet to recite to her outside her bedroom window on a dreary Sunday morning.”

Gage, chuckling, tipped back his drink.

Ayesha glanced up again.

Their gazes held until Theo and Thandie burst into the main room from the pool, Thandie crying and Theo sputtering through his defense opening statement. To Joel’s surprise, Thandie ran to him instead of Ayesha.

“Uncle Joel,” Thandie wrapped her arms around him, “Theo’s being mean.”

Theo flicked away the accusation. “Nuh-uh. I do not have a mean bone in my body.”

Joel ran a hand over her damp, curly hair. “What’d he do?”

“He—”

“It was an accident!”

An interruption meant Theo was guilty. If Theo was culpable of a crime, he objected whenever the prosecution tried to present their side of the argument.

Thandie tilted her head. “He did *this*.”

A line of three red scratch marks started at the corner of her left eye, stretched to her ear, and ended at the base of her neck.

“Oh, no.” Joel motioned for Ayesha to join them. “That’s not acceptable, Theo.”

Theo rolled his eyes.

“Give that another try,” Joel and Gage said.

“Sorry, Joel.” Theo’s bottom lip quivered. “Sorry, Unco Gage.”

Theo, usually carefree and more mischievous than unkind, had started showing out through loud tantrums and defiance over the last few months. He was also having nightmares and struggled to sleep through the night. Now, it appeared he’d escalated to assault.

They’d chalked it up to the move, that maybe he was having a hard time adjusting to life in Sweden, but they’d been in Fiji for a couple of weeks so far, and the issues continued to increase in intensity.

Ayesha joined them in the kitchen. “Is everything okay?” she asked. “Did something happen?”

Joel motioned to Thandie’s face.

“Theo did that?” She zeroed in on Theo. “Baby, did you hurt Thandie?”

“Auntie, I think it was an accident,” Thandie said.

“Don’t come to his defense.” Ayesha took Theo’s hand. “Come on. We need to talk.”

Joel hung back, but she stopped when she reached the door to her bedroom and nodded, indicating that she wanted him to follow—which made sense. Theo *did* have a tendency to listen to him. According to her, it was the timbre of his voice. The rest of the guys called it “Dad voice” and claimed it was a

“power” most men didn’t realize they had, whether or not they had children.

Ayesha took a seat on the bed and positioned Theo between her knees. Joel leaned against the wall, watching them, arms folded.

“Now, explain what happened,” she said.

Theo looked over at the room’s glass sliding doors, which framed a picturesque view of the beachfront. “We were playing, and she made me so angry.”

Ayesha placed two fingers beneath his chin and returned his face to hers. “Angry, how?”

“I didn’t want to play her game. Just because she’s older’n me, everybody acts like I’m s’posed to listen to her, but she’s only a little bit older.”

“Baby, even if you don’t want to ‘listen’ to her, you didn’t have to put your hands on her.”

Theo reached into his bag of attitude and pulled out a handful of audacity. “It wasn’t my hands, Mama. It was my *fingers*.”

Ayesha exhaled longer than their flight from Europe to Fiji and muttered something under her breath. To Joel, it sounded like she was praying, counting, or both.

“Hey,” Joel called.

Tears sprung from Theo’s eyes, and Ayesha looked at him as if to say, “*See? Dad voice*” before nudging Theo closer.

“You want to tell me what’s been going on with you?” she asked. “Since when do we hurt our family?”

Theo's head bobbed with each hard sniff. "N-never. W-we don't hurt the p-people we l-love."

Joel walked over and crouched next to him. "What made you so upset that you thought the only solution was to scratch Thandie?"

"I d-don't know." More tears came, and Theo's face flushed until he was crimson from his collarbone to his hairline. "Can I go *pologize* to Thandie? I'm really s-sorry, and I didn't mean to h-hurt her."

Ayesha scanned his tiny body as if searching for clues as to what was causing his changing behavior. "Yes, you can go apologize to Thandie," she said. "We'll talk more later."

"Can I have a hug, Mama? Or are you too angry wiff me?"

She pulled him into her arms, kissing the side of his face. "I love you, baby. I'll never be too upset to hug you, but you know that when there's a problem you can't work out, you get an adult to help you find a solution. I'm very disappointed you did that."

Theo's sniffles matured into an all-out cry. "I'm sorry, Mama. Please don't be...*dis-pointed*. I can still be...a good kid."

"Theo, you *are* a good kid," Joel reassured him. "We know you didn't mean it, but sometimes, even when we don't mean to hurt the people we love, we can still hurt them really badly. And wouldn't you feel terrible if you *really* hurt Thandie?"

Theo nodded.

"So you see why we have that rule about how we love each other?" Ayesha asked.

"Yes, Mama."

She released him. “Okay. Go apologize to Thandie.”

Theo turned. “Joel, do you still love me even though I did something bad?”

Joel wiped away the tears on Theo’s cheeks with his thumb, then folded Theo into a hug. “Always. We’ll love you forever. Forever and ever and ever.”

“And ever?”

“Now you’re asking for too much, bud.”

Theo, giggling, stepped back. “I’ll go ‘pologize now.”

After one more round of hugs, he left the room, swiping and rubbing at his eyes.

Joel rose from his crouch and sat beside Ayesha on the mattress. The slippery fabric from her cover-up brushed the side of his calf. “Think it’s us making him more aggressive?” he asked. “Me and the guys, I mean. Because of what we do?”

“He doesn’t know exactly what you guys do,” she said. “Plus, he thinks of you as some kind of superhero who defeats bad guys.” She reached across and stroked the middle of his back, and she might as well have proposed marriage. “I don’t know, Joel. Something’s going on with him.”

“We’ll get to the bottom of it.”

“We?”

“Yes, we. Me and you.”

She groaned. “But I don’t want to. You do it.”

Then she smiled, but he couldn’t return the gesture. Not when she was sitting next to him, the woman he’d loved for so long it felt unnatural that they weren’t “together.”

“I’m kidding, of course,” she added.

His gaze shifted to her mouth.

All it would take was one kiss, and their agony would be over. No other woman had caught his eye, but it wasn't as though he'd looked for one. Had he tried to date, the minute the woman came close enough, she would have seen Ayesha's reflection in his irises.

"Hey, Ma?" Josiah lightly tapped on the door, severing their connection. "Are you and Joel still talking to Theo?"

They slid apart.

"You can come in, Siah," she said.

Josiah poked his head inside.

When he spotted them sitting next to each other on the bed, he entered the room holding sheets of paper in one hand with a beach towel draped around his shoulders.

"Are you guys busy? There's something I have to show you, and it's kind of weird." He took a seat in the space between them. "Um, so Theo and Thandie were drawing earlier, and Theo drew something, like I said, pretty weird."

He flipped the papers over.

The first was a child's drawing of a figure. The figure had no features to speak of, not even a discernible face, and was jet-black from head to toe. It stood in front of a house as though staring at it, but it was difficult to tell whether it was the Maui or Sweden house.

"Theo drew this?" Joel asked.

Josiah nodded. "And there's more."

The next drawing was of three people asleep inside a house. Joel leaned closer, and there were enough details to

determine that the people were Josiah, Ayesha, and Theo. The lagoon in the back meant this one was the Maui house, and while the three of them slept, the figure peered through the window into Theo's bedroom.

"The last one's the creepiest." After an exhale so hard it dropped his shoulders, Josiah unveiled the last page.

Ayesha gasped.

Joel's body went on alert.

The last drawing was of Josiah and Ayesha standing in front of a house, blue circles dripping from their eyes. The figure made an appearance here as well, this time with a single fang protruding from its head area. On the ground lay two bodies, one not readily identifiable; however, the other was clearly Theo. The two bodies lay side by side with Xs for eyes in a sea of red crayon.

"Is this why he's scared to go to sleep?" Josiah asked. "Do you think these are him drawing his dreams?"

Joel stared at the motionless, sticklike little boy on the ground with Theo's hair and complexion. "Honestly, Josiah, I don't know, but I want to hold on to these."

"I think the other person's Curtis," Ayesha said. "Theo's only seen pictures of him, but I'm pretty sure that's Curtis' hair, and those squiggly lines are supposed to be his *pe'a*. His tattoos. So, is Theo saying that this...figure, or whatever, is going to kill him and put him in a grave like his father?"

A thought crept through Joel's mind, that the figure could represent an actual person, but he kept it to himself. If he shared it, Ayesha would spiral. When it came to Josiah and Theo, it barely took a push to send her over the deep end.

It was why Curtis' family triggered her the way they did. She saw their disappointment as reflections of Curtis. But if what had happened a few years back in Maui was any indication, he knew firsthand that Curtis continued to love Ayesha from the great beyond.

Josiah handed over the papers, slapped his palms on his thighs, and stood with the groan of a man fifty years older. "Ma, Joel, I'm really worried about Theo. Why is this happening? What if this never goes away?"

Ayesha gave his hand a light squeeze. "Sweetie, this could all be part of him adjusting to life outside Maui. Even if it's something else, me and Joel will get to the bottom of it. I promise. Thanks for bringing these to us."

Josiah nodded and left the room, dragging his feet with his head bowed and his shoulders slumped. Not long after, they followed him and headed for the outdoor dining space for dinner. As usual, Mike and Tayler had prepped the food. Everyone would be at the table, sparkling beach and saltwater pool be damned.

"Do you think it's a manifestation?" Ayesha asked, and if they walked any slower, time would lap them. "The figure could be some sort of symbol."

Joel took her hand.

She looped her fingers through his.

If he kissed her, she would kiss him back. She would let him tug her hair, grab her ass, and smear her lip gloss. Yet, uncertainty wasn't what kept him from kissing her so hard she'd somehow wind up pregnant.

"I'm hoping it's only a manifestation," he said. "But if it escalates, we'll have to look at other possibilities."

“Such as?”

“If this figure could represent a real person.”

“Joel, one of those drawings is the figure at the window while we’re all sleeping.” Her chest pitched higher, faster. “Do you think somebody was in our house, and I didn’t know?”

The best-case scenario was that the figure turned out to be a symbol. He couldn’t bring himself to think about the worst-case scenario for something like this.

“Julien set up your security system.” He raised the back of her hand to his lips. “It’s not a system your average hacker can get through.”

“And if it’s not an average person?”

“Then that would present even more possibilities, but let’s deal with what’s in front of us right now.”

She continued to breathe like air was scarce, so he pulled her aside, out of view of the table, and held her against his midsection. She wrapped her arms around him, melted into him, and he realized then what was the true culprit of his hesitation.

Eventually, the rise and fall of her chest matched his, but he didn’t let go right away. Holding her felt natural, which had been the case since they took that walk on the beach in Malibu long ago, and all he’d needed then was her hand in his. Each time he touched her, he knew she was the only person he wanted this close, fabric against fabric and skin against skin.

“Better?” he asked.

She dragged in a breath. “Yeah.”

“Are you sure? I can carry you to the table if you’d like.” He tilted her face up to his. “Ayesha, Ayesha, Ayesha. You are

so damn gorgeous to me. Did you know that?”

“And you’re so damn beautiful to me, Joel Lattimore. Did *you* know *that*?”

He cupped the side of her face. “I was wondering—”

“*Mama! Where are you?*”

“Wondering what?” she asked.

He raised her hand to his lips and kissed each fingertip. “Later. If he doesn’t see you in the next five seconds, he’ll contact Interpol.”

They separated and headed for the loud vibrancy of the table.

Josiah inhaled his food, and when Tayler asked him if he needed scuba gear, he laughed and nearly spat rice across the table.

Theo kicked his legs while Ayesha shredded his chicken to ensure it had close to the same bite as the rice.

Joel put together their plates and set Ayesha’s, along with a glass of lemonade, in front of her. Afterward, he took the seat next to Josiah.

It wasn’t the first time they’d situated themselves like this, him and Ayesha with the boys between them. He wanted it to mean more than it currently did, and they were both ready to be more, but he kept chickening out. When he wasn’t, he was missing innuendos that clearly indicated she wanted him to warm her bed.

However, the issue he’d run into, the realization he’d come to only moments ago, was that he wasn’t interested in asking Ayesha to be his girlfriend.

Since they started spending time together, they never seriously dated other people, which had nothing to do with being too busy. It was because they'd been dating each other and lying to themselves about it, using their pasts to hide the fact that they'd been a couple for two years—at least.

As far as he was concerned, she was his girlfriend. Ayesha was his partner, soulmate, confidante, other half, and better half, regardless of them not owning a piece of paper legally binding them to one another.

Still, he wanted that paper.

“Joel, can you help me, please?” Theo raised his hands in the air, both covered in food residue. “I don't want to drop it.”

Joel brought Theo's cup to his mouth. They'd graduated from the sippy cup, but something told him he and Ayesha would likely have to return to using tumblers and straws.

And maybe a bib.

“Slow down, Theo,” he gently chided.

Theo leaned back, licked his lips, and released a satisfied *ahh*. Joel grabbed a napkin and wiped juice and sauce from Theo's face, despite knowing at least one would return the minute he was done.

Theo tilted his chin. “Am I cute again?”

“Again?” Joel tousled his hair. “When are you not, kid?”

Theo, giggling, returned to his food.

Joel set the cup on the table and looked up to find Ayesha watching them.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

She nodded and slipped a golden slice of plantain into her mouth.

It didn't matter what they pretended to be on the outside; he was as deeply rooted in her heart as she was in his. If that was the case, if he officially wanted her to be his, the only thing stopping that from happening was one simple question.

CHAPTER 2

Ayesha stood overlooking the beach, tired but not sleepy after spending over an hour trying to calm Theo down enough to fall asleep. It didn't matter that he and Josiah were sharing a room. The only people who could ease his night terrors without effort were the Lethal Six.

She stretched, the ocean breezes whipping her braids around her head and her maxi-dress cover-up tickling her ankles. When she sensed someone walking up behind her, she quickly swiped at her eyes and forced a smile.

The last thing she needed was for Joel to find out there was more on her plate than Theo's night terrors. His reaction to Theo's daycare teacher's insinuations was more than enough proof there were certain things she needed to keep to herself in order to protect the general public.

His presence dwarfed her from behind. "You didn't call me."

"You were with the guys," she said.

"Which means?"

"That this is a vacation for you too."

He moved, situating himself beside her. "Ayesha, Theo might not know what I do, but he knows it's about keeping

people safe. That seems to give him some peace. It might have been easier if you let me help you.”

If she let him, he would put everything on his shoulders, and she knew the issue with Central having a target on their backs loomed over him.

“What about when we go home?” she asked. “What if he gets too used to you tucking him in, and we go home? Where will you be?”

“Right next to you, like always.”

“Joel...” She pressed her palm against her stomach. “Don’t say things like that.”

“Why not?”

“I might fall in love.”

“Can’t have that.” The side of his mouth tugged. “Ayesha, are you worried about you, Theo, and Josiah getting comfortable with me doing something, and then I can’t do it any longer? Are you afraid something might happen to me?”

It wasn’t fear.

It was sheer terror.

Something happening to Joel would be like reliving Curtis’ death magnified. She’d dared to love again, so if she lost him, it was possible not even the guys would be able to guide her back to sanity.

“Joel, it doesn’t matter what kind of relationship we have. If I lose you, I lose part of myself.”

“Sure you’re not already in love with me?” he asked. “That sounded very ‘in love’ with me.”

“Nah.” She flicked her wrist. “You’re not my type. Tall, good-looking, and kind with pretty eyes? *Blech.*”

“I know what you mean. If only I were into goddesses with beautiful brown skin, sultry eyes, and a perfect mouth. Makes me nauseous thinking about the sweet sound of your voice and the way you say my name.”

“Joel.”

He shuddered. “Disgusting.”

She laughed.

He smiled, his focus on the setting sun at the edge of the clear ocean waters. The winds whipped his hair around, and she forced herself to look away, knowing she could stare at this man for hours if given the chance.

She thought back to the fantasy life they’d built together. The idea of a short courtship because they’d essentially been together for years, and then he would propose to her on the beach.

Now, it all seemed like too much.

They spent so much time together that “dating” seemed pretentious. She and Joel could walk into a chapel tomorrow and get married, and it would be virtually no different from a couple who’d spent a few years together before taking the leap.

“Who from Curtis’ family did you talk to today?” he asked. “I’ve been watching you. You didn’t come out here only to listen to the waves.”

She knew she’d have to lie, but for a moment, she considered telling him. She considered what he would do and how he would react if he read the text from Curtis’

grandmother, sent through one of Curtis' older sisters. They'd sent it in response to her telling them she would go no-contact if they couldn't accept Theo.

`A`ohe lokomaika`i i nele i ke pâna`i.

This means "our kindness to you

WILL be rewarded."

Honor Curtis for once in your life.

Bring his child home.

His "child."

She nearly threw her phone.

Curtis' grandmother was what her mother would have called someone "set in their ways," unwilling to budge out of stubbornness hardened by age. Joel had accepted Theo and Josiah like they were his own sons. Yet, Theo shared blood with these people, and they treated him like an "other."

If she told Joel, he would comb the island and assassinate them one by one. So, rather than the truth, she gave him half of a lie.

"It's just Theo. I'm worried sick about him."

He shoved his hands into his pockets. "I know that's not everything that's bothering you—you forget how well I know you—but I know that's a big part of it. What if you *did* take a step back and let me handle it?"

She hacked out a dry laugh. "Then what would I worry about? I'm not sure I can operate without worry."

"How about you try? For me."

"Since you put it that way," she raised a pinky, "I'll do my best...for you."

He stared at her raised hand, lightly stroked her pinky, and then hooked his with hers. Their joined fingers dangled between their bodies.

“There’s actually something important I want to talk to you about,” he said. “Come to my room later. After everyone’s asleep.”

All the saliva left her mouth.

“And don’t stay out here too late. I don’t care how private of a beach it is; if something happens to you, you know it doesn’t matter who I have to torture to find you.”

He gently squeezed her hand and walked off.

She watched him go, studying the broad lines of his shoulders and the way his shirt hung on his chiseled frame. Most mornings, they all took turns exercising in the villa’s gym. Some mornings, they subbed the workout for a hike, a swim, or a run on the beach. Every morning, she tripped over imaginary twigs and seashells or nearly dropped weights on her toes, distracted while staring at Joel’s bare torso.

“Marry me?” she whispered. “I love you.”

She spent the next hour sitting on the beach, thinking about Theo, Curtis’ family, and Joel. As the lights in the villa progressively shut off one by one, her thoughts tapered until all she could think about was Joel. It wouldn’t be her first time alone with him in a bedroom, but she no longer had the willpower she once did. In her mind, this man was her husband.

“Curtis, you there?” She twisted the ring on her finger and looked up, the dark sky twinkling like someone had overturned a basket of stars. “What do you think, baby? You like him, right?”

A wave slammed the shore.

Crystal-clear water wove between her toes.

“Yeah, me too. I love the way he makes me feel. I love how he loves our boys. And, ever since Joel started coming around, I haven’t felt alone as a woman or as a parent.”

A gust of wind tickled her face.

“Yeah, I am. I’m in love with him, but I’d be lying if I said I’m never afraid that loving him will make you think I’ve forgotten you.”

The gust of wind passed through her fingers and caressed her calves underneath the dress. Gage and Tayler’s muffled voices floated past her from the villa.

“I’ll never forget you, Curtis. As long as I live. Honestly, I feel like you sent Joel to us. He just,” she sighed, smiling a little, “fits. You’d like him. Well, except for the whole me being in love with him thing, you’d like him. I’m kind of stumped about what’ll happen once I get there. I mean, are threesomes allowed in heaven?”

Another light went off in the villa. The only one that remained was the one in the kitchen, where Tayler sat on the island countertop with Gage in front of her, Gage’s palms planted on either side of Tayler’s body. They laughed about something while Gage intermittently kissed Tayler’s chin and forehead.

A breeze delicately brushed Ayesha’s cheek and lips. “I love you, Curtis,” she said. “Sleep well, okay? We’ll talk again soon.”

She stood, dusted sand from her dress, and headed to the house. As she passed the kitchen, she tossed a quick “Good

night” in Tayler and Gage’s direction, which they returned without breaking eye contact.

She went to her room to change.

In the middle of undressing, she heard Tayler laugh and shriek. A pair of footsteps followed, one moving more quickly than the other. Finally, a door opened and shut.

She popped out her contacts and slipped on her glasses. Then, carefully, like there was a sleeping baby nearby, she slithered through the bedroom door and navigated the dark hallways until she came to Joel’s room.

As she went to knock, he opened the door.

“Heard you coming.” He stood in the doorway, wearing only a pair of cotton shorts. “Come on in. The coast is clear.”

She snatched her gaze from his bare chest and walked past him. Like hers, his room welcomed the beachfront through a wall of glass doors—glass doors she suddenly wanted to feel against her nipples while Joel held her hips and grunted behind her.

“Um,” she swallowed, “did you have company? Why wouldn’t the coast be clear?”

He shut the bedroom door. “A couple of times, I forgot to close the sliders and walked in to find an unexpected guest on my bed.”

“You better say it was a woman.”

“An iguana.”

She stopped in the middle of climbing onto the mattress. “A *who*? Joel, you know how I feel about lizards. If there’s an iguana in here, I’m going back to my room.”

“No, don’t leave.” He dropped into a push-up to check underneath the bed, then rose with the same minimal effort to check the closet and bathroom. “I don’t see him.”

“How do you know it’s a him?”

“The first time we made eye contact, I sensed the territorial challenge inside him.”

She snorted a laugh.

“But it’s fine.” He took a seat on the bed. “He’s not here.”

“Did you name him too?”

“Yep. Carlton. Because he—”

“Looks like a Carlton,” she finished. “I know you pretty well myself, Mr. Lattimore.”

All he had to do was hit her with that smile of his, and she slowly grew more at ease. After challenging days at work in Maui, she’d walk through the door and right into his smile, arms, and consistently delicious dinners, and the stress would slough off like dead skin.

He tapped the space next to him. “Come sit next to me.”

“If I sit there, my feet dangle off the bed.”

“Okay, then.” He lay on his back, one arm outstretched. “Now, come to me, my goddess.”

Laughing, she crawled over and wedged herself against his side. He removed her glasses and set them on the nightstand before drawing her close using one arm. She did her best to relax, but out of the corner of her eye, she kept seeing imaginary fragments of a spiked lizard.

He sighed. “I should have never told you about Carlton.”

“You damn right, you shouldn’t have,” she said.

He rolled onto his side.

Her stomach curled into all sorts of ties and knots, and she wondered whether he knew he still had a smile on his face.

“So...cuddling?” she asked.

“As long as you don’t alert the Manly Men Association of The Globe,” he made a fist, pumped it once, “then I’m completely fine with holding you all night.”

“What’s that, the M-M-A-T-G?”

“You’ve never heard of the Em-ma-te-guh?”

A laugh tore from her chest.

One of her favorite things about Joel was his sense of humor, as weird as it could be from time to time. She imagined he’d been that way his entire life, and that it had made more sense when he was lanky and a far cry from popular among his high school class. Now that he’d grown into the embodiment of raw sexiness, she found his sense of humor to be one of his most beautiful traits.

“What did you want to talk about?” she asked.

He tucked a hand against her lower back. “Right. So, with all this mess going on, the guys and I are making sure we have all our ducks in a row. Our death benefits are privatized, so Central can’t touch them, but when I removed Sydney as my beneficiary, I realized I didn’t have anyone to replace her with. I was thinking about adding the boys.”

She leaned back. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. If anything happens to me, combined with what you got from Curtis, I want the boys to be set for life.”

“What if you get married and start a family?” Which she would gladly let happen if she was dead. “What then?”

He didn't comment.

“Joel, it can still happen.”

He remained silent.

She scratched her eyebrow. “So, uh, are you asking if I'm okay with you adding the boys as beneficiaries? Because I am.”

“Well, there's a caveat. Because of the nature of what we do and the amount we're talking about, they won't let me set up a family trust for the boys unless they're my stepsons or I've legally adopted them.” He stroked her back with his thumb. “I didn't know how you'd feel about that part.”

She'd expected a modicum of discomfort. Something as small as a grain of salt in the sea. Yet, there was nothing.

“We could talk to them about it,” she said. “Honestly, I don't think the boys would object, especially if we explain why.”

“And you'd be fine with that?”

“Yes, and no. So, adoption. That process can take a while, can't it? Plus, whose laws would we be relying on? Maui? D.C.? Sweden?”

“To be honest, it's a shit ton of paperwork,” he said. “I asked Larke to look everything over, and even she sighed. We could be looking at a year or two.”

A possible solution took hold of her and didn't let go, and the mere *idea* brought her an unnatural amount of joy. She truly did want him to have a wife one day. However, she didn't want that wife to be anyone but her.

“What if we got married?” she suggested. “I mean, we joke about it all the time, but what if that’s the solution?”

He went still.

She momentarily stopped breathing.

“You’re technically still a D.C. resident,” she continued, less confident than she was seconds ago. “Don’t ask me how I know, but in D.C., you can get a license and get married on the same day. Then I get some mail at your place, which we could use if we need to establish my residency, and bada-boom, bada-bing, Josiah and Theo are legally your stepsons. Plus, if there’s an interviewing process for your dossier, we’ll nail that. Joel’s favorite color? Quantico blue—whatever that is. Favorite movie? One from the nineties called *Chain Reaction* that no one’s ever heard of. Joel’s favorite food? His Nonna’s ribollita. How’d we meet? We were at Julien’s house when he walked in wearing jeans, a gray sweater, and low-top leather sneakers.”

He remained silent for so long, she started to mentally back out of the idea.

“You remember what I had on?”

“That was a guess.”

“A rather accurate one.” He studied her, chewing on the corner of his bottom lip. “Okay, then. Ayesha’s favorite color? Alert me when she picks just one. Her favorite movie? According to Theo, James Cameron’s *The Gigantic*. Her favorite food? *Alert me when she picks just one.*”

She sputtered a laugh.

“What was our first date?” he asked.

“Easy.” She swatted the air. “Napili Plaza. You took me to lunch, and we ate burgers and gravy fries. Then we conked out and nearly missed picking up the boys from school.”

“Nope. See? They’d catch us. Toss us in federal prison for fraud.”

“What’s our first date, then?”

“Brunch after Gage and Tayler’s wedding,” he said, with zero hesitation. “Think about it...I came to your room to ‘pick you up.’ We sat together, eventually, and ate off each other’s plates. Then we took a private tour around the city.”

“Everybody did the tour, though.”

“But who’d you sit next to? Whose shoulder did you lean on when you got tired toward the end of the tour? And, if memory serves me correctly, we slept together that night.”

“Yeah, *literally*. With the boys between us.”

“Semantics.”

“Plus, I sat next to Xara on the tour bus,” she reminded him. “You switched seats with her, and then, yes, I might have leaned on your shoulder.”

“And hugged my arm, making me feel all warm and fuzzy when only seconds before you told me you didn’t want me.”

“Dramatic much?”

“So you wanted me?”

“You know I did.”

His strokes grew longer. “But that was our first date. Agree or disagree? Did I make my case?”

She tapped her lips with an index finger. “Hmm. Maybe you’re right. I mean, I did get dolled up for you for brunch.”

“That dress you had on when I came down for the pen?”
He drew her closer. “I *knew* that was for me.”

“Did you like it?”

“You almost didn’t make it out of the room.”

“What does that—”

“But back to the original topic,” he redirected. “That could work, us getting married, but what about after the process is over? We get married for a year or two and then dissolve it?”

They could.

Over her dead body.

“Eesh, I don’t know if I can go through another,” he looked down, “divorce.”

She followed his gaze to where she’d started twisting her wedding ring around her finger. He’d stopped wearing his at some point, though she didn’t know when. Oddly, however, he put it back on whenever they were out together, which often made people think they were married to each other. That and Joel telling any man who wouldn’t leave her alone not to fuck with his *wife*.

“This is for the boys,” she insisted. “So, even if it’s only a year or two, I think we should go for it.”

He cradled the back of her head, tangling his fingers in her hair, and her heart beat up into her eye sockets. A couple of years ago, when the guys were leaving on their last trip out to Angola, he’d threatened to kiss her if she didn’t return his hug. So many times, she regretted not letting him.

“Don’t say things like,” his gaze shifted to the wall behind her, “that.”

A flash of cold replaced all the warmth in her body. “Joel, what is it?”

“Nothing.”

“Joel.”

“It’s nothing.”

“If that iguana’s in this room,” she rose onto her knees and turned, “I’m leaving.”

A bare wall stared back at her.

“Ugh.” Laughing, she picked up a pillow. “Don’t *do* that.”

As she went to wallop him with it, he grabbed it from her hand, tossed it behind him, rolled her onto her back, and brought his lips down onto hers—all in one satisfyingly dizzy motion.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and sighed, and he responded with a low one of his own.

Finally.

He tasted like spearmint, his mouth hot, and for how long they’d waited for this moment, she knew the kiss wouldn’t stop at gentle, exploratory pecks. Still, she was unprepared for him snaking his tongue into her mouth—deep.

She gripped his hair.

He grunted and kissed her harder.

One of his hands squeezed, released, and then made large circles at her hip, the dress’s silky fabric caressing her skin. As if it was a silent request, her legs parted.

“It’s okay.” She nibbled on his lip, sucked on his tongue. “Touch me.”

They pulled apart.

He searched her face, searched her eyes. Then, after a sigh, his lips collided with hers again, and he shifted until he was between her legs. She wrapped one around him, and he planted a trail of kisses down to her neck.

“Eesh, how do you feel about sleeping with your fiancé tonight?”

“Just sleep?” she asked.

“Mm-hmm. Unless, of course, you want me to take your clothes off. Would you like that?” While he sucked on and planted kisses all over her neck, he unraveled the knot at the front of her cover-up. “Would you like me to take your...” He slid his hand inside. “Holy fuck. You’re naked.”

The dress fell away.

“Surprise,” she squeaked out. “I was so anxious about coming here, I forgot to finish changing. Then I didn’t remember that I forgot to finish changing until maybe a second or two ago.”

He passed his fingers over her skin, his touch going from gentle to firm. Then his gaze darted from areola to areola, nipple to nipple, his bottom lip trapped between his teeth.

The knot in his throat bounced.

He dipped his head, and she arched her back, but he stopped less than an inch from her nipple. She saw the war inside him, saw how much he wanted to lick each time his bottom lip disappeared into his mouth and reemerged wet, but she didn’t know what was stopping him. She wanted this just as much.

He cupped a breast and lightly squeezed. “Ayesha. God, Ayesha. You don’t know how long...”

Except, she did know how long.

He squeezed again, a little harder, propping up her breast like a ceremonial offering. She watched, holding her breath, waiting for pink to snake from his mouth. All it would take was one flick, and she’d melt through the mattress. With how wound up she was, if he sucked, she’d climax immediately.

Grunting, he shook his head, left the bed, and grabbed a shirt from the dresser. Once he’d wrapped her in it like a forbidden artifact, he climbed into the bed and lay on his back, staring at the ceiling.

Curiosity got the best of her.

She looked down, and it appeared fate had blessed her twice. Not only could this man scratch an itch deep inside her, but he could also reach the one at the back of her throat.

When he noticed where her gaze had gone, he grabbed a pillow and covered his groin, but the pillow didn’t matter.

She could still see it.

It was burned into her retinas.

“Eesh, we can’t. Your moans can be heard in the mountains when you eat *ice cream*. Here, we’d traumatize everyone.”

“I can try to be quiet.”

“Not with what I want to do to you.”

“Joel, I know you,” she said. “You’re overthinking this. Just because it’s our first time together doesn’t mean it has to be special.”

He turned his head and met her eyes. “Ayesha, really? It’s you. Of course, it does.”

With that, she shut her mouth.

After a few additional moments that were nearly as hard for her as they were for him, he moved the pillow. She stole a glance, but he no longer sprouted a monument in his shorts.

“Just don’t go falling in love with me and trying to make this marriage permanent,” he said.

She returned to his side. “Fine, as long as you don’t get me pregnant.”

“What would happen if you did? I’m not saying you will. I’m...curious.”

“Well,” she released a heavy sigh, “we’d have to stay together.”

“Would you be upset to have a baby with me?”

“Joel, no. I’d gladly have your baby.” In her dreams, she already had.

He chewed on his thumbnail.

She caught the smile he attempted to hide.

“Can you imagine?” he asked. “Me and you together forever?”

“Oh, I have. That’s why we can’t risk me having your baby. It’s tempting, especially with the lovely children I think we’d make, but we mustn’t. No matter how much I beg for it, don’t come inside me, Joel.”

The pillow returned to his groin.

“Joel, are you listening? No matter how good it feels, even if I lock my legs around your waist, don’t come deep inside

me.”

“Keep going, and I’ll rub one out right here.”

“And finish down my throat?”

He pointed with his chin. “Go to the other side of the bed. I might not need to touch it if you keep talking like that. It’ll shoot out on its own.”

She scooted to the edge of the mattress. “If it does, I’ll lick it up.”

“Eesh…”

“You don’t have to do this, you know,” she reminded him. “I want you, Joel. I’m not wearing panties, anyway. Let me climb on top of you. I’ll ride your dick all night.”

The pillow jerked, and he rubbed his brow bone so hard, his thumb left red streaks. “Eesh, I want you just as much, but let me romance you a little, okay? I would love nothing more than to fuck you through this bed, break you the fuck in half, but no matter how hard this is, and it clearly is, you’re important to me. Let me show you how much. I’ve been waiting years to show you how much.”

She watched him, wondering what she’d done to deserve a second chance at a good man. Love had to be the bane of the heart’s existence. For years, it beat a consistent, steady rhythm, and then, one day, everything changed. All she had to do was look into Joel’s eyes, and her heart used up every throb it had reserved for the rest of the day, in an instant.

“Maybe you’ll be such a good husband, I won’t let you go,” she said.

He raised a thick eyebrow. “Let me go to who? You’re who I want, Ayesha. I have nowhere to go if you’re not on the

other side waiting for me.”

Goosebumps covered her skin. “Now it sounds like *you’re* in love with *me*.”

“And we *cannot* have that.”

She grinned. “Joel?”

“Yeah, babe?”

“You’re who I want, too.”

He reached out, drew her close, and kissed her forehead. Before he removed his lips, she felt him smile.

* * *

“Ayesha, don’t move.”

Ayesha opened one eye to find Joel standing on the opposite side of the bed, shirtless in a pair of beach shorts, his hair damp.

“Hmm? Why don’t mo...” She froze. “Where is it?”

He aimed his head at the headboard.

She looked up to find a blurry baby dinosaur—there was no other way to describe the creature—sitting on top of the headboard. A row of spikes roamed down its back, its body an alternating pattern of green and white stripes. It was either larger than the typical house cat, or she needed to find her glasses.

“If you make any sudden movements, it’ll startle him,” he said. “And if you startle him, he might jump on you.”

“How’d he even get in?”

“He might have been in here since last night.”

“But you said you didn’t see him.”

“Carlton” crawled forward, and she nearly screamed, but screaming would bring everyone to Joel’s room. It would be hard to convince them nothing was going on, considering she was in his bed, early in the morning, wearing only his shirt with what were probably love bites on her neck—unless Carlton had mistaken her neck for a midnight snack.

“Joel,” she swiped at her neck, “am I blotchy? I think he might have gotten me last night.”

The corner of Joel’s mouth lifted. “No, I got you last night.”

Carlton hopped from the headboard onto the mattress. She choked on a scream and rolled out of bed. By the time she scrambled to her feet, Joel had walked around the bottom edge and over to her.

“Eesh, are you ok—”

She climbed him and locked her legs around his waist. He kissed her neck and jaw, holding her in place.

“You’re fine.” He brushed another kiss along her jaw. “I opened the sliders. I figured, maybe if he sees freedom, he’ll make a break for it. There’s no way he likes being cooped up in here with the air conditioning, being cold-blooded and all.”

“Just grab him.”

“*Grab* him? With my *hands*?”

“I’m sure you’ve done more dangerous stuff than this.”

“Yeah. With weapons.”

“Joel, I don’t do lizards.”

“I’m well aware.”

Carlton took a few steps toward the mattress edge in the direction of the open doors.

“That’s it, buddy,” Joel coaxed. “Isn’t it nice outside? Sixty-eight degrees. If you leave now, you’ll catch the sunrise, and let me tell you, it’s beautiful.”

“Are you trying to negotiate with an iguana?” she asked.

“I’m talking him off the ledge, Ayesha. Maybe mating season didn’t go the way he planned.”

Much later, she would laugh about how she probably looked, clinging to Joel like a baby marsupial. Right now, the only thing she could focus on was getting as far away as possible from the prehistoric reptile.

Gage walked by the sliding doors.

“Gage!” She flailed her arms. “Help, please.”

Gage stepped inside. “What’s the matter?”

“He’s the matter.” She pointed to the mattress. “You’re not afraid of iguanas, right? There’s no way you’re afraid of iguanas. Do they have iguanas in Australia?”

Gage looked from Carlton to Joel. “Mate, didn’t you used to have—”

“It would help us out,” Joel said. “That thing’s, uh, terrifying. So terrifying.”

Gage frowned. “Lattimore, I’ve seen you pick up—”

“Gage, please,” she pleaded. “I’m *dying*.”

Without the slightest bit of hesitation, Gage walked over to the bed and scooped Carlton up off the mattress.

She tightened her grip on Joel.

Joel brushed the tip of his nose along her jaw and followed the path with a line of kisses, but she was too terrified to care that Gage might find out about them before they were ready to tell everyone.

Gage set Carlton on his shoulder. “Interestingly enough, iguanas aren’t native to Australia,” he said. “But one of my brothers did have a pet green iguana when we were kids. Can’t have them now, though. It’s prohibited.”

She flicked her fingers at the sliding doors. “Can you take him home now, please?”

“Why? You’re scared of this bloke, Eesh? But he’s so tiny.” Gage studied them, lightly stroking the top of the iguana’s head. “Hey, isn’t it a little early for you to be in here, sweetheart? And where’s the rest of your clothes?”

She tried not to look at the rumpled cover-up on the floor, but her brain took too long to send the message. Gage’s gaze followed hers, and then their gazes collided again, his irises a lighter shade of emerald in the increasing sunlight.

“It’s not what it looks like,” she said. “Tell him, Joel.”

Joel buried his nose in her hair. “Tell him what?”

“That I just got here. This morning.”

“God, you smell so good, Eesh.”

She groaned.

“Did the iguana do that?” Gage tapped his neck. “You’ve got some marks there. Some bites or something.”

She nodded. “Yes, the iguana did.”

“Eesh, iguanas carry salmonella. We should probably get you to a hospital.”

“Then no, the iguana didn’t.”

Gage laughed.

A sudden shriek caused all three of them to look toward the sliding doors. Joel set her down, and he and Gage stepped outside. She shimmied into the cover-up and grabbed her glasses before joining them.

“That sounded like Thandie,” Gage said, scanning the beachfront. “Lattimore?”

“Already calling him.”

Julien’s voice sounded from the watch on Joel’s wrist. “What’s up, Lattimore?”

“Is Thandie with you?” Joel asked.

“No.” Julien’s voice went from sleepy and relaxed to frantic. “Why? What’s wrong?”

Ayesha spotted a head bobbing in the water and ran, at full speed, toward the shoreline. As she drew nearer, she realized that more than one head was present. One clearly belonged to Thandie, who appeared to be swimming toward the other—someone too small to be Grey or Monroe, but definitely not too small to be her son.

Theo.

Their names got caught in her throat.

Joel and Gage ran past her and dove into the water, and she used every ounce of willpower to stay put. Joel and Gage were stronger swimmers, and too many people could further complicate the process of trying to get the children out. The water was also choppy than usual, though not rough enough to pose a challenge for an adult. Thandie and Theo, however, could easily get pulled under.

Thandie yelled Theo's name, and that she was coming and to "just keep swimming." Then Theo's head sunk beneath the water.

And it didn't resurface.

CHAPTER 3

Theo's arms and legs flailed, and a wave knocked him beneath the surface every few seconds. With her head start, Thandie was almost close enough to grab him, but Joel and Gage covered more than twice as much distance in one stroke.

Theo's head went under again.

Joel ducked beneath the surface. Although the sun hadn't fully risen, the water was clear enough for him to see Theo trying to claw his way back to the top. Then Thandie grabbed him and, rapidly kicking her legs, swam them both to the surface. Once they were back on land, he would ask her if she wanted one of Disney's theme parks named after her. The kid was incredible.

"Talk to me, Theo," she said.

Theo coughed and clung to her, his arms wrapped around her middle.

"That's it, baby boy." She thumped Theo on his back. "Keep coughing. Daddy says that's a good sign."

"Thandie," Joel called. "We've got it. Thank you, sweetheart. You're a mini Katie Leducky, I swear."

Thandie beamed, climbed onto Gage's back, and they headed for the shore. Joel held Theo close, trying not to

squeeze him, but it wasn't easy. All he could think about was how close he'd come to losing him. If he didn't squeeze him, in his mind, Theo would float away.

“Hey, baby boy.” He kissed the top of Theo's head. “You okay? Talk to me.”

Theo, grip tight around his neck, nodded.

“Can you tell me what happened?”

“Me and Thandie,” Theo coughed, “were picking up seashells for her mommy and Unco Julien, and for you and Mama. We were making a present. But then I saw a man on the beach, and I got scared and runned away. I didn't mean to run into the water.”

Joel searched the area. “What man?”

“It was my ‘magination.” Theo squeezed tighter. “I didn't mean to go into the water. I'm sorry, Joel. Don't be mad.”

Joel nudged Theo around to his back and swam toward the beachfront. Ari, on her knees, hugged Thandie and kissed her forehead. Ayesha could barely stand still as she and Josiah stared at the water.

“I'm not mad, Theo. I was more scared than anything. It would break my heart if anything ever happened to you.”

“To pieces?”

“A million pieces.”

“Because you love me?”

“Because I love you.”

“Like Unco Gage loves Grey, and Unco Mike loves Mikey?” Theo coughed again, the series of coughs followed

by a snort. “And like Unco Julien loves Ty, and Unco Gio loves Aleksi?”

Joel smiled. “Yes. Exactly like that.”

“Like I’m your little boy?”

“Theo, you are my little boy.”

Ayesha met them in the water, took Theo, and held him against her chest. Josiah joined in on the hug, and Joel watched them, a mix of emotions tightening a rope around his neck. At that moment, he would have given anything for Theo to feel safe again. It was one thing for the terrors to plague his dreams. Now, they were putting Theo’s life at risk.

Ayesha’s dress clung to her partially naked form, so he remained close behind her as they headed inside. Tayler met them with a couple of towels, exchanged Theo for one, and took Theo with her to monitor him.

Ayesha went to her room to dry off and change.

He did the same.

Afterward, he sat, gripping the edge of the mattress and staring at the floor. The door slowly opened, and Ayesha walked in. She hadn’t shed a tear from the beach to the villa, so he opened his arms.

She crawled onto his lap, her knees straddling his middle, and he held her as tightly as she held him. Her tears warmed and dampened the shoulder and sleeve of his T-shirt, and her body shook with each cry.

It was too close.

They’d come too close.

He'd had guns in his face, had bullets come within inches of his head. He'd been shot, burned, and stabbed throughout his military and professional career. Yet, nothing had scared him like seeing Theo in the water.

The boys were supposed to outlive them. Whatever he could do to make that happen, to make sure he and Ayesha never mourned them, he would do, even if it required mourning him.

"He'll stay in here with me for the rest of the vacation," he whispered.

She nodded. "Okay."

"How's Josiah?"

"Quiet."

"And you?"

"I'm grateful that he's okay. I know it could have been worse, but I'm still scared out of my mind. We could have lost him today." The tears started up again. "Joel, he's *four*."

He kissed her hair, stroked her back. When the worst of his fears tried to take up space in his mind, he shoved them away.

"How about Thandie, though?" he said. "Girl's a badass. I fucking love this family."

"Me too." She kissed his temple. "Me too."

Taylor let them know that she would keep Theo with her, monitoring him for the next twenty-four hours. Mo took Ayesha, Josiah, and Thandie with her for a walk down to a small grocery store near the villa.

Adrenaline still coursing through him, Joel prowled through the villa and found Giorgio staring at a sheet of paper

at the outdoor dining table.

“This is Little Theo?” Giorgio asked.

This drawing, like the others, featured a black figure. The figure held Theo outside a window by the neck. Down below, an ocean teemed with sharks.

“It’s one of four so far,” Joel said. “He keeps drawing them.”

He retrieved the other three and returned to a full table, and this was the part that Sydney never entirely understood. He never had to ask; they simply were *there* for him whenever he needed them. Whenever they needed each other.

They passed the images around the table.

Julien pulled out his phone. “Wait, he drew something like this at my house. When I asked him about it, he said it was from his imagination. Then the shit with Central started, and I forgot about it.”

The picture on Julien’s phone was a singular black figure, the largest of all the ones they’d seen so far. Considering it was an earlier drawing, the figure’s shrunken size could have signified Theo becoming less fearful of it over time.

Joel leaned closer. “What’s that?”

“Thought it was a claw at first,” Julien said. “But it didn’t make sense why he would only draw one claw.”

“And one fang.” Dez pointed to the single extrusion from the figure’s head area. “A beast with only one claw and one fang seems out of place.”

“Unless it’s not a claw,” Mike suggested. “Could be a knife. A claw would curve around like a scythe. This goes straight down. I think this might be a knife.”

“The dark figure have a name?” Gage asked.

Joel shook his head. “Not that I know of, but I haven’t had a chance to talk to him about it yet.”

Giorgio made a low, grating noise in his throat and aligned all the pictures. “Look. Figure is same. Always. But this one have fang.”

“Which indicates some kind of a face,” Julien said. “It’s morphing.”

“It becomes more human with every drawing,” Joel finished. “He’s not drawing a monster. He’s drawing a person.”

“Look close, Lattimore,” Giorgio continued. “Is not blood on fang. Is not red. Little Theo draw orange.”

“Like a flame?” Joel frowned. “Like a cigarette.”

A few years back, they went to Angola to complete a series of assignments involving missing children. On their first assignment, they came to a village they’d assumed was abandoned until a figure emerged from one of the homes. The figure, a male with a husky build, had been smoking a cigarette. By the end of the assignment, they’d realized that the figure had been spying on them.

Joel pushed up out of his chair. “Until we know for sure, don’t say anything to Ayesha.”

They knew Ayesha.

They knew what news like this would do.

Gage tapped the picture Theo had drawn of him and Curtis sharing a grave. “Did this person tell Theo they would kill him like his father? How would they know?”

“And how’d they beat the security system?” Julien chewed on his bottom lip, his gaze unfocused. “This shit’s tied to us, but why go after Theo? Be a fucking man and come to us. What kind of coward shit is that, going after a little kid?”

Giorgio lodged the tip of a blade into the tabletop, right through the neck of the drawing of the most prominent figure.

“I don’t know who it is,” Joel said. “But I know how he got to Theo.” He stared at the picture of Theo sleeping in bed. “He came in through the window.”

* * *

Slowly, Theo transitioned back to a semblance of his usual self. By the time they boarded the flight to return to Sweden, Theo was bubbly and giggly, which didn’t bring Joel the peace he’d assumed it would. Instead, it felt like the calm before things escalated.

Everyone was dead on their feet when they reached the house. A month-long vacation, combined with a long flight back, sent Josiah straight to bed the minute they walked through the front door. Joel carried Theo, who’d fallen asleep on the ride from the airport, to his room. Theo didn’t stir from the car to his bed or even as Ayesha slipped him into a pair of pajamas.

“You’ll be okay without me?” he asked, Ayesha walking beside him to the front door.

She shrugged. “I’ll be okay without you, in the literal sense. I won’t be okay without you in a more emotional sense. I don’t want you to go. The minute you step outside this door, I’ll miss you and start pouting, and it will *not* be pretty.”

“To me, nothing about you can *not* be pretty.” He pulled her into his arms and leaned back against the front door. “Man, Ayesha. I think we’ve stumbled into a relationship.”

“I think we’ve been stumbling for a minute,” she said. “I’m just glad we finally managed to find our footing.”

“You like being my girlfriend?”

“Lattimore, I’m your fiancée.”

He worked his bottom lip with his teeth, wondering how much longer he could wait to make her thighs hug the side of his head. “For the purpose of our marriage pop quiz,” he began, “when did we officially start dating?”

She eased out of his embrace, took his hand, and pulled him toward the stairs. “Um, let’s see. It has to be sometime before you chewed that guy out for ‘flirting’ with me in Whole Foods.”

“I stepped away for two seconds, and I know he saw the ring on your finger.”

“He asked me for a recipe.”

“He’s never heard of Google? And who the fuck asks someone else for a salmon recipe? Season it, throw it in a pan, and boom, it’s done. Add soy sauce if you want to get fancy.”

She tipped her head in agreement.

“So, before then,” he urged.

“I’d say...remember when you, Josiah, and Theo were dancing to some song, and you tried to get me to dance, but I didn’t want to? So, you twirled me into your arms and didn’t give up until I joined the three of you? That night.”

“Again, we’d get thrown in prison.”

“Then when did we officially start dating, Mr. Lattimore?”

“When I came to Maui after my shoulder surgery.”

She stopped at the bottom of the stairs. “You’re joking.”

“Nope. Think about it. I’d barely flushed the anesthesia from my system before I got onto a plane because I couldn’t wait to see my girl and our boys. You picked me up from the airport and had lunch ready for me. Then we went home together.”

“You stayed in the guest house.”

“Boundaries, Eesh. I believe in boundaries.”

She circled her index finger. “Wait, wait. But that’s after Gage and Tay’s wedding. Isn’t that when you said our first date was?”

“Yeah, but we didn’t officially start dating until months later. We had some stuff to work out.”

He’d been convinced that what didn’t work for Sydney wouldn’t work for Ayesha. Ayesha wanted a husband and a father figure, and as far as he’d been concerned, since he’d failed Sydney as a husband, Ayesha would never be able to see him as either. Then, when he finally did muster up the courage to tell her how he felt, she shut him down.

A knife to the heart would have been painless compared to what that had felt like, and that was when he realized his feelings for Ayesha were nothing at all like he’d ever experienced.

They were intense.

Potent.

Substantially unhinged.

Ayesha would have never gotten him to sign divorce papers, and if she insisted they end their marriage, he would go from Joel Lattimore to Giorgio Pozza in a heartbeat.

More and more, it felt like Ayesha Savea could be the love of his life, and that knowledge saddled him with a ridiculous amount of guilt when he thought about what had been taken from her for them to get here.

“I also had to deal with you not having feelings for me,” he said. “With you shutting me down when we had our ‘fight’ after I found out about Sydney and Kofi.”

She frowned. “You think I didn’t have feelings for you?”

“You didn’t.”

“Joel, I lov—” She wagged a finger at him. “Oh, you think you’re slick, don’t you?”

He grinned. “What were you about to say?”

“I was about to say that I’m not sure where you’re going to sleep. There’s the guest room, in the bed with me, or in the bed with me, inside me.”

Blood rushed to his groin. “Inside you where?”

“Wherever you want to put it, babe.”

“You sure about that? You might choke.”

“Then I’ll choke.”

He wanted her so much it made his teeth hurt, and she kept pushing his buttons. Soon, his willpower would say, “Fuck you, Joel,” and she’d end up bouncing on his dick.

For hours.

But he didn’t like that she believed it didn’t have to be special. She was special to him, precious and priceless. He saw

candles, rose petals, stem glasses, music, and Ayesha, naked in the middle of the bed, staring up at him, completely unaware of how much time her pussy would spend attached to his tongue.

“How about a compromise,” he suggested. “How about you let me plan what I’m planning, but tonight, you ride my face?”

She pinched her chin. “Hmm. Sixty-nine?”

“To one hundred.”

They headed for the owner’s suite, but a tiny, solemn figure emerged at the end of the hallway, partially illuminated by the recessed lighting.

“Mama?”

Ayesha released his hand, hurried down the hall, and kneeled in front of Theo. “Hey, sweetie. What’s wrong? Did you have a bad dream?”

“Mama? I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what?”

“I didn’t mean to.”

“Theo,” she stroked his cheek, “it’s okay. What happened, sweetheart?”

Theo’s face crumpled. “I had an accident.”

Sympathy and rage flared in Joel’s chest, burning away the anticipation that had built between him and Ayesha moments ago. Somebody terrorized his boy, and he didn’t know who the fuck it was. Yet, he wanted to be the boys’ father.

Fathers helped their kids feel safe.

And Theo didn’t feel safe.

“I’m sorry, Mama.” Theo’s shoulders jerked with each snuffle. “I didn’t mean to.”

“Sweetie,” Ayesha pressed a trio of kisses against his cheek, “accidents happen. That’s just the way life goes sometimes. I’ll help you change, and we’ll get you some new sheets. Don’t worry about it, okay? Accidents happen.”

“I’ll do the sheets,” Joel said. “And I’ll set out some new pajamas for you, Theopatosaurus. Any requests? Maybe dinosaurs? Actually, how about your Apatosaurus pajamas?”

Theo shook his head. “You can pick, Joel. I don’t want to right now.”

Never had a single sentence left such a gaping hole inside him. If they verified that someone hurt Theo, and possibly someone connected to them, Central, or both, they’d also have to face the possibility that the hurt might go deeper than any of them were prepared to deal with.

Ayesha took Theo’s hand, and they disappeared behind the bathroom door.

He replaced the sheets and found Theo a fresh pair of pajamas. Then he took the old ones and the soiled sheets to the laundry room, sprayed them with the fancy organic stain remover he and Ayesha spent entirely too much on, and tossed them in the washer.

Theo hadn’t had an accident in at least two years. Still, they’d kept him in Pull-Ups until he was three and nighttime underwear until earlier that year, convinced each time he woke up dry, it was a fluke. As a precaution, they never removed the waterproof covering on the mattress underneath the sheets, and until tonight, they never had to.

After turning on the washing machine, he went in search of them and stopped outside Theo's door when he picked up on the topic of their conversation.

"It's really easy," Theo argued. "When we were still in Maui, I called Joel 'Daddy,' and he didn't even get mad."

"Theo—"

"It's not fair! Jojo got to have a daddy!"

"Theo," Ayesha sighed, "baby, you do have a father. He... died, but you do have a father. You did."

"Mama, my heaven papa can't tuck me in or read me bedtime stories. He can't tickle me and make me laugh and give me hugs. Only Joel can. I love him a lot, Mama. A whole lot. This much."

Joel's heart swelled as he imagined Theo stretching his little arms as wide as he could.

"I know you love him, baby," Ayesha said. "And he loves you."

"And when we liveded wiff Joel, I didn't see the scary man. I never did, Mama."

"Baby, we never actually *lived* with...wait, what man?"

Joel stepped into the room. Theo hopped out of bed and raced into his arms. In one motion, he scooped him up and hugged him close. Ayesha watched them, and he knew the minute they settled Theo back to sleep, she would ask him about "the man." What he didn't know was what lie he would tell her.

"Joel, can you stay wiff me?" Theo asked. "Like in Fiji?"

"You're scared here too?"

Theo nodded. “I feel safe wiff you.”

“What if you sleep with Mama in her bed?” Ayesha asked. “Do you think that would help a teeny tiny bit?”

“Can Joel stay? Is it okay even if he’s not my birfday daddy?”

Ayesha asked him the same question with her eyes, and he nodded—as if it would have been anything else. If this “man” turned out to be a literal threat, then she and Josiah were also at risk.

They went to her room, and Theo didn’t release him, even as he sat on the mattress and propped his back against the headboard.

Theo plopped his ring and middle finger into his mouth and sucked on them like a pacifier. Whenever he tried to place Theo on the bed, Theo’s grip tightened. They didn’t utter a word until Theo’s breathing slowed and his fingers slipped from his mouth.

“He said ‘man,’” Ayesha said, pacing in front of the bedroom dresser. “Not monster. Man. What if...Joel, what if someone was in the house when the three of us were asleep, and I didn’t know? I mean, it’s one of the things Theo drew. It’s entirely possible.”

“Ayesha—”

“And what if this...this man,” she shook her hands, “hurt Theo? Like...*hurt*, hurt? All the...all the signs are there—a behavior change, increased fearfulness, nightmares.” She motioned to Theo. “Regression. That? Him sucking on his fingers? That’s regression.”

She took a seat on the mattress, her hands in her hair. He tried one more time to set Theo down, replaced his body with

a pillow, and then walked over to kneel in front of her.

“I’ve never worked with child victims of se...” She gagged. “Child victims of...of that kind of abuse.”

“Let me ask you this,” he began. “You said before that it could have been Adjustment Disorder. Could those still be signs of Adjustment Disorder?”

“Technically, but the man thing doesn’t sit well with me.”

Anxiety was a process, and she needed to work through it; Lord knew she’d helped him work through many a breakdown. However, he didn’t want to tell her everything would be all right to try to assuage her panic. Chances were, things wouldn’t be.

“How about I get Josiah?” he asked. “The bed’s big enough for four, especially since one of them didn’t grow much since the days he used to call me ‘Jo.’”

She looked around the room, her expression blank. “No, Josiah’s okay. It’s okay. He’s getting to that age, you know? I don’t want to crowd him.”

“Eesh? Look at me, babe.”

It took her a moment, but when their gazes connected, he made a mental note to schedule an appointment with a cardiologist to discuss what eye contact with her was doing to his heart.

“Know what I just realized?” He took her hands and had her rise to her feet with him. “I have the nerve to call you my fiancée, yet I haven’t taken you on a proper date.”

He loved her now, and regardless of what he’d been tangled in with Sydney, he’d loved her then. He loved her smile, her laugh. The way she smelled. The way she felt in his

arms, soft and warm while he watched her sleep, wondering if he'd saved an angel's life at some point to be blessed with this woman entering his.

He loved her cooking—except for her eggs. He half-expected a baby chick to step right off his plate whenever she served eggs.

Despite being confident in her profession, he loved how anxious she could get. He loved the kind of mother she was, how her mind worked, and how she approached a problem. And he loved how she talked about him, how she talked *to* him. Then, even if it was only a glance, the way she always found him, no matter how large the room or expansive the open space, drove him crazy with infatuation.

“What do you say, gorgeous?” He kissed the palm of her hand. “Will you have dinner with me? I’ll ask one of the guys if they’re okay with watching the boys while we go out. I think Theo’ll feel comfortable with Giorgio. What do you think?”

She nodded. “Definitely.”

“And what if I get Tay and Gage to come with us? That way, I won’t end up spreading you out like a buffet on the table in the middle of the restaurant?”

A smile hooked one side of her mouth.

Helpless, he smiled in return.

“I wouldn’t object,” she said. “But we might get kicked out of Sweden.”

“And I already almost got us kicked out of Maui. By now, I’m on somebody’s radar.”

Her smile widened, and he nearly told her he loved her. It wasn’t as if he believed she would seize up or say she didn’t

feel the same, but he was saving it for a very specific moment.

She leaned forward and gave him a kiss that dropped an anchor in a chamber of his heart.

“I’d love to have dinner with you, Joel.”

While she got ready for bed in the bathroom in the owner’s suite, he used the one in the hallway. Once finished, he reentered the bedroom to find Ayesha asleep with Theo curled against her.

Most days, he couldn’t believe it. Soon, he’d be doing the whole marriage thing again. This time, marriage would come with a family. A family he would protect, even if it meant having to kill to ensure their safety.

And he fully intended to.

Without blinking.

CHAPTER 4

“Damn it, Trevor.” Wesley Barnes grabbed his midsection where his teammate, Trevor Mason, had landed a solid punch. “Isn’t that supposed to be the arm where you got shot back in Angola?”

Their phones buzzed as four additional men entered the training room—Lee Jeong-Hyeok, Nicholas Spettro, Siriano Lavigne, and Adrián Delgano.

“This is one for you, Adrián.” Trevor pointed at him with his chin. “Recon on the Savea widow. I’m telling you, Savea was close to Wolfe, and we know Wolfe leads Team Alpha. We track Savea’s widow down, we find Wolfe, and we find Alpha.”

Wesley snickered. “Would be funny, Omega wiping out Alpha.”

Nicholas raised an index finger. “I can do the recon. We don’t have to send Adrián—”

“I’m going.” Adrián studied the image on his phone, but he wouldn’t need it. He’d run this op before. After all, he was the one responsible for making Savea’s wife a widow in the first place. “Lavigne got spotted by the kid. I won’t make the same mistake.”

Trevor laid out the first part of their strategy, but the words barely reached Adrián's ears. If he looked at the photo too much, the team would suspect something was wrong, but it was challenging.

Ayesha Savea was on their radar.

Back on their radar.

He raised his head.

Lavigne, the ignorant fucker, smirked.

If there was one thing that was different about them compared to the Alpha group, there would be no whisperings of them getting too close or operating like an organized crime family. To save Ayesha's life, if he had to put a blade through every last one of these assholes' eyes, he would do it without hesitation.

They thought they knew.

Lavigne thought he knew, all because he'd caught him kissing Ayesha all those years ago in Maui. Lavigne had then accused him of getting too close to the operation; their task had been to find out whether Ayesha knew more than what she let on about Curtis' life outside of being a husband and father. If she did, they were supposed to kill her and the boys.

Luckily, she didn't, but by the time he found out, he'd already fallen in love. Had they tried to harm her or the boys, he would have laid waste to them all.

This group called him "quiet."

Back in Brazil, he went by a different name.

Perhaps it was because he had no experience with that part of life that he fell so quickly for Ayesha. He'd never met someone he could talk to the way he talked to her, and while

he chalked some of that up to her profession, few people could tell him she didn't feel at least something for him.

She'd writhed underneath his touch. She'd sought him out, sought his kiss and his arms, always so wet for him that all he'd had to do was bend her over her desk and slide inside her body. He could still hear her moans, her sighs, and the echo of his voice calling her "querida," repeatedly, as he spasmed inside her.

Fuck them if they thought he would be surveilling her for any other reason than to see if she'd give him another chance. This time, he would tell her his real name. He would tell her the truth about what he did and how those skills would keep her and her boys safe, no matter where they went in the world.

They were good together once.

They could be good together again.

"Oy." A balled-up piece of paper hit him in the face. "Gano, where you off to, mate?"

He blinked.

Five pairs of eyes stared in his direction.

"Thinking," he said.

Lavigne sent him a look.

With his eyes, he dared Lavigne to make a comment about him, Ayesha, his true motive for following her—anything. Yet, as all cowards did, Lavigne kept his mouth shut.

Had Lavigne been in his position, he was certain the asshole would have fallen for Ayesha the same way. They craved what she offered—attention, kindness, affection, consideration—and often, the heart hidden behind a stone wall was as soft as fresh snow.

He stood headed for the door.

“Hey, Gano,” Spettro called. “Aren’t you gonna need me to find the widow?”

With everything in him, he wanted them to stop calling her that. It wasn’t exactly easy when he realized to what extent he’d deceived Ayesha. If she ever found out that she’d slept with the man responsible for her husband’s death, she wouldn’t know what to do with herself.

Hopefully, she would find it in her heart to forgive him. The fact that he was a dangerous man didn’t automatically mean he was a heartless one.

“When you couldn’t find the lawyer?” he spat. “I brought her to your doorstep, and you lost her.”

Nicholas sneered.

Like he gave a fuck.

“I’ll find her,” he said, starting again for the door. “Don’t worry about me.”

The five of them returned to talking strategy about how they planned for the Savea op to play out, but none of them were fools. Things wouldn’t go smoothly, especially since they had a mole in their group, a defector.

One of them couldn’t be trusted.

Little did they know, the person was him.

CHAPTER 5

The hostess had already taken their coats and asked them twice to follow her to their table, but Joel's feet remained rooted in place.

Ayesha tried calling his name.

Still, he didn't look above her neck, the fingers on his right hand twitching as though it was a struggle not to reach out and touch her, but he couldn't decide where to start first.

The hostess tried again. "Right this way?"

Ayesha took his hand, and he moved after a couple of tugs. Still, they nearly bumped into several people on their way to the table, his focus never wavering from her black, long-sleeve turtleneck, skirt, and skin-toned winter leggings for brown skin that were a prototype Xara planned to debut in a year.

She smoothed the skirt. "Xara helped me with the whole thing. Even the shoes and accessories. What do you think?"

He cocked his head to the side and chewed on the corner of his bottom lip, but no words left his mouth.

Once at their table, he pulled out her chair. As she sat, he placed his lips next to her ear and whispered, "*Fuck*, my wife looks incredible."

Now breathless, she spared the soft chandelier lighting above them and the floor-to-ceiling rectangular windows next to their table a glance. However, they would have to come back again for her to notice it all. The moment Joel took the seat across from her, it all disappeared.

The server took their orders.

Tayler nudged her thigh under the table.

Ayesha jumped, then coughed into a fist. “So, Joel...I would ask you how your day’s going, but I already know.”

“Ask me anyhow,” he said.

She clasped her hands on the tabletop and leaned forward. “How was your day?”

“I had a great day. By the way, I’m sorry I didn’t mention this in my dating profile, but I have kids.”

“Oh? Well, why didn’t you mention it?”

“I like to make sure, you know. Me and my boys, we’re a package deal.” He scratched his jaw and pulled off a convincing nervous expression. “Is that a deal-breaker, you think? I’ll be honest...I like you, Ayesha.”

“Oh gosh, no. Not a deal-breaker. I love kids. Personally, I’ve always wanted kids.”

He laughed.

“And I like you too,” she added, and it was impossible not to smile when he was smiling at her, looking at her.

“It’s me and my two boys. One’s four, and the other one’s eleven.” He pulled out his phone, tapped the screen a few times, and handed it to her. “I took that today. We went to an

indoor park, and I didn't think my older son—his name's Josiah—would enjoy it, but we all had a good time.”

Her heart warmed at the image of Theo on Joel's neck with Josiah at his side, all three smiling at the camera. Then she scrolled, and the next photo was Joel and Josiah with panicked looks on their faces as Theo appeared to attempt a “trust fall” from Joel's shoulders.

“Where's the boys' mama?”

“I think I might be looking at her.”

She sent him a look that made him adjust in his seat as she handed the phone back to him. While she understood why he wanted to wait, why he wanted to make their first time making love even more memorable, she wouldn't make it easy for him. It wasn't as if he was trying not to seduce her, sitting across from her in a black sweater with a sliver of the shirt underneath peeking from his collar.

“So, Josiah's the older one?” She handed the phone back to him. “He's very handsome. What's the little one's name?”

“Xanax.”

She choked on a laugh, reached for her glass of wine, and took a sip. “So,” she cleared her throat, tapping her chest, “is that all you did today? Hang out with your boys?”

“It was a distraction,” he said. “I was kind of nervous about this date. After the park, they went to their aunt and uncle's house, and I spent the rest of that time getting ready. Two hours.”

“Two hours for a guy is like the four hours I took.”

“You spent four hours getting ready for me?”

“I was nervous too. It’s been a long time since I’ve been on a date with a guy as hot as you.”

He graced her with another smile.

She slowly unraveled.

The man was so damn gorgeous.

The server returned with their food, and she vaguely remembered leaning back to give them space to rest the plate in front of her. Underneath the table, she fiddled with her boots, trying to slip one off to slide her leg up Joel’s, but the zipper at the back kept her foot trapped in leather.

Then, all of a sudden, he chuckled to himself and shook his head as he reached for his fork.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing, nothing. It’s just that...I just realized I’ll do anything to keep that smile on your face. You’re so damn gorgeous, Eesh.”

She stopped fiddling with her shoes.

At the same time, they looked out the windows at the dark, private, non-heated, uncovered, and cordoned-off deck sporting a bright yellow sign that read: *Varning*.

She rose.

He went to stand, but Gage settled him back onto his chair with a hand on his shoulder. Tayler did the same for her with a light tug on her wrist.

Gage sighed. “I stand corrected, love. I understand now why we’re here.”

“I’m glad we came,” Tayler said.

“Love, I’ll come anywhere you ask me to.”

Ayesha, grimacing, set down her fork.

Joel, eyes closed, squeezed his forehead.

Gage and Tayler laughed, Tayler squeezing Gage's fingers as though she needed his strength to stop herself from falling over.

While they ate, Ayesha and Joel managed to avoid having their intensity singe the rest of the restaurant patrons. Gage and Tayler kept the conversation flowing, which helped to keep her and Joel distracted, but she knew Gage well enough to know he was getting them primed for a heavy question.

“So,” Gage began. “How's Theo doing? Any better?”

Ayesha drained her wine glass and took a moment to piece herself together. “Honestly, I'm not sure. Earlier this week, he mentioned something about a ‘man.’ Then there are these drawings he did. I can't help but feel like they're connected.”

“Is there an alternative?” Tayler asked. “Back when I worked in North Carolina, we'd have kids undergoing various cancer treatments. Sometimes, they would manifest their emotions through art. It wasn't unusual for them to create a physical being for their fear or frustrations.”

“That's a strong possibility, and the one I'm hoping is the most accurate,” Ayesha said. “There's no way of knowing if the move was hard for him. Theo's always had big emotions, but never to this magnitude.”

Joel reached across the table, took her hand, and swept his thumb across her knuckles, pausing every so often at her ring. As far as she knew, Theo had adjusted well to the move because everyone was closer. He occasionally objected when she bundled him up like a stuffed burrito. However, the

objections stopped when she reduced the number of layers and focused on clothing material—at Xara’s suggestion.

“Life hasn’t exactly been easy for Theo,” she continued. “Almost everywhere he goes, he’s alone a lot. Making friends has been something of a crutch. Even for kids, he’s hard to keep up with. Because he’s so...*active*, sometimes he throws or kicks a ball too hard. Sometimes, he’s too talkative and doesn’t have a handle on inside and outside voices. Eventually, he pulls away because he’s sensitive to rejection and would rather be alone than,” she swallowed, pushing down the threat of tears, “be left out. Stuff like that.”

She’d assumed that leaving Theo at preschool for his first day would have been easier to manage as she’d already experienced it with Josiah. Then Theo started coming home sad virtually every afternoon, and she could never get him to tell her why.

However, the little kids’ playground had been visible from Josiah’s classroom. So, Josiah saw that every single day, Theo played alone. Josiah, being older, wasn’t permitted to go outside to spend recess with Theo, and it broke her heart into so many pieces that some remained behind in Maui.

She wasn’t sure whether the trend continued in Sweden. Although he never came home as sad as he used to, he never talked about friends.

“It’s my fault,” she said. “I kept him with me more because he had so many problems in daycare. Socialization isn’t innate. I’m not sure how I expected him to learn to make friends if I never allowed him to have any.”

Joel squeezed her hand. “First of all, ‘we’ kept him with ‘us.’ It was ‘our’ decision to keep Theo at home with us as much as we could. It was less stressful for him that way. Once

the weather gets warmer, we'll put him on a soccer team or something. Give it time. He'll make friends. He's too amazing not to make friends."

She shook off memories of Theo by himself in their yard with his soccer ball whenever Josiah was busy, at school, or out with friends and she couldn't play with him. Joel had been more of a blessing in Theo's life than she'd realized. Whenever Joel visited, they played together. Joel eventually visited so much, outside of school, all of Theo's lonely moments vanished.

"What do you guys think?" She looked from Gage to Joel. "Do you think what he's drawing is something he's seen or that it's representative of something he's too young to articulate?"

Joel and Gage exchanged a look.

"Things have been quiet," Gage said. "We assumed that would have been a good thing, but it's...unsettling. My hope is that the drawings are a conduit for his feelings."

"Do you think something that like could happen, and he'd keep it to himself?"

Taylor nodded. "Definitely, but I'm not saying someone's causing him physical harm. You'd be surprised what kids will keep from their parents. Sometimes, it's fear. Sometimes, they think it's their job to protect their parents. We all know that the child's brain is self-centered, so if something goes wrong, they immediately blame themselves."

Now that Theo, Thandie, and Josiah were enrolled in school, only the guys could drop them off unless she or Ari had to be there. They wouldn't even risk Mo. The situation

with Central was too delicate to trust anyone else, even people in the area the guys had trusted for years.

“Could he spend some time with me?” Joel asked. “Just me and him? We haven’t done that in a while.”

Ayesha smiled. “Of course, Joel. You know he’d love that. You don’t even have to ask.”

Their joined hands moved in sync, fingers brushing and stroking. Lately, she’d had Joel, Xara, and Mike to focus on, so it had been a while since she’d last sat with the knowledge of how tough things could be for Theo from time to time.

It wasn’t like he could help some of his traits. Notwithstanding his recent difficulties, Theo melted hearts with his little face, his eyes, and that giggle of his.

The emotion returned.

This time, there would be no burying it.

She stood. “I’ll be right back.”

After letting Tayler know she’d be okay on her own, she headed for the restroom. Thankfully, it was mostly empty, and she locked herself in a stall and reeled off tissue paper, dabbing at her eyes until they stung.

Since Theo didn’t have an extensive enough vocabulary to articulate his frustration, the figure could have been a symbol. If he saw himself as a danger or nuisance, the man could represent his fear of hurting her and Josiah.

Theo also wanted Joel to be his father. Perhaps he figured that if he had a living father, many of his problems would disappear. There was only so much she could do on her own, and Theo knew, to a certain extent, that Curtis and Joel had capabilities to keep him safe that the average father didn’t.

Usually, it would all be too much.

Now, she had Joel in her corner.

She blew her nose, left the stall, washed her hands at the sink, and checked her makeup. Joel, Tayler, and Gage knew what she'd come in here to do, but she didn't want to *look* it.

She wiped her hands, tossed the paper towel, and left the bathroom only to run smack dab into a solid chest. The person wrapped their arms around her waist to steady her—and didn't let go.

“Ayesha?”

She looked up. “*Adrian?*”

“Querida, you look beautiful.” He drew her close. “It’s so good seeing you.”

She returned the hug and spotted Joel, Gage, and Tayler watching her over Adrian’s shoulder.

“You too.”

“I’m beautiful?” he asked.

“Nice seeing you too, I mean.”

“I know. I’m joking.” He tightened his embrace. “Are you here alone?”

He still looked damn good, still had that slight Brazilian accent that used to leave her searching for his touch before it was even one o’clock in the afternoon. Back then, he was slimmer and more toned. Over the years, he’d packed on a good deal of muscle and grown out his hair.

“No, I’m with someone,” she said.

He released her and didn’t so much as attempt to conceal his disappointment. “That’s too bad. For me, not for him. How

are the boys?”

“Good. Actually, I have to get back to my—”

“Of course. Of course. Say hi to Theo and Josiah for me.”

They didn’t have a clue who he was.

She nodded. “Will do.”

He squeezed her wrist.

She stepped around him, headed back to the table, and reclaimed her seat next to Tayler. Joel continued to stare in the direction of the restrooms.

“Somebody you know?” he asked.

She resisted the urge to turn around. “Somebody I used to know.”

Adrián Queirós used to work out of a massive office space down the hall from hers, and although she never entirely understood what he did, he’d been successful at it from the looks of things.

One afternoon, he stopped in to introduce himself, as he was new to the building, and ended up staying and chatting and playing with Theo for nearly an hour. She’d thought nothing of it or about him. He was attractive, and she’d noticed, but that was it.

They ran into each other again in the building’s café during lunch. A few days later, when he didn’t spot her in the café, he brought up a container of food, which she’d appreciated because she’d worked through lunch and had been breastfeeding at the time. After that, they regularly spent lunch together. She let him know she was a recent widow and not looking for anything serious, and he told her he’d recently ended a long-term relationship himself.

A month later, he kissed her in the parking lot.

She'd craved human touch, human comfort.

So, she kissed him back.

It kept happening, going from lips lightly brushing in the tenuous space between pleasure and guilt to open-mouthed and desperate within a matter of weeks.

Then Gage flew in and took Josiah and Theo back to California to spend time with him, so she and Adrián agreed to meet outside the office for a late afternoon lunch. That somewhere turned out to be a restaurant in a luxury hotel overlooking the Pacific.

After they ate, they kissed.

And kissed.

Adrián booked a room, and they had sex for the first time.

When Theo was with the nanny, Adrián was with her in her office. On the days she didn't have Theo, despite those days being few and far between, they had sex in Adrián's office, then eventually at his Maui estate.

However, one morning, she woke up in his arms and found him staring down at her. And after gracing her with a soft smile, he'd said, "*Ayesha, I'm afraid I might be falling in love, querida.*"

So, they broke things off. That same week, he shut down his office, and she never saw him again.

"His name's Adrián," she said. "We had a thing a while back. It wasn't serious."

Joel didn't look her way. "Does he know that?"

"We both agreed to break it off."

“Why?”

“He said he thought he might be falling in love. That wasn’t what we agreed to, so we sort of ended things.”

“Sort of?”

“It wasn’t exactly a conventional relationship.”

“Then what was it?”

She let her eyes answer the question.

Joel licked his lips and she half-expected for them to be swiped right off his face. “How long did this ‘agreement’ last?” he asked. “A week? A month? A year? Because it must have lasted a while if the fucker still hasn’t left the restaurant.”

Again, she fought the urge to turn around.

“He’s chatting up the hostess, mate,” Gage said, although he stared in the same direction. “That’s why he’s still here.”

“Eesh, turn around,” Joel said. “I want to see what he does.”

She waited for Gage to cancel the request. Instead, Gage looked like he was centering Adrián in the scope of an imaginary rifle.

She turned.

Adrián laughed with the hostess and looked off to the side, but then his gaze connected with hers—and held. He stared at her without attempting to mask what he wanted, and she could almost see scenes of their time together play out between them on an invisible projection screen.

Things were going well.

She and Joel were finally together.

However, since the universe *loved* to fuck with her, it had decided to randomly toss Adrián into the mix. If she threw in the fact that the guys were even more “off-kilter” than usual these days, there was no version of this faux love triangle she could envision that wouldn’t end in someone’s death.

As far as she knew, Adrián was a desk, business software, suit and tie guy, which was only what Joel appeared to be on the outside. Also, if it came down to it, she knew who she’d save. She knew who had her heart. But she would be lying to herself if she said running into Adrián hadn’t evoked an unexpected *something*.

“Are you guys sure you can adapt to a normal life?” Tayler asked. “One guy and the two of you go into savage mode.”

“You don’t find that odd, love?” Gage asked. “What are the odds of Ayesha running into a man she once had a...casual affair with years ago in Maui, in Sweden?”

Ayesha started to raise an index finger but then set her hand back on her lap. “Technically, he did do a lot of international business.”

“Was he eating alone?” Joel added. “He ran into you, and then he left. That tells me he was here specifically to run into you.”

“You think he’s stalking me?”

Gage shrugged. “It’s possible. It would fucking suck for him, but it’s possible.”

“Why would it have taken so long?”

“We’re not saying there aren’t other variables to consider,” Gage said. “But that right there? That little incidental meetup? It doesn’t sit well with me.”

It didn't sit well with her either, but she already had to deal with Theo and Curtis' family. She couldn't pile on Adrián. Plus, even if Adrián *was* following her, how close did he expect to get with Carnivore One and Carnivore Two at the same table, and with four more bloodthirsty wolves back at what Dez jokingly referred to as their commune?

"Feel like dessert, Eesh?" Tayler asked.

She nodded. "Yes. And maybe another glass of wine."

* * *

The ride back home was mostly silent, and as she stared at the side of Joel's face, she wondered if they were on the precipice of their first argument as an engaged couple.

His voice pierced the silence. "Ayesha, there's something you should know about me. Something that could cause issues for us, even though I'm working on it. I'm...not that great at communicating."

"Are you sure?" she asked. "I've never had an issue with you in that department."

"That's because in the past, if I walked off and a guy tried to strike up a conversation with you at Trader Joe's, I could seethe, but I couldn't do anything about it."

"How quickly we forget Isaac. Then, let's see...there's the salmon guy from Whole Foods. Then there's the time we went to the beach, and those college guys kept trying to guess my name, and you'd learned all theirs by the end of the week without, if I recall correctly, ever saying a word to them. And the example you used? The guy at Trader Joe's? Oh, you

seethed. You just did it quietly. With your eyes. You burned a hole in that poor guy's confidence with only your eyes."

"You said you weren't interested, and he kept going."

"You were a foot taller than him, and I'm pretty sure he was only around twenty-four, twenty-five."

"Which meant he should have known better," he insisted. "A woman like you deserves a man, not some twenty-four-year-old who nearly got his life cut short because he doesn't understand the rules of basic boundaries."

"You guys aren't right in the head."

He shrugged. "I know."

She rolled her eyes, laughing quietly. "Joel, my point is that you might have *thought* you couldn't have done anything about it, but that didn't stop you from doing something about it."

"Yeah, but you never stopped me."

"Maybe I like you getting all possessive over me. Maybe I like the fact that you're not 'right in the head.'"

He glanced at her. "I swear, keeping men off you is a full-time job."

"Serves you right for getting involved with a beautiful woman."

"You're not wrong there." He released a quick, deep grunt. "In the least."

"So, you're bad at communicating..."

"I keep things in," he explained. "Especially if I'm upset."

"Why?"

“I’ve never seen my dad upset.”

“Doesn’t mean he never was.”

“I know.”

“Are you afraid of anger?”

He took a moment to respond. “Only in some cases. When I get upset, especially in a relationship, I see myself from the outside looking in, and I don’t like how it looks. I’m a big guy. You’re a pint-sized human. If I get upset at you, to me, I feel like it’ll make you afraid of me.”

“Tayler’s pint-sized,” she argued. “I’m average height for a woman.”

“Which is roughly a foot shorter than me.”

“Joel,” she eyed him, “why do you see yourself that way? You won’t hurt me.”

“I know.”

“Are you upset right now?”

He stretched the muscles in his neck. “Technically.”

“Why?”

“How’d you and your boyfriend meet?”

“Julien recruited him onto his Black Ops unit.”

He smiled, and it stretched from one end of the country to the other. The tension on his face evaporated, and he reached over, lacing their fingers together.

“Now, how did Adrián and I meet?” she corrected. “He leased an office in the same building. This was back when Theo was a baby.”

Joel glanced in the rearview mirror. “How do you go from that to sleeping together?”

“Time and a bucket of loneliness mixed with grief. I was still raw, but I had the boys, so it wasn’t like I could drop everything and cry all day. I needed...warmth. Losing Curtis felt like someone ripping off a piece of my flesh, and I wanted the ache to dull, even for a little while.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through that.” He kissed the back of her hand. “But when you first met him, did you feel like he was pushing you? Like he was on that path to get you in bed?”

“You mean like if he targeted me?”

“Something like that.”

“No. It kind of just happened. As a matter of fact, there were a few times before we slept together that we came close, and he would stop.”

“*He* stopped?”

“Joel...”

“You said you liked me being possessive.” He pressed another kiss to the back of her hand. “Lucky for you, I can’t seem to turn it off.”

“He said he felt guilty,” she explained. “He knew I was hurting, and it made him feel like he was taking advantage of me.”

“And was he?”

“Not intentionally, but back then, I was a shell. Empty. In pain. Sometimes, I closed my eyes and imagined it was Curtis making love to me. Knowing I did that to him makes me feel like crap now, but...it hurt so bad, Joel. I didn’t get to say goodbye. I would lie in bed with Curtis’ clothes, sometimes

wearing them and other times lying on them, and it was never enough. I felt like he was torn from me, and I needed to apply pressure to the wound, but I couldn't find where the wound was."

Joel kissed her palm and lowered it to his chest, his hand completely covering hers. "Ayesha, it was what you had to do to get through having something extremely difficult happen to you. Even if you two never...slept together, I don't think it would have been different."

"What do you mean?"

Glancing again in the rearview mirror, he pulled through the entrance gate of their sizable swath of land. "Because it's you, Eesh. There's something about you. Regardless of whether things had gotten physical, he would have still fallen in love with you."

While she often joked that the universe hated her, to be blessed with someone like Joel Lattimore meant it appeared to love her just as much.

"I like that we do this," she said. "And you're not a bad communicator, no matter what you think."

"I'm letting this indiscretion slide. Once I put a ring on your finger, if Adrián pops up again, I'm putting him six feet under."

She thumbed her wedding ring, for the first time realizing that marrying Joel would mean taking it off. Usually, she only took it off to have it cleaned and when she was in the shower, but she wanted to marry Joel. More than anything, she wanted to marry Joel. The annulment talk was bull; he would have to wrench their marriage license from her curled, cold, dead

fingers. Then, once they were married for a bit, she wanted to grow their family.

However, it occasionally felt like marrying Joel would, in some way, nullify her marriage to Curtis.

The phone rang through the car speakers. When they saw who was calling, they glanced at each other.

She accepted the call, her panic already at DEFCON Three. “Mo? Is everything okay? Did something happen—”

Crying sounded in the background at a level she hadn’t heard since Theo was a baby. Concern for Theo shoved everything aside—Adrian, the past. All she wanted was to hold her son so tight that she squeezed the agony from his body into hers.

Mo’s voice finally came through. “Eesh, Theo’s having a hard time tonight. He—*oh, puka, it’s okay. It’s okay, sweetie. Cry all you need to. I won’t leave you*—woke up screaming. Like, it’s so bad, he’s throwing up. Then he asked me to ask Giorgio if he could make sure ‘the man’ didn’t get him. When I told him Giorgio left to meet up with Dez, Mike, and Julien, this started.”

Ayesha dabbed uselessly at her eyes. “We’re almost home.”

“Gio’s on his way back, so we’ll try to get him to calm down.” Mo whispered a few more reassuring words to Theo. “It didn’t feel right not calling because we’ve never seen him this bad, you know? But we’ll take care of him and love on him until you guys get here. I promise.”

“Thanks, Mo-Mo.”

“No problem, Eesh.”

They ended the call, and Ayesha folded herself into the seat. She couldn't distance herself from the problem to effectively treat Theo, but he needed to talk to *someone*. Someone who could give them more clarity on this whole "man" issue.

"Joel?" She looked over, her vision watery. "Did somebody hurt my baby?"

CHAPTER 6

When they arrived at the house, Theo had on a new set of pajamas and was fast asleep in Giorgio's arms, those two fingers in his mouth. Josiah had fallen asleep in the middle of the sofa while Mo sat near Josiah's feet. Aleks, curls growing more uniform week by week, was sprawled all over Mo, his tiny belly rising and falling with each quiet snore.

"Hey, Mo-Mo, Giorgio," Ayesha greeted. "Has he been asleep long?"

Giorgio stroked Theo's hair. "Nyet."

"He's been asleep for about fifteen minutes," Mo said. "I've never seen him like this. I mean, he didn't stop crying until Gio walked in. Then, after we finished cleaning him up, he asked Gio to pick him up, and I can't tell you the last time he's done *that*."

Joel lifted Theo from Giorgio's arms, and Ayesha pulled his fingers from his mouth, which caused Theo's head to pop up.

"It's us," Joel whispered.

Theo gripped Joel's coat. "Where's Mama?"

"Right here, baby," she said. "Sweetie, did you have a nightmare?"

Theo's fingers returned to his mouth, and each tug opened a fresh crack in Ayesha's heart.

"Theo? Can you tell Mama what happened?"

Theo closed his eyes and continued to suck on his fingers.

Ayesha sighed and turned to Mo. "Mo, is it okay if Josiah stays until the morning?"

Mo handed Aleks to Giorgio and stood, stretching her arms above her head. "Of course. He can stay for as long as he likes."

"Thank you."

Ayesha kissed Josiah's cheek.

Mo walked them to the door.

Just before they left the main living area, Ayesha noticed Giorgio's hands moving, which was one of his stress responses. When things got to him further, he cut. Though it wasn't noticeable to the naked eye, he did it far less ever since she started joining him when he worked on his cars. During those times, she'd also learned a lot about his past. For him to be where he was despite his trauma made him one of the strongest people she knew.

Theo fell asleep as soon as Joel secured him in the car, and he didn't wake up on the ride back or as they walked into the house. However, the minute Joel set him on his bed, he scrambled into Joel's arms as if the sheets were on fire.

So, they took him to her room.

As she changed him into his nighttime undies, she saw he was already wearing a pair and prayed it wasn't because he'd had an accident at Mo and Giorgio's. Mo wouldn't mind, but the latent "you're a terrible mother" merged with the "you'll

fail as a single mother.” She wouldn’t be able to weather that with everything else going on.

“Honor Curtis for once in your life.”

She gave Joel a black ribbed tank and checkered pajama bottoms he had to know, at first glance, were brand new. While he changed in a guest room, she dragged makeup remover cloths over her face until her skin tingled. Then she brushed her teeth, tossed on one of Joel’s shirts, lifted Theo out of bed, and went downstairs.

As she hugged Theo close, stifling her cries, she heard Joel walk down the hallway. Next, his footsteps sounded on the staircase, and he came directly to the laundry room. There, he found her on the floor with Theo attached to her like Velcro.

She sat with her back pressed against the washing machine. Her tears dripped onto the back of Theo’s cotton shirt.

Joel kneeled in front of her, ran a gentle hand over the top of her twisted hair strands, and leaned forward to kiss her forehead. Just as delicately, he took Theo from her arms, took her hand, and walked them back up to the owner’s suite, where he set Theo on the mattress next to a pillow.

Once he’d settled Theo, he walked her just outside the door and pressed three kisses against her forehead. Then he hugged her, and he didn’t speak until her cries became sniffles. The possibility of Theo suffering abuse right under her nose was the hardest thing she’d ever dealt with, and she’d lost a husband and both of her parents.

“Come stay with me,” Joel whispered. “That way, Theo knows I’ll always come home. He can count on me coming home. So can Josiah. And you too, Eesh.”

She barely forced the words through her lips. “Joel, did some...somebody hurt my baby?”

“We don’t know that for sure.”

“Then why...is this...happening to him?”

“I’ll find out.”

“What if somebody...touched him?”

“Eesh, you can’t handle the thought of that right now.” He leaned back, cupped her face, and wiped her tears with his fingertips. “I’m going to do more stuff with him, even if it’s just going to the grocery store. I know I always take Josiah, but I’ve had several courses in Theo-ology. I think I can handle it. I’ll find out what’s going on. I promise.”

“You’re one of the world’s foremost experts in Theo-ology,” she said. “And I don’t think I tell you enough how much I appreciate the way you love them.”

“You don’t have to. You show me.” He tucked a twisted strand behind her ear. “In every way, you show me how much you appreciate me.”

“Because your life is important to me. I enjoy making you happy.” She wanted them to be happy together for the rest of their lives. “And I want Josiah and Theo to have good childhoods. I don’t want them to grow up thinking I didn’t love them enough or that I constantly failed them.”

“You know my mother had the same fear?”

“The Italian Martha Stewart?”

He laughed. “Yep. As you know, I lost my grandfather when I was young, and my Nonna wasn’t exactly the affectionate type. With her grandkids, yeah, but not with her daughters. She thought being soft with them would leave them

unprepared for a hard world, so I don't think my mother hugged my Nonna until my sister was born."

"But Jemma's very affectionate."

"Still, she always felt like she needed to do more. It wasn't enough to make custom birthday cakes, throw birthday parties, or read bedtime stories. The funny thing is, all the memories I have of my mother are good ones. When I think about her, I think of her singing to me when I got my tonsils out. Or when she'd 'fix' my hair and kiss my cheek before I went to school. I remember her laughing more than I remember her being angry. Yet, to this day, she thinks she could have done more."

"But what if they eventually need therapy to recover from their childhoods?" she asked.

"Babe, good parents worry that they're not perfect. Bad parents either believe they are, don't care, or only remember they have kids when they have a need to fulfill—attention, praise, money...whatever. And Eesh, I have great parents, yet look at all the shit you had to help me through. Theo and Josiah seeking therapy as adults wouldn't automatically be because you failed them. You're one part of this life. We can shield them from plenty, but not everything, and not forever."

She smiled. "Look at you."

"Learned from the expert."

He leaned toward her.

She closed her eyes.

Then she felt his lips on her cheek.

She held her breath, waiting for the second kiss. It was simple, yet the first time he did it, no matter what she'd tried to tell herself, it had stolen nearly all the air from her lungs. It

was the morning she gave him the pen, and she'd spent the rest of the week thinking about that simple yet unique double kiss.

He drew back and kissed her cheek, and when his mouth connected with hers, she sighed.

The sweet heat of his lips touching hers jarred her until she had to brace herself with two hands against his chest. He anchored her with his hands at her waist, and had it not been for his grip, she would have floated away.

Some things in life were simply *right*—his mouth against hers, the flutter of his warm breaths over the delicate space beneath her nose, her fingers curling until she'd seized handfuls of the ribbed tank, and the way a slight head tilt gave her more room to offer him more of herself.

“Joel,” her lips brushed his, “I can't guarantee that if we come to stay with you, we'll leave.”

“Don't leave, then,” he said. “There are things I can do to get you to stay. *So many things...*”

He cradled the back of her head, kissed her harder, and exhaled a moan quieter than a whisper as he lifted her off her feet.

She knew what she *wanted* to tell him.

But she didn't.

It wasn't time yet.

She cradled the sides of his face, her eyes opening and closing as their lips met and their heads turned. If she wasn't looking at his mouth, she was looking into his eyes. If he wasn't looking into her eyes, he was looking at her mouth.

“Just so you know, Josiah already has his room picked out at my place,” he said, his voice like sandpaper.

She laughed, not the slightest bit surprised.

“Ayesha, I’ll always be here for you. During the easy moments, the hard moments—it doesn’t matter. I’ll always be here for you. I can never repay you for everything you’ve done for me, but know that having you in my life is everything I *never* could have wished for. People know how to ask for happiness. I never would have known how to ask for you.”

Choking up, she brushed his hair off his forehead. “Joel, that sounds dangerously like you’re in love with me.”

“It does?” He smiled. “Can’t have that.”

She alternated between hugging and kissing him, euphoria replacing her earlier misery.

Eventually, he set her on her feet.

They made their way back into the room, but as she climbed in beside Theo, Theo jerked in his sleep.

“Don’t hurt my mama, Veeny.”

“Veeny?” She searched Theo’s face, looking for a sign or a clue. Anything. “Is that a word? A name?”

“I’m not sure,” Joel said. “I’ll ask Giorgio, see if he’s ever heard it.”

She kissed Theo’s cheek. “Mama and Joel are going to find out what’s hurting you and fix this, okay? I swear. I love you so much. Please know that if something happened to you and Mama wasn’t there to protect you, she’s so, so sorry, sweetheart. So sorry.”

Before the end of the week, the four of them would be under one roof, and with the way Theo trembled against her, it wouldn’t be a moment too soon.

CHAPTER 7

Joel and Ayesha decided it made the most sense to have Theo stay with him for the rest of the week while she and Josiah finished moving. Theo had his bag packed in under three minutes, but Joel had to repack it so they brought actual essentials instead of dinosaur toys, race cars, and juice boxes.

They asked Theo's teacher if he could complete his work for the rest of the week virtually, and she told them Theo had been so anxious and withdrawn at school, she wanted them to treat his time away like any other illness. She also gave them a recommendation for someone they could speak to about his night terrors.

As it was cold outside, Joel set up a tent on the enclosed patio at his house and lit the outdoor fireplace. He even picked up artificial turf to simulate the grass the tent sat on top of. While he'd had a night of activities planned, Theo didn't seem to be interested in anything other than lying on sleeping bags, tucked against him, while they read stories together.

"Are you sure you want me to read this one, Theo?" Joel flipped through a book about a baby bird who hatched while its mother was away. "Have you ever read it before?"

"My teacher at my old school in Maui readed it to our class," Theo said. "It's about a baby bird looking for its

mama.”

Theo wanted them to wear matching pajamas, but he didn't have anything blue with gray spaceships. So, he improvised with a blue Quantico T-shirt and gray pajama pants, the fabrics rustling against each other as Theo snuggled closer.

“She *read* it to your class?” He turned to the first page. “You must really like this story if you want to read it again.”

As he read, he understood why it had resonated with Theo.

It started with a mother bird sitting on an egg. When she felt the egg move, she realized it was getting ready to hatch and flew away to find food. While she was away, the baby bird hatched and subsequently went on an adventure to find its mother.

Because of his age, Theo rarely received credit for the times he was most perceptive. He'd essentially “hatched” when his father wasn't around, and he'd been looking for one ever since.

When they reached a part where the baby bird proclaimed that it *had* to have a mother but hadn't found her yet, Theo squirmed.

“Is this how you feel, Theo?” Joel asked. “Do you feel like you don't have a,” he decided to play coy, “mother?”

Theo pulled wrinkled index and middle fingers from his mouth. “But I have a mama, Joel.”

“Do you feel like you don't have a daddy?”

“Josiah had a daddy. I never had a daddy.”

“And how does that make you feel?”

“I asked Mama if we could go to where they put him in the dirt after he went to heaven, just me and her. And Mama showed me pictures and stuff, and I watched him on her phone and the computer.”

“But it’s not the same.”

“It’s not the same thing,” Theo echoed.

Joel continued the story, stopping again when Theo squirmed as the baby bird asked a giant piece of machinery if it was its mother.

“So, what did you and your mama do when you went to see your dad?”

“I aksed him a secret. I aks...aks,” Theo huffed, “*asked* him if he would be mad if I got another daddy.”

“Did you have someone in mind?”

Theo readjusted so the sides of their heads touched. “I want *you* to be my daddy, Joel. I love my uncles, but I want them to be my uncles.”

“I must be a special guy.”

“Joel, you’re really funny, your eggs don’t have any juice like when Mama makes them, and you’re really good at soccer even though I think Mama’s better.”

“Hey!”

Theo giggled.

“I’m working on my game,” Joel said, faking hurt. “But she is pretty good, isn’t she?”

“Mama said when you love somebody, you don’t want bad things to happen to them. I love you, Joel, the same like I love Mama. I don’t want bad things to happen to you. When I get to

hang out wiff you, and we do stuff together, just me and you, or wiff Jojo, I feel like you're my daddy. I like when you pick me up from school and read me stories. Can you stay with me forever?"

Joel closed the book. "Do you think I'll go away if I'm not your father?"

"Do you want to go away?"

"Theo, I'll always be here for you, whether I'm your father or not." Though he was ready to officially take on the role. "And no, I don't want to go far away from you."

Theo beamed. "Don't tell Mama, but you're my second bestest friend."

"Who's your first?"

"Jojo."

Joel smiled. "Good choice."

"Mama is the bestest because she's Mama, Jojo is my first bestest friend, you're my second bestest friend, and Thandie is my," Theo held up three fingers, "three bestest friend. I don't have any other friends at school."

A pang hit Joel in the center of his chest when he recalled what Ayesha had said at dinner. Back in Maui, most of Theo's friends had been extensions of Josiah's. Theo also wasn't the biggest fan of school, and he and Ayesha had assumed it was because he had to periodically "sit still and listen" for longer than fifteen minutes.

Now that he thought about it, part of that dislike could have been due to Theo's friendlessness. Kids could tell when people didn't like or merely tolerated them, but what was there not to like about Theo?

“Are kids mean to you at school, Theo?” he asked.

Theo split two fingers into “legs” and walked them across his forehead. “They get mad because sometimes I kick the ball too hard, but I never mean it when it hurts somebody. That’s when they say I can’t play anymore.”

“What do you do then?”

“Play by myself.”

He studied Theo’s face, torn between wanting to fight pre-K and kindergarten-age children for hurting his boy and begging them to please play with him. If they gave him a shot and learned who he truly was, they would love him.

“Whenever we go to recess at the same time as the big kids, Thandie plays wiff me even though she’s bigger’n me.”

Theo crawled on top of him and stared into his eyes, their noses almost touching. Joel moved the book to the side to avoid having it crushed beneath Theo’s thirty-eight pounds. They’d already taken him for two check-ups since moving to Sweden, but the pediatrician reassured them that Theo was perfectly healthy—just small.

“Joel, I didn’t mean to scratch Thandie.”

“I know you didn’t, buddy. Me and your mama know you didn’t mean it, but we have to make sure you understand it’s dangerous and remind you of the rules.”

Theo agreed, quieted, and resettled.

Joel finished the rest of the book.

Next, they read one about a little boy who lost his dinosaur.

When he thought they were finished and Theo was ready to “roast marshmallows,” Theo went to his bag and pulled out one last book. Joel scanned the cover and came dangerously close to bursting into a level of tears that would have made *Theo* uncomfortable.

“My teacher gived me this book.” Theo climbed back on top of him. “I aksed her if she had a book that I could read to you when I’m a gooder reader, and she said I can take this one home and read it wiff you so I learn the words.”

He swallowed twice before reading the title out loud. “You asked her for a book called ‘I Love You, Daddy’ to read with *me?*”

“Mm-hmm.”

Joel sat up.

Theo plopped his fingers into his mouth and threaded himself through Joel’s arms to see the pictures while they read.

Joel didn’t know how he got through the book about a baby bear who felt as if it could do things it never thought possible because of its father. He didn’t know how he made it without flooding the living room with tears. A few times, he had to stop and pretend to clear something from his throat to gather his composure.

Just like Theo didn’t want him to go anywhere, he didn’t want to go anywhere himself. At this point, where *could* he go except straight into a den of misery and unhappiness if they stopped being part of his life?

“Theo,” he kissed the top of Theo’s head, “thank you for bringing this book home for me to read with you. Thank you so much.”

After the story, they roasted marshmallows in the wood-burning fireplace, and he used the opportunity to reiterate fire safety to Theo four times to ensure he'd heard it once.

When they were done, he expected the sugar to have Theo bouncing off the walls, but all Theo wanted to do was sit with him in the tent and look at the stars through the patio windows.

He learned that dinosaurs were the “biggest animals to ever have lived,” Komodo dragons had “*poisin* spit,” and a “*boxed* jellyfish” was “the most *poisinous* thing in the world.” As Theo spewed out fact after fact, he made a mental note to get a *National Geographic Kids* subscription sent to the house.

Theo also wanted to know, if he was “really good,” whether he could get a pet iguana. Gage and Tayler had Ares, Mo had a puppy named Ginger, and Giorgio had secret piranhas, but there was no way in hell Ayesha would agree to a giant ass lizard in the house, even more so after Carlton.

“Joel, are you gonna marry Mama?” Theo suddenly asked in the middle of explaining why a Komodo dragon wasn't the same thing as a Water Monitor lizard.

“Well, I...uh...” Joel scratched the back of his head. “What do you think? Do you think your mama and I should get married?”

“Do you love Mama?”

“I do.”

“And Mama loves you too.”

His mouth stretched into a wide smile. “And how do you know your mama loves me?”

“Because she said so!” Theo tossed up both hands for emphasis. “I aksed her, and she said it would be our secret,

and I never telled anybody.”

The smile stretched further. “You’re a vault, son.”

“But I can help you make Mama love you like me and Jojo love you,” Theo added.

“I’m all ears.”

“Mama likes food.”

“Good. I took her to a fancy restaurant.”

“Did they have yummy lemonade?” Theo smacked his lips. “Mama likes yummy lemonade.”

“We didn’t have lemonade that time, but if we go back, I’ll make sure we order some.”

Theo stood in front of him and tapped his chin, their faces again close to touching. “What about pretty flowers?”

“Will you help me pick some out?”

“We’ll get the prettiest flowers for the prettiest mama!” Theo pumped his fist. “Oh! Mama loves kisses too!”

And he loved that Theo’s mama loved kisses.

“I’ll...try to remember that.”

Theo yawned and curled into the nook created by his bent limbs and midsection. If he got up from this position without tearing a tendon or ligament, it would be a miracle, but he would risk injury if it meant keeping the three of them safe, especially his little guy.

“Joel, when it’s just me and you and nobody else, can I call you Daddy? Would that make you mad?”

A lump formed in his throat. “It wouldn’t make me mad, but are you sure you want to do that?”

“Jojo said if you get to be our daddy, I can call you Daddy, and he can call you Dad. Then, when I get bigger, I can call you Dad too, but I don’t want to right now.”

“Well, when it’s just the two of us and nobody else, you can call me whatever you want.”

“Daddy. I want to call you my daddy.”

If Ayesha didn’t realize she was moving in for good, it wouldn’t take her long to figure it out. If she needed him to convince her to stay, he could do that as well.

“If I fall asleep, will you leave me?” Theo asked.

“Nope.” He pressed a couple of kisses on top of Theo’s head. “I’ll be right here when you wake up. No one will hurt you as long as you’re with me. Promise.”

He held up his pinky.

Theo wrapped his smaller one around it and closed his eyes.

“Daddy?”

“Yes, Theo?”

“This is the bestest night ever.”

Joel tucked him close. “For me too, buddy. For me too.”

CHAPTER 8

When Joel didn't feel the movements or stirrings of a tiny, warm body next to him, his eyelids flipped open. He was in the tent, but Theo wasn't next to him. He'd told Theo to wake him if he had to go to the bathroom, even though he wore the nighttime underwear, to ensure he didn't walk in the dark alone. If Theo wasn't next to him, where the hell was he?

"Theo?" He left the tent, scanned the patio, and noticed the open doors. "Theo, where are you? Talk to me, buddy."

After sweeping his gaze around the outdoor space one last time, he went inside, moved aside a picture on the wall, and grabbed the Glock hidden behind it, his pulse pounding in his ears.

"Theo-nosaurus Rex, can you hear me?"

A shriek echoed through the house.

His blood started to curdle, but he took a moment to focus on where the noise had come from. Panic wouldn't help him find Theo, but he was seconds away from his heart giving out.

Theo's voice rang out again from the direction of the kitchen.

"Mama! Joel!"

He dashed to the kitchen and followed crying and whimpering noises to the pantry. Inside, he found Theo curled into a ball on the floor, eyes shut and shaking so violently that his curls lay damp and flat on his forehead.

“Theo?” His fingers grazed Theo’s skin. “Theo, it’s me. I’m here.”

Theo’s eyes opened, widened, and he scrambled backward until he’d plastered himself up against a pile of cans.

Joel kneeled, tucking away the pistol. “It’s me, Theo. It’s Joel. You’re safe, baby boy.”

Theo dashed forward and hugged him with trembling arms around his neck, little heart beating out of his chest. Tears stained his face as he coughed between cries.

“Theo, I’m here. I’m here. Can you feel my breathing? Try to breathe like me. In...out. In...out. I’m here. I’m here. You’re safe. You’re safe.”

While they breathed together, Joel walked around the house, stroking Theo’s back and rocking him like he’d done since Theo was a baby. No matter how much he freaked out on the inside, he kept his tone level and calm.

“I’m right here, Theo.” He sent a quick apology heavenward before the following words left his mouth. “Daddy’s here. Daddy’s right here. I’m not going anywhere, baby boy. You’re safe.”

It took several minutes for Theo’s crying to reduce to tearful whimpers, but he didn’t stop walking or set him down, even if he had to hold him for the rest of the night.

“Daddy?” Theo’s stomach quivered. “Can I tell you a secret?”

Joel held his breath. “Yes, you can tell me a secret. You can tell me anything.”

“Mr. Veeny was at the Maui house.”

Rage potent enough to coagulate his blood replaced every ounce of fear. “Theo, is Mr. Veeny real or fake?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Is that who you drew in your pictures? The scary man?”

“Yes.”

He sat Theo on the living room sofa and crouched in front of him. “Theo, you can tell me anything. Anything in the world. I love you with everything in me, so if Mr. Veeny hurt you in Maui and told you not to tell me, tell me anyhow. Anybody who hurts my baby boy has to deal with me, and I won’t be nice about it. It’s okay to tell me, no matter what he said to you.”

Theo’s lips trembled. “Mr. Veeny told me not to tell Mama he was at my school.”

“Did he tell you his name was Mr. Veeny?”

“His name is Veen...something.”

“What else did,” *this motherfucker*, “Mr. Veeny tell you?”

“He said that if I tell, he’ll hurt Mama and Jojo like he hurt my heaven papa.”

“If you tell what?”

Theo looked away.

“Baby boy, how did Mr. Veeny get inside the Maui house?”

“He climbed through my bedroom window.”

Joel swallowed a litany of curse words and used divine strength to keep his expression neutral. “Theo, did Mr. Veeny ever touch you? And I mean anywhere, like on your arm, your leg, or,” his voice shook, “inside your underwear?”

Theo circled his fingers around his neck. “Like this. He pickeded me up, and he said that if I screamed, he would drop me outside on the ground so I could break into a million pieces.”

“Did he touch you anywhere else? Hurt you? Scratch you? Pinch you?”

“He showed me his gun, and he said he would use it to shoot me and kill me and make me dead.”

Joel’s rage grew until tremors moved inside him. “Theo, when was the last time you saw Mr. Veeny?”

“Before you stayed with me, Mama, and Jojo, and me and Mama got the fluenza. I forgot about him for a little while, and I never thought about him, not even a little bit, but then I dreamed that he was in our Sweden house, and then I remembered.”

“And Mr. Veeny,” *who’s a dead motherfucker*, “said he knows about your heaven papa?”

“Uh, huh. He said he killed my heaven papa, but I don’t believe him. Mama said my heaven papa was a hero, and he protected my uncles, and that’s how come he went to heaven because he’s an angel.”

“And your mama’s right.”

“Daddy,” the tears returned, “I’m scared.”

“I know, and it’s okay to be scared. I was scared when I couldn’t find you, but I’m angry too. I’m angry at Mr. Veeny

for hurting my little boy, so you know what I'm going to do? Me and your uncles are going to make sure Mr. Veeny doesn't ever lay a," *fucking*, "hand on you again, Theo. I promise. Until I'm infinity years old, I'm going to take care of you, Jojo, and your mama." He turned around and patted his shoulders. "Come on. Hop on up."

Theo climbed onto his back.

"Hold on tight."

Theo's chin moved against his shoulder.

After ensuring everything was closed and locked up tight, he headed upstairs. While camping was fun, for Theo's peace of mind, they needed to sleep somewhere not as open or vulnerable as the multi-pane glass-covered back patio.

He set Theo down on the mattress and climbed into bed. Theo immediately latched onto his left side, and he wrapped an arm around him, locking him in. Then, when he was confident Theo was asleep, he texted Ayesha.

JOEL

Hey, beautiful. You up?

AYESHA

Right back at you, handsome. I'm way up. How's boys' night?

JOEL

How do you feel about you and Josiah coming tonight?

His phone rang, and he cursed. He'd texted because he had no idea how he sounded. Inside, he felt ready to commit murder; she would waste no time picking up on that.

“Joel, what happened? Is Theo okay?”

He wasn't ready to tell her what he knew. If he did, she'd have to live with the knowledge that this man had been in her home. She'd realize that this Mr. Veeny had been in her baby's room and had managed to bypass Julien's security system, which meant this wasn't some average fuck, not that it mattered in the grand scheme of things.

Mr. Veeny was a dead motherfucker.

He couldn't do that to her, not when she'd been so happy since they moved to Sweden. She was always laughing and smiling now, and she loved being within driving distance of everyone. His duty was to keep that smile on her face, which meant he would keep this from her for as long as he feasibly could.

“Theo had another nightmare,” he said. “I found him hiding in the pantry.”

“Oh, God.”

“I'd like it if you and Josiah came tonight. I'd feel better if you guys came before it gets too late, and you're here when Theo wakes up.”

Her bed frame creaked. “Okay. We're coming. I'll go wake Josiah, and I'll see you in—”

“Don't hang up.”

He listened as they packed their things, Josiah's maturing, sleepy voice asking if everything was okay with Theo. He heard Ayesha reassure him that everything was fine, but there was no way Josiah believed her with the way she sounded.

They drove to his house, and he didn't allow her to disconnect until he heard the garage door close. When she

appeared in the bedroom doorway, his anger cooled.

“Where’s Josiah?” he asked.

“He’s half asleep, so he went to his room.” She flicked a thumb behind her. “You said he had his room picked out, but I didn’t realize it was a finished room.”

“Almost finished. He needs a desk and some other stuff.”

“There’s wall paneling, Joel.”

Ever since moving to Sweden, he’d decided they would one day live together. Theo also had a room, but after he started having night terrors, he didn’t do as much there as he’d done in Josiah’s.

Ayesha kicked off her shoes, slipped off the pair of leggings she’d tossed on under her cotton nightgown, and climbed into bed.

She lay next to him and reached across his body to stroke the soft curls on Theo’s head. As if suddenly remembering something, she rose and blessed him with a light kiss that eased the remainder of his need for violence.

“And you said that Giorgio doesn’t know anything about this ‘veeny’ thing, right?” she asked.

“No,” he lied.

Giorgio had immediately connected “veeny” to Theo’s drawing as the name of the black figure.

She stared at Theo, eyes glistening.

“Ayesha, I have something to tell you, and I don’t know if you’ll like it.” It wasn’t what he needed to tell her, but it was something she needed to know.

“Theo asked to call you Daddy, didn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“And you didn’t tell him he couldn’t.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged. “I mean, I guess it’s because I don’t hate it? I know how that sounds, and I’m sorry for doing that without consulting with you first, but he had me read this ‘I Love You, Daddy’ book, and I got caught up in all the feels.”

“An ‘I Love You, Daddy’ book?” She looked up, meeting his gaze. “And he brought that to you out of the blue?”

“He asked his teacher for a book he could read with me,” he said, rubbing his chest.

“Joel, you’ve been an active part of Theo’s life for... almost as long as I have. I’m surprised it took him this long.”

“So you don’t think Curtis’ll lodge a trident in my spine?”

She burst out in quiet laughter. “Why a trident?”

“I...” He breathed through a laugh. “I don’t even know.”

“Joel, the truth is, no matter how much I try to avoid thinking this, Theo never knew his father. He never knew what it’s like to have a father, and my words, videos, and photos can only do so much. You came into his life and made him feel loved, protected, and appreciated. For all intents and purposes...Joel, you *are* his father.”

Even after the divorce papers were signed and time had passed, he’d held onto the belief that he’d used up all the love he would ever have. He often used “split” more than “divorce” because it was exactly what his heart had done that day he

walked out of a lawyer's office as a single man, again, all of a sudden.

But things were different now.

It was as if Ayesha had peeled back the layers of his skin and stepped inside him. He could barely remember where he ended, and she began. Without the paperwork, they already had a union, a partnership, and the well he'd assumed had been drained after his divorce now flowed over anew.

Smiling, he raised her hand to his lips. "So, you're with me?"

"I'm with you," she said.

"You live here now."

"That's fine."

"I booked the tickets. By the time we get back, you'll be my wife."

"Are you nervous?"

He shook his head. "Not...at...all."

"Me either."

When their lips touched, what he felt wasn't another minor heart attack. His blood vessels dilated. His breathing slowed. He dipped his tongue inside her mouth and cradled the back of her head to take as much of her as he could. Later, when they were alone, he would possess this mouth, own this mouth. Right now, their son lay between them, needed them.

So, they pulled apart.

While he wooed her and made her his in every way imaginable, behind the scenes, he would track this fucking Mr. Veeny. And with the level of harm he wanted to commit, he

prayed he didn't fall to a place he couldn't come back from,
even if Ayesha called to him from the other side.

CHAPTER 9

Dmitri Sokolov continued his search, for the first time regretting the nine-bedroom estate he called home—technically, *one* of his homes—in Santorini, Greece. Nine bedrooms and seven bathrooms gave his girlfriend too many places to hide, and while he enjoyed the games they played, he had a feeling Sydney wasn't hiding because he'd find her naked somewhere.

“Dorogaya, where are you hiding, my love?”

At the next bathroom he came to, he placed his ear against the door and heard what sounded like someone in pain.

He yanked the door open.

Sydney sat tucked in a corner, her face so wet with tears that, at first, he thought it was sweat.

“Sydney?” He kneeled in front of her. “What’s the matter? What’s wrong?”

He tried to move her to check for any wounds or injuries, but she shook her head and looked directly into his eyes.

“Dmitri, I’m sorry.”

As she stood, she handed him something, stepped around his body, and left the bathroom, coughing between her cries.

Although he wasn't exactly well-versed in how to read these things, these tests wanted to make sure there was no doubt about their results. All three of them, every single one, had the same word in the small viewing window:

Pregnant

Pregnant

Pregnant

“Sydney, wait.” He followed her down the long hallway to the western side of the house, where the owner's wing was located. There, he found her pacing, the sheets unmade because the housekeepers had a day off—and because he enjoyed the games he and Sydney played.

“I didn't plan this,” she said. “I didn't do this on purpose, I swear.”

He tapped the tests against his palm. “Sydney, if you were trying to trap me, I gave you a whole boatload of ammunition. A ship docked at a harbor pulled out more than I did.”

She continued to pace, wringing her fingers. “I need to go to Sweden.”

“Sweden? Where your ex-husband lives?”

She came to a stop, her eyes wide and her hands raised in front of her. “No, I don't mean...it's nothing like that. It's your baby.”

“*Our* baby,” he corrected.

She squeezed her fingers, and he stepped forward to break them apart before she permanently cut off her blood supply.

“I just need someone to talk to.”

“*Someone* is standing right here, Syd.”

She stared at him, the whites of her eyes glistening. “Dmitri, I...I don’t know if I can do this,” she said, barely louder than a whisper. “I don’t know if I can be a mother.”

“The baby’s already inside you. Are you talking about terminating the pregnancy?”

“No, no.” She pressed her forehead against his chest. “I don’t want to do that. I want the baby. I want...*our* baby, but I don’t know if I can be a mother.”

“The two kind of go hand in hand.”

“I know.”

“So then, going to Sweden is about seeing your friend,” he said. “The therapist.”

“Maybe. I don’t know. I’m not sure I can talk to her right now.”

“Why not?”

She didn’t respond.

He sighed, not used to brokering deals where he didn’t come out the ultimate beneficiary. “Syd, if you want to go to Sweden, it won’t be alone. I have business there. We can fly out together.”

She looked up into his face. “Are you sure? You haven’t been feeling well, and you promised me you’d slow down.”

When they first met, she’d expected him to treat her like a princess before understanding that he was used to being treated like a king. After meeting her family, he’d realized they’d molded her that way, her parents swiping her along a whetstone until she was sharpened into someone shortsighted with an intense fear of abandonment. Someone even she hadn’t wanted to be.

“That’s what this business trip is for. After that, I’ll rest. I mean, I’ve got a kid on the way.” He smiled. “I’ve got a *kid* on the way.”

“So, you’ve got to make sure you’re around.”

“Would you leave?”

She cocked her head to the side. “What do you mean?”

“You left your marriage because life grew out of your control. If that happens with us, will you leave?”

“The world doesn’t revolve around Sydney Donovan,” she said. “A...friend taught me that.”

“Is it your friend Ayesha? Did something happen between the two of you?”

All she did was shrug.

He thought back to why he’d been looking for her in the first place, why he’d needed to talk to her.

She’d confided in him that one of the reasons her marriage ended was because of her fear of being alone by way of her ex-husband’s death. What she didn’t realize was that there were ways to die that were far more common than a stray bullet or an explosive.

Her ex-husband placed himself in situations where he could see danger coming. Knowing danger existed somewhere increased the likelihood of being able to prepare for it in some form. But he’d had no idea danger had been growing inside him all this time, and according to his follow-up earlier, his danger had reached its second stage.

Time would tell whether what her friend had taught her would make a difference in their future.

Sydney demanded.

If her demands weren't met, she ran.

Yet, if she tried to run with his kid inside her, she would quickly learn all that his money could do.

CHAPTER 10

“Ayesha, I can’t do this anymore.” Adrian pushed Ayesha back against the car, her face between his hands. “I’m going to kiss you. I have to. Tell me, now, if it’s not what you want.”

As he moved closer, he spotted something over her shoulder, in the distance, tucked into a dark corner of the parking garage adjacent to their office building.

It was laughable that the asshole thought he didn’t know he was being followed. If he was lucky, Lavigne would run from the dark corner right back to Trevor to share the breaking news of him and Ayesha. If he was lucky, they would come for him.

“Adrian?”

He looked down into Ayesha’s face. Before, all he’d had was an image of a pretty woman in mourning. However, upon meeting her, she quickly became a woman who’d offered him more warmth than he’d ever known in his cold, cold life.

She stood on the highest point on her toes, and he wrapped her arms around his neck before looping his around her.

Their lips met.

Her lips parted.

His tongue sailed inside.

“Just like that,” she whispered against his mouth.

“God, Adrián...just like that.”

Adrián stared at the Baltic from the house’s balcony ledge, his arm propped on his bent knee. He’d been cooped up in a villa, although large, with five other men, for close to six months. Before the year was out, somebody would die, and his money was on the waste of human organs staring at the side of his face.

“I’ve known your secret since our Maui reconnaissance on the Savea widow.” Lavigne blew a puff of smoke into the air. “I followed you. I saw you kiss her.”

“I knew you were following me,” he spat. “And I don’t care that you saw me kiss her.”

“I watched you fuck her.”

“Good. Maybe you learned something.”

Lavigne grunted and took a pull on the cigarette. After a long pause, he asked, “What is it about her pussy that tames men this way?”

Adrián mentally checked to verify he had at least one firearm on his body. Even if he didn’t, he had knives.

And hands.

“It is a serious question.” Lavigne took another pull. “Maybe I’m curious.”

“You’ve never spent time with her,” Adrián said. “That’s why you’re curious. Trust me. If you did, you’d have your answer.”

It wasn’t what she had between her legs.

It was who Ayesha was, in contrast to who *they* were. It was why they needed weapons; without weapons, they would be forced to realize just how wide open they consistently left their hearts and minds. They would be forced to accept that there was no protecting them against someone who came wielding something other than danger.

People like them expected bullets, war, death, and darkness. Yet warmth, a kind smile, soft eye contact, or even something as basic as an authentic embrace? They had no idea what the hell to do with any of it. So, when faced with those moments of confusion, those moments when they were most vulnerable, they folded like a house of cards.

“You know something?” Lavigne tapped the end of the glowing nicotine stick, sending ashes floating through the air. “Before the Savea widow, I never saw you with a woman. At first, I thought you might not like them, but I think it is something different. The infamous Adrián Delgano, former enforcer for the *Chamasagrado* cartel of Brazil...was the Savea widow your first lover?”

Adrián unhinged his jaw, using nearly all the strength he had in his body. “Lavigne, do me a favor and shut the fuck up.”

“Protective of her, are you? You have been watching her? For a long time? If so, then *tu sais ce que j’ai fait au garçon.*”

“You did *what* to what boy?” He went from sitting to his hand wrapped around Lavigne’s throat in seconds, Lavigne’s

back pressed against the concrete exterior wall.

The cigarette dropped from Lavigne's fingers, and as Lavigne's eyes turned red, the ignorant fuck smiled.

Adrián brandished the pistol and held it against Lavigne's temple, but Trevor rushed onto the terrace and knocked the gun to the side just as the shot rang out, the bullet headed for the depths of the sea.

"Let him go, Adrián."

Adrián squeezed tighter.

"Gano."

He released.

Lavigne stumbled to the side, coughing.

"Lavigne, I've told you, several times, that I'll kill you if I find out you hurt either of those boys," he spat, the gun aimed at Lavigne's skull.

"What boys?" Trevor asked.

"Ayesha Savea's. We said we wouldn't hurt any of them, her or her little boys. That's not how we operate. That's not what the fuck we do."

"It's not." Trevor turned to Lavigne. "So, what did you do? Did you hurt a kid?"

Lavigne swatted the air. "Only a little scare."

Adrián faced the water. For good measure, next time, he would pull the trigger more than once. "Ayesha's here," he said. "I saw her."

Trevor frowned. "So she actually did leave Hawaii for cold-ass Sweden?"

“Seems that way.”

Not only had she been sitting with Gage Wolfe, the man they were actively combing the country to locate, but it appeared she'd also found herself a new man. Whoever the guy was looked genuinely interested in her, but once he got the chance to talk to her, she'd understand. He was the only person who could care for her in a way that would make her feel safe in a world like this.

If she forgave him.

“She wasn't alone,” he added. “She appeared to be on a date—pretty boy, businessman-looking type. It doesn't make any sense to keep following her. We'll find Alpha some other way.”

“Was it only her and the boyfriend?” Lavigne asked.

Adrian tightened his grip on the handgun. “Yes. Why do you ask? Did you follow me?”

If he'd followed him, he would have seen Wolfe. As usual, Siriano Lavigne was full of shit.

Lavigne reached for another cigarette. “You said I was spotted by the kid. How did you know? Are *you* following *me*?”

Had he followed Lavigne more closely, he would have been able to save Theo from having to deal with the terror he was currently going through. Then, the last time he'd listened in, he'd overheard them saying they were getting ready to move, so he'd be relegated to only tracking Ayesha's location rather than hearing her voice every morning.

“For now, play nice,” Trevor ordered. “Don't forget that out of all the other teams, whoever eliminates Alpha gets to

walk away from this life. I've got a wife I'd love to see more.
We'd like to have a couple of kids. Keep it the fuck together.”

Lavigne lit his cigarette. “Oui.”

Adrian didn't respond.

CHAPTER 11

Ayesha opened her eyes and blinked a few times, the room's furniture and decor unfamiliar, but then she picked up on the thumb stroking the back of her neck. As if she'd been doing it for years, she settled further against Joel's hard chest, and his arm around her waist tucked her closer.

"Good morning, Joel."

"*Great* morning, Ayesha." His chest swelled with a sigh. "By the way, Theo and Josiah are downstairs making us breakfast in bed. That means we have a few minutes to ourselves."

His gaze lowered, and the way he helplessly stared at her mouth when he wanted to kiss her turned her on to the point of near dizziness.

"Joel, we can't."

"We can't...what?"

"I haven't brushed my teeth yet. You can't kiss me with morning breath."

"You'd be surprised by the things I would do if you let me."

She slapped her hands over her mouth.

He rolled his eyes with a grin and flipped so she lay on her back while he hovered over her, his legs on either side of her body. “You say that now when you were just less than six inches from my face.”

She laughed. “I’m aware now.”

“So, I can’t kiss your lips,” he kissed the side of her neck, “but that doesn’t mean there aren’t more places where I can put my mouth.”

He kissed his way down to the middle of her chest and then back up to her mouth. The moment his lips touched hers, she angled her head. When she felt his tongue, she opened up. Tightness pulled at her nipples, and enough sparks to power the entire house lit between her legs.

“So,” he weakened her with soft flicks of his tongue, “you didn’t kiss Curtis in the mornings?”

She loved how he sounded, his voice thick and abrasive like a honeycomb spilling over with golden drops of desire.

“Yeah, but not in the beginning,” she said.

“Eesh, we’re not ‘in the beginning.’” He licked her top lip, sucked it into his mouth, released. “We’re way past ‘in the beginning.’ Our first date was over two years ago, remember?”

As he moved to her bottom lip, she swore her body released an egg. Current circumstances had proven she’d been fertile at least twice.

“Eesh, open up for me, baby.”

She parted her lips, and he shoved his tongue between them, his tongue lazy and deliberate as if committing the inner workings of her mouth to memory.

She flung her arms around his neck, and the pads of her fingertips grazed his scalp.

A low groan resonated in his throat. “I fucking love it when you do that. You don’t know how close you came to riding my fingers at Gage and Tay’s wedding.”

He rolled again so that she sat on top of him, hot and hard underneath her. Then he slid his hand up her thighs, toward her panties.

“Just like that.” She held her breath, waiting for his touch. “God, Joel...just like that.”

“Mama and Daddy are still asleep.”

“Mama and...Daddy?”

He went still.

“Five more seconds,” she whispered, chest heaving. Even if it was five seconds, she wanted to spend them kissing him with his fingers inside her. “And the boys always knock.”

“Joel’s not really my daddy yet. It’s just his secret name that I call him.” Small hands tapped on the door. “Mama? Joel? Auntie Sydney’s here.”

Joel hesitated, then gently moved her aside and slid off the bed. He didn’t say a word as he walked into the bathroom, tousling his hair with his fingers.

Ayesha stared at the closed bathroom door.

This was a new development.

She tossed her legs over the side of the bed and thought about going to Joel’s closet to find something of his to wear over her nightgown. However, after a reaction like that, she

wasn't sure he wouldn't rip it off for wearing it in front of Sydney.

Instead, she smoothed the fabric, let the cotton dress fall back to just above her knees, and opened the door. Theo rushed forward and wrapped his arms around her legs.

“Good morning, Mama. Did you sleep good?”

“I slept *very* good, my love.” She played with his curls, kissed the top of his head, and then looked up. “Good morning, Sydney.”

Sydney scanned her face, a woman who was an expert in what *just finished making out with Joel Lattimore* looked like.

“I didn't expect to find you and the boys here,” Sydney said. “I'm sorry about barging in like this.”

“We live here now,” Theo said, beaming.

Sydney glanced over Ayesha's shoulder. “Oh. And Joel's in there?”

“He's in the bathroom.” Ayesha held Theo's hands while he positioned his feet on top of hers, and she carefully stepped forward, Theo's weight shortening her strides. “Theo, how about we eat downstairs instead of breakfast in bed this time? Is that okay with you and Josiah, you think?”

He nodded. “It's okay, Mama.”

Ayesha headed toward the stairs, thoughts racing. By the time she took a seat at the breakfast table, she felt like she'd had several minor heart attacks.

Josiah brought a tray of French toast, hard-boiled eggs, grapes, cubed cheese, breakfast sausage, and her and Joel's favorite coffee to the table.

“Here you go, Ma.” He hugged her and kissed her cheek.
“Bon appétit.”

She smiled up at him. “What did I do to deserve such a beautiful gesture?”

“We just wanted to do something nice for you and Joel.” He glanced at the stairs. “Where is he, anyway? Uncle Julien’s gonna be here soon to take me to school, and I want to make sure I see him before I leave. I didn’t come up earlier because...you know.”

She reached for a grape. “What’s ‘you know’?”

“Come on, Ma. You know. You and Joel were alone? In his room?”

“I’m not sure what you think that means.”

“Don’t make me say it.”

“Now, I kind of have to make you say it.”

“I notice how you guys look at each other,” he said. “You’re crushing on each other pretty hard. Theo wouldn’t notice because he’s little, but I’m older, so I noticed.”

“Which means?”

“*Kissing*, Ma,” he whispered. “You and Joel were... kissing.”

She grabbed another grape, glad her eleven-year-old didn’t know more than he needed to at his age. “How would you know that’s what a closed door means?” she asked. “Have you *kissed* already?”

His face turned red from the neck up.

“Who was it? Do I know them?”

“Where’s Joel?” Josiah peered at the stairs, gripping and releasing the wood at the back of her chair.

“Should I try to guess?”

“Ma, I can’t talk to you about this.”

“You’ve already had your first kiss, Siah?”

“No!” His eyes open wide. “I *swear*, I haven’t! Really, I haven’t!”

“Then are you thinking about kissing a certain someone, perhaps?” She paused, pretending she needed a moment to think, and gasped. “Is it Malia? Is that why you two had all those ‘debates’ when you were younger? You know, I still talk to her dad and grandma. Maybe her family could come for a visit.”

Josiah groaned. “Ma, this is my villain origin story.”

She laughed, nearly choking on another piece of fruit. He draped himself over the back of her chair, wrapped his arms around her shoulders, and touched his cheek to hers.

“You still love me even though I annoy you?” she teased. “Even if I’m the reason you’ll one day turn into Red Skull?”

“Unfortunately.”

He quieted.

She waited, knowing what would follow.

“Ma, were you serious about talking to Malia’s dad and grandma?”

“I could...if you want me to,” she said.

“It’s not what you think. We’re friends, and we like a lot of the same books, video games, and TV shows. Plus, I think

she'd like Sweden. I don't even think about...kissing and stuff like that."

"So, to you, her eyes are just green."

"They're *brown*, Ma." He released her and jumped back, his eyes even wider than before. "Which is just a guess!"

"I'm sorry, my love. Mama will stop torturing you now."

His face was still the color of beets, but she didn't point it out; he'd suffered enough for one morning. She loved their relationship, and she hoped they remained close the older he became, even if that meant him pulling away a little during his teenage years.

"Ma, why's Aunt Sydney here?" he asked.

She gnawed on a cube of cheese. "I don't know yet."

"Ma, don't worry, okay? You and Joel look at each other like you're in love or something. You look at him the way you used to look at Dad."

"Really? You remember that?"

"Ma, even though I'm only six-and-a-half years away from being an adult, I'm still enough of a kid to think my mom's the most beautiful person in the world."

Speechless, she reached for his hand.

"The last time you were this happy, Dad was alive," he said. "And you loved Dad a whole lot. That means you love Joel, and I already know Joel loves you."

"How's that?"

"Ma," he hit her with an incredulous look, "Joel doesn't even *try* to hide it."

She laughed. “Is it his face? Do you know what it looks like when a guy’s in love or something?”

Crimson crept back up his neck. “Ma!”

“Kidding, kidding.” She squeezed his hand. “Where’s your brother, by the way?”

“Doing cartwheels in the living room. Oh, there’s a man out there.”

“What?”

“Yeah, he came with Aunt Sydney.”

She left the table and headed to the front room, where Theo was doing cartwheels while explaining to their unknown guest that the word “dinosaur” meant “big and terrible lizard,” but dinosaurs “aren’t even really truly lizards.” When the guest noticed her, he stood.

“Hi.” He stepped forward, hand outstretched. “I didn’t know anyone else, at least another adult, was here. I didn’t want to leave the kids downstairs by themselves. I’m Dmitri. Dmitri Sokolov.”

She’d heard his name before, but they’d never met. He was the billionaire cousin of one of the guys’ good friends or accomplices—however that worked.

“Ayesha,” she said.

His brows shot up. “Oh! It’s good to finally put a face to the name. So, you’re who Sydney came to see then.”

“Sydney’s upstairs with Joel.” And she would have already gone up there, but she was trying something new. She was trying to trust him the way she’d trusted Curtis.

Still, they’d been up there too damn long.

With Curtis, no matter how long he was gone, she never wondered if there was some woman under him in Kazakhstan, Budapest, or wherever because she wasn't around. Curtis never did anything to color her perception of relationships, so she didn't know where the intense, possessive streak toward Joel came from.

Dmitri looked over her shoulder. "Upstairs? I thought she was in the kitchen."

"Nope."

"So, you live here?"

"Yes."

"With Joel?"

"Yes."

He scratched at his clean-shaven jawline. "I see."

"Want to go wait in the kitchen?"

"Definitely."

They headed for the kitchen.

She reclaimed her seat at the breakfast table while Dmitri leaned against the kitchen counter.

"Are you okay?" she asked him. "Have a seat. You look like you're about to keel over. Siah, sweetie, can you get Dmitri some water?"

Josiah nodded and ran to the refrigerator.

She continued to study him. When people needed to reveal information, they had a look. Dmitri had that look, and although his eyes darted around the room, his gaze always returned to her.

“Ah,” he took the glass Josiah extended, “Thank you...
Josiah.”

Josiah waved off the thanks with a low, “No prob.”

“And Ayesha, Sydney told me what you do for a living,” Dmitri said. “Even if she didn’t, I would have picked up on it. You have a warmth about you, and the way you look at people makes them want to open up.”

“I don’t think I have a special way of looking at people.”

“Even if there were days I forgot I was in charge, the way people look at me would remind me,” he said. “You look at me like you care, whether it’s if the room’s too cold or hot or if someone in my family recently passed away. It’s not common to find that in a stranger. Most of the time, people look to unload their worries onto someone else. They listen only for an opening. A chance to jump in with their personal struggles. People you can talk to, *truly* talk to, are easy to spot. At least if you’ve spent your entire life having to read people.”

She smiled.

She liked this guy.

“I could just be good at what I do,” she protested.

“Or your personality is what called you to that profession in the first place.”

Josiah pointed at her. “Touché, Ma.”

Dmitri, chuckling, took a sip of water.

She examined the exhaustion on his handsome face, the sprinkle of sweat on his forehead, and the wild look that entered his eyes from time to time. He wasn’t well, but she hoped it wasn’t anything serious.

Sydney had worried about losing Joel to a bullet, but in times like these, she wondered whether Sydney realized that nature had more dangerous weapons at its disposal. Gage, Mike, Julien, Dez, and Giorgio could protect Joel from harm much better than they could ever protect him from illness. But thinking about Joel and illness made her sick.

She grabbed a piece of French toast, took a bite, and was pleasantly surprised. The boys had outdone themselves, but she suspected Joel had some involvement in the surprise breakfast, which meant she'd slept harder than she'd realized.

Joel and Sydney made their way down the stairs, and Sydney headed straight for Dmitri after tossing a glance her way. There was no hug, "hi," or "See you later."

The doorbell rang.

"Ma, that's Julien." Josiah kissed her cheek. "I love you."

"I love you too, sweetie. Have a good day at school."

Joel walked over to the table, tucked his fingers underneath her chin, and gave her a kiss so sweet, it *almost* erased all her earlier anxiety.

"Don't eat without me, Eesh," he said. "I'll be right back."

He kissed her again, even sweeter, then walked out with Josiah, one hand around Josiah's shoulders. As Dmitri and Sydney turned to leave, Dmitri nodded in her direction and mouthed, "Thank you."

She responded with a smile.

Theo cartwheeled into the kitchen. "Hi, Mama."

"Hi, Theo."

"Who was that man?"

“A friend of Sydney’s.”

“Does he have the fluenza?”

“He did look a little under the weather, didn’t he?”

“Can somebody be on top of the weather?”

“It’s a figure of speech.”

“Whatever that means.” He hopped over to her chair. “Do you like the breakfast, Mama? I did the grapes and the cheese.”

“It’s very delicious, Theo.” It wasn’t their first time making her a meal, but the fact that everything was edible was another clue that Joel had assisted in some way. “It looks so filling. Thank you for an amazing breakfast.”

“What does ‘filling’ mean, Mama?”

“It means, once I’m done eating all of this, my belly will be happy.”

“Mama, since Joel already gived me breakfast food when I waked up, can I play on my tablet?”

“You have to do ABC & Me first,” she said. “After that, you can play whatever you want.”

“*Mama.*” He dropped into a squat, gripping the crossed bars at the back of the chair, and sprung back up. “*I don’t wanna* do ABC & Me.”

“It’s either ABC & Me and then your games or no games at all.” She motioned for him to stand in front of her, gently cupped his chin, and looked directly into his eyes. “That’s the deal, and it has a shelf-life of ten seconds. One, two, three...”

Theo groaned and tossed back his head with more drama than a stage actor. “*Okay.*”

“That’s my smart, sweet boy.”

“I’m smart, Mama?”

“Absolutely. Did somebody say you weren’t?”

He shrugged.

“Theo, you are smart,” she kissed his forehead, “sweet, kind,” she gave him another kiss, “and worthy.”

He wrinkled his brows. “Worthy?”

“It means...that you deserve good things.”

“Like toys?”

“Toys. And hugs and kisses, and being told that you’re smart because it’s true, and the chance to watch your favorite things on TV. And love. Theodore Iokua Savea, you are wonderful.”

“What if somebody thinks I’m bad?”

“Like who?”

Again, he shrugged.

“Was it Uncle Gage?”

His eyes opened wide. “Mama, Unco Gage would never say I’m bad! None of my uncles would.”

“Was it Joel?”

He looked at her like she’d lost her mind.

“Mama, Joel would never say that! Joel loves me! I’m his little boy, just like I’m your little boy. He even said I could call him ‘Daddy’ and that daddies protect the people they love, like you and Jojo. That means he loves me like I love him and like I love you and Jojo and Thandie and Grey and Monroe...and everybody. I love everybody. It’s just a lot of names.”

She laughed and pulled him onto her lap. “How about this? Say you were trying to pick up a,” she altered her voice, added strain, “*really heavy* rock, and it was giving you a hard time. What do you think Uncle...Gio would say?”

Theo took his voice as deep as it could go and narrowed his eyebrows. “Little Theo, you are strong.”

She laughed harder.

Theo watched her with a grin, squeezing his fingers as if both pleased and slightly embarrassed he could make a grown-up laugh that hard at his age.

“That was perfect,” she said. “And yes, Uncle Gio would say that. Now, one day, you might meet someone who’ll think you’re ‘bad,’ but you have a superpower, baby. You might not always be able to change what people think about you, but you can block it from making it change the way you think about yourself.”

Theo sliced a hand through the air. “Like a force field.”

“*Just* like a force field. So when people try to tell you things like you’re ‘bad’ or that you’re not smart, put up your force field.” She made a noise that was supposed to be a force field but came across suspiciously like a lightsaber. “Then, once it’s up, remember that *you* know you’re smart and wonderful. I know it, and Joel and Jojo do too. We all do.”

“So the people who love me think I’m...that word you said?”

“Worthy,” she reiterated. “Us, the people who love you, know that you’re worth anything we can give you, especially our love.”

“But what if somebody gived you,” he fashioned his arms into a wide circle above his head, “a billion, trillion, gazillion

dollars for me to go away?”

“Theo, no amount of money would make me choose not to be your mother. I never want you to go away. So, I would never ever trade you for a gazillion dollars. Not even a milbiltrilazilion dollars.”

He understood.

She knew, in his own way, he understood. Still, it surprised her when tears filled his eyes. It was as if he not only understood but felt it, as though he hadn't been certain and had believed there was something more precious than he was.

Then he blew a raspberry against her cheek, hopped off her lap, and dashed up the stairs, screaming like they hadn't just had a heart-to-heart.

Joel returned and sat in the chair directly across from her. He poured coffee into his mug and brought it to his lips, and she popped a couple of grapes and cubes of cheese into her mouth.

They remained that way, eating silently and staring, waiting for the other to ask whatever question had caused the dense fog between them. When their plates were empty, they moved them aside and leaned forward, their forearms on the tabletop.

She bolstered herself with a deep breath. “Why'd you have to talk to Sydney in your bedroom?”

“*Our* bedroom, babe,” he corrected. “And I thought about it on the way down. I'm sorry I did that. Something that happened earlier must have thrown me off.”

“What'd she want?”

“She said she wants to talk to me about something.”

“Getting back together?”

He turned his ear toward her. “Sorry, *what?*”

“Did she want to talk about getting back together?”

“Even if she did, you might not have heard, but I’m getting married soon. Beautiful woman. Thoughtful. My best friend and an even better girlfriend-fiancée. Perfect sense of humor. Has lips that taste like cherries. I’m probably obsessed with her. Think you’ve met.”

“So you wouldn’t—”

“Eesh, no offense to Sydney because what we had was good for what it was, but I wouldn’t give up my place in heaven just to claw my way back to purgatory unless it’s where I’ll find you.”

As far as answers went, it was perfect.

He’d learned her over the years. A “no,” she would have accepted. On the outside. Eventually, after twisting and analyzing his words for a few weeks until, her brain ached. An answer like that shut her brain right up.

“And she didn’t say what she wanted to discuss, but I have an idea.”

“So, what’s the earlier thing that threw you off?” she asked.

His brows twitched. “You don’t know you said it, do you?”

“Said what?” She thought back to that morning, to his hands and lips and tongue, and thinking about them only made her want to go upstairs and take things further. “Joel, what could I have possibly—”

The realization punched her in the gut.

“Just like that. God, Joel...just like that.”

But it wasn't Joel's name she'd used.

“You have *got* to be kidding me.” She shoved away from the table onto her feet. Why was this happening now? And why wouldn't she have used Curtis' name, at the very least? Especially during a moment like that.

“Why would I...” She rubbed and squeezed her forehead. “I don't understand why that happened. The way you must hate me.”

He toppled her into his arms.

She didn't see when he moved.

“Ayesha, I don't hate you. I'll admit it...threw me off, but I don't hate you.”

“Joel, I swear I don't have feelings for him.”

“Okay.”

“You don't believe me.”

“I believe you that you think you don't.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“What do you have planned for today?” His thumb moved in lazy strokes along her lower back. “I'm taking Theo with me to pick up some stuff for the house. Later, I'll get Josiah from school. We can spend the afternoon together, the four of us.”

“I can't today,” she said, equally uninterested in returning to their previous conversation. “The ladies and I have Book Club.”

“You guys never miss a book club.”

“Mo’s very passionate about it.” She rose onto her toes, and he leaned down to brush a quick kiss over her lips. “I’m going upstairs to get ready.”

“If we’re not going out, I’ll make dinner tonight. Any requests?”

“I’ll eat whatever you put in front of me.”

“Ditto.”

After another kiss, he released her, and she hurried up the stairs.

CHAPTER 12

Ayesha coughed into her elbow. Sweat dripped from her forehead onto the boxing ring's non-slip canvas floor. At this point, her shirt and leggings could be wrung out like a dish rag, and her shoulder hurt like hell.

“Is it painful?” Mo examined a bright, purplish-red spot on her upper arm, fingers light. “Giorgio saw a bruise on my side the other night and asked me who I'd been fighting. I had to tell him I fell in the garden before innocent lives were lost.”

Ayesha laughed and smothered another cough. “You guys don't have a garden, and you *like* that he's crazy.”

“I do. My name is Mo Pozza, and I'm in love with a psycho.”

Behind them, Tayler grunted with each fist she slammed against a heavy bag. They'd started “Book Club” shortly after a woman showed up at Mo and Giorgio's looking for baby Aleksi. Tayler worked on marksmanship, and when Sydney was in town, she focused on boxing. Mo trained them in everything else. The last thing they wanted was to be sitting ducks, waiting for the guys to come in and “save” them, or rely too heavily on Tayler's deadeye or Mo's lethal skill.

“Take five,” Sydney said.

Tayler grabbed the bag. “Five minutes? Thank G—”

“Nope. Seconds. Let’s go.”

Groaning, Tayler restarted her set.

Ayesha switched with Ari as Mo’s sparring partner and joined Xara and Larke in the weight room. Just like the guys had their “lair,” Mo had a spot close to where their property was located. Her hope was to start a training program, much like she’d done in California.

None of the guys knew about it yet. Ayesha figured Giorgio would find out about it when Mo learned about his secret piranhas. Joel had let it slip that Giorgio kept the exotic fish in a massive aquarium in the back office of the hangar where he kept his vehicles.

The complex was equipped with a boxing ring, rows of heavy bags and other boxing equipment, weight, cardio, and stretch areas—Mo turned into a drill sergeant during pilates, calisthenics, and yoga—and a glass play area more secure than the Oval Office. However, Ayesha’s favorite room was at the furthest end of the structure, an obstacle course where they used paintball guns and lasers for tactical training.

“Hey, Ayesha?” Sydney called. “Switch with Tayler.”

Tayler didn’t wait for Ayesha to answer; she stripped off her gloves and unraveled her hand wraps, her cami soaked through. Ayesha playfully swatted Tayler’s shoulder as she walked past, wrapped her hands, and tugged on a set of gloves.

Sydney braced on the other side of the heavy bag. Ayesha hit the bag with two quick blows at Sydney’s instruction and drowned out the noise around them, striking with jabs, crosses, hooks, or kicks each time Sydney gave a command.

“Now give me five knee strikes,” Sydney instructed.

Ayesha raised her knee.

“Are you sleeping with Joel?”

She lost her balance and steadied herself by gripping the bag. “What?”

“You and Joel,” Sydney reiterated. “Are you two sleeping together? I mean, you were in his bedroom. Theo called Joel ‘Daddy’ this morning. The boys were making you guys breakfast in bed.”

“Joel and I...we’re dating.”

Sydney took a step back. “Did you find him attractive while we were still married?”

Ayesha slammed her fist so hard against the bag that the reverberation sent a wave of pain down her already injured shoulder. “All the guys are attractive, Sydney.”

“What I mean is, did you look at him in any way other than as a friend while we were still married?”

“You mean while I was grieving my dead husband and trying to raise a small child and an infant? Alone?”

“Eesh, level with me,” Sydney prefaced. “Was the reason you were adamant about Joel and I not getting back together because you were in love with him?”

Ayesha grabbed the bag to hold it steady. Although the rest of the room wasn’t listening, she dropped her voice. “I was never adamant about you two not getting back together,” she said. “I was adamant about you treating him better.”

“I treated him poorly?”

“Sydney,” she squeezed the bridge of her nose, eyes briefly shutting, “I’m not doing this with you.”

“I’m not trying to upset you, I swear,” Sydney insisted. “But none of this seems kind of suspicious to you?”

“Like how?”

“You were the main one telling me to—”

“Treat him how he deserves to be treated,” she said. “A man like Joel? You don’t break his heart because it’s convenient. A man like Joel has earned the right to be treated fairly, treated *well*, and I dare you to tell me something different.”

There were the “men” who complained about not being treated like royalty by their girlfriends or wives but acted like small children. Then there were the *men* like Joel, who made a woman feel so loved, safe, treasured, and supported that she naturally wanted to do everything for him she feasibly could.

If he’d worked in a boardroom, she would have brought him lunch without batting an eye. Helping her with the household and the boys meant she didn’t deplete her energy, and she wanted to spend all that extra energy riding him until his toes permanently curled.

“Syd, why are you being like this all of a sudden?” she asked. “When have I ever not been there for you? When have I ever judged you? Sydney, I love you like a sister, so why are you treating me like I betrayed you when you know I never would?”

She’d *tried* to avoid this. Joel was the last person she would have chosen because the situation could have turned messy, but she’d had no say in the matter. She loved him and would continue to love him as long as there was breath in her body.

Sydney's eyes filled. "I...I don't know. I don't know what's going on with me. I'm sorry, Ayesha. I don't know what all that was about, and I'm truly sorry I even went there. I'm just...not myself these days."

Ayesha gave her a quick scan. "How do you think Dmitri would feel if he knew you were giving me the third degree over your ex-husband?"

"He wouldn't be happy about it, even less so now."

"Why? What's different now?"

Mo's voice rose above the noise. "We're done here! Let's wrap up and head to the obstacle course!"

Ayesha walked across the open space to return the gloves to a peg on the wall.

"Our relationship's changing," Sydney said, walking next to her.

"Ours or yours and Dmitri's?"

"Both. Me and Dmitri are getting closer. Yet, I'm pushing you away and taking my frustrations and emotions out on you, and you're the last person I should be doing that with."

Ayesha unraveled her hand wraps. "I'm happy, Sydney. Joel makes me deliriously happy. It just happened this way. It wasn't planned, and if I'm being honest, I never thought I'd feel this way about someone again. Ever."

"Eesh, it didn't 'just happen.' You and Joel together makes all the sense in the world. You might not have planned it, but fate did. You two are like Mo and Giorgio. You were meant to be together, long before you met, and I'm sorry about what you had to go through for it to happen. But I'm not sorry that I had to lose him. Eesh, I really am sorry."

She flashed Sydney a grin, though hurt continued to resonate inside her. “Are you okay? You’re usually kind of whiny but not irritable and confrontational.”

Sydney dabbed tears from her eyes. “I don’t know how someone so sweet can spit fire like you do. And, to be honest, I’m dealing with something. This time, there’s no out. There’s no golden parachute. I’m scared.”

“Is it Dmitri’s health?”

Sydney cocked her head to the side. “What do you mean?”

Mo clapped her hands, grabbed Sydney by the arm, and dragged her toward the tactical area. “Let’s go, ladies. You can pow-wow later. We’ve got work to do.”

Ari walked several paces behind her twin, far enough to whisper, “‘Raise your hand if you’ve ever been personally victimized by’ Mo Pozza,” without Mo hearing.

Like last time.

Larke and Tayler fell in step with Ari. Ayesha, sighing, stared at the back of their heads until Xara hooked their elbows and pulled her along.

* * *

By the end of Book Club, she was exhausted, and she nearly fell to her knees when she came home to an empty house. Determined to use every bit of the solace, she drew a bath for an uninterrupted soak and then took a long, much-needed nap.

A kiss woke her out of her sleep.

When she opened her eyes, Joel was sitting at the edge of the bed, staring at her like there were no pillows or sheets,

only her lying against a blank canvas.

“Hey, gorgeous. I’ve been calling and texting you. You had me worried there for a second. Must have been a good ass nap.”

She stretched.

The man’s bed was amazing.

“Eesh? What happened here?” He leaned closer to her arm. “Did I do that this morning when I held you down?”

She tugged at her sleeve. “This? No. I...fell in Mo’s garden.”

“Mo and Pozza don’t have a garden.”

“It’s an inside joke. I must have bumped into something.”

“What did you hit this hard?”

“I don’t remember. It’s fine. I don’t even know why it bruised.”

She might as well have said nothing.

It wasn’t until after her bath that she realized the bruise had only *started* at her upper arm. She’d stumbled and fallen on the shoulder while blocking one of Mo’s kicks, and while the impact had hurt, Tayler had assured her nothing felt out of place. However, if the pain persisted, she would see an orthopedist.

“Jesus, babe.” He raised her sleeve to continue his examination, the gentleness of his touch a deep contrast to the muscles flexing in his forearms. “Did you ice it?”

“Yeah. A little.”

“I’ll put more ice on it for you later.”

He kissed her shoulder, jaw, and cheek, and she turned her head for him to drop one on her mouth.

“I have a surprise for you.” He slid his fingers between hers. “Come on before I change my mind and do to you what’s going through my head.”

Had they been alone, she would have found a way to convince him to do Option B.

First, they passed Josiah’s room, where he sat in front of a brand-new-looking laptop doing homework at a desk that hadn’t been there before. He looked up, grinned, pointed to his new desk and computer, and returned to his work.

The empty room she hoped Theo would eventually feel safe enough to sleep in now had a wooden platform bed in the middle. A mattress sat on the slats, and there were sealed boxes and several bags in the corner that she wanted to investigate, but Joel pulled her along, down the stairs.

“Joel, what all did you do today?”

“Picked up a few things,” he said. “I hope you don’t mind. I wasn’t sure if you’d want more input, but I wanted to surprise you.”

“I’ve had sole input for a while now. I’m good. Where’s Theo?”

The answer to her question stood in the dining area with his hands behind his back, attempting to hide a bouquet of roses almost as big as he was. Joel had dressed him in a tuxedo and bow tie, and he was so excited and adorable, it took everything in her not to squeal.

He presented the flowers. “The prettiest flowers for the prettiest mama!”

She stooped to his eye level, took the flowers, and held them close to her chest. “Oh, Theo. These are beautiful. And you look so handsome!”

“I pickeded them out. You like them, Mama?”

“I *love* them, baby.”

He stepped aside and opened his arms. “Ta-da!”

Rose petals were scattered on the top of the dining table between glowing tapered candles, wine glasses, and a bottle of wine on ice in a stainless steel bucket. Tea light candles flickered in glass containers, and a steaming, covered bowl held what she guessed was their dinner.

“Joel did it, Mama. I told him to give you flowers and lemonade.” Theo dropped his voice to something not remotely close to a whisper. “And kisses.”

Ayesha pointed to the “wine” bottle. “That’s lemonade?”

Joel nodded. “Yes, ma’am. My guy gives good advice. I didn’t want to stray from a single detail.”

Theo beamed up at Joel.

It melted her heart.

“Joel, did I do good?”

“You did amazing,” Joel said.

They bumped fists.

Theo cheered, dashed up the stairs, and ran down the hallway, calling for his brother.

Joel pulled out her chair.

“Do you do stuff like this often?” she asked. “Is it safe to feel spoiled?”

She took a seat and set the roses next to her on the tabletop. Then he pushed in her chair and took the seat next to her, and the fact that he sat next to her rather than across from her warmed her body like a revved-up car engine.

“Very safe,” he said. “I’m a romantic kind of guy, Eesh. I like it when my lady’s happy.”

“Oh, she’s happy.”

For dinner, they had delicious homemade *ribollita*, and he poured her “wine” and leaned over to kiss her whenever the mood struck him. His smile and laugh made her hot and wet, and she’d found her thoughts straying to whether a couple’s first time together being a quickie was considered bad luck.

As keyed up as she was, it wouldn’t take long, but it wasn’t like she was solely searching for an orgasm. Orgasms, she’d had. Over the years, she’d given herself plenty. What her body craved was him, swollen and hard. The sounds of his pleasure. The grunt of his release. The evidence on her inner thighs.

“Joel...” She pushed at his chest, pushed his lips away from hers before she turned into a puddle. “I need to go upstairs.”

He looked at her from beneath hooded eyelids. “Why?”

“To change.”

“You know, I can handle that problem for you.” He ran his tongue along his bottom lip. “By the time I’m done with you, you’ll sparkle.”

She stood, leaned down for another kiss that only made her situation worse, and hurried to the stairs. When her foot landed on the first step, her phone rang, but she didn’t have time for a conversation.

It took her only a couple of minutes to change. However, in that couple of minutes, Joel had gone from highly aroused to a malevolent intensity she heard before she saw him.

“I asked how you got this number and why the hell you’re calling my woman’s phone.”

She entered the dining area.

“Yes, she is, and you don’t have to know my name. I know how lucky I am.” He hung up. “Ayesha, did you give that Adrián fucker your number?”

She frowned. “No. That was him?”

“Yep.”

“I didn’t give him my number, Joel.”

“See, that’s the thing. None of our numbers are listed anywhere. The only people with these numbers,” he held up the phone, “are the kids’ teachers. I’ll be right back.”

He started past her.

She grabbed his forearm. “Where are you going? Julien’s?”

“Yeah.”

“Not tonight. Please? We just,” she motioned to the table, “had a lovely dinner together, and it’s been the perfect day. Plus, you look *terrific* in that sweater and those jeans, and I’d like to kiss you for as long as I can because you know Theo’s already planning his return.”

“Damn, Eesh.” He set her phone down. “I’m not even pissed anymore.”

He grabbed her ass, picked her up, and latched onto her mouth. Any reply she had disappeared down his throat. Joel

had a way of kissing her that made her lose all sense of time, his tongue moving slowly and deliberately, dancing with hers.

He propped her against a wall.

And she whimpered.

Actually whimpered.

“Don’t do that to me, baby.” He flicked his tongue in and out of her mouth, licking from inside her top lip to the bow that dipped in its middle. “Don’t let me hear how much you love what I’m doing to you.”

He latched back onto her mouth, and his fingers slipped over the soaked middle of the new pair of panties, stroking her through the fabric. They had to stop—or something. There was a reason they had to stop, but it escaped her with each flick of Joel’s tongue.

He pushed past the panties, sliding two fingers inside her, and she barely restrained what would have been a loud moan.

“I want you, Joel.” She sucked on his lips. “Please give it to me. Please, please give it to me.”

“It’s hard not to,” he said, his voice strained. “You keep testing me like you don’t know how hard I want to fuck you.”

“Baby, you’ll feel so good inside me.”

“You want me inside your pussy, Eesh?”

“Yes. Yes, yes, yes.”

“Then put me inside your pussy.”

Groaning, he removed his fingers and steadied her against him with his thighs and a firm grip on her ass. As she went to reach into his jeans, so wet she was practically dripping, running footsteps sounded throughout the house.

They both sighed through a laugh.

Joel gave her one last tender kiss and let her down to the floor, and she blocked his lower half from Theo's view with her body.

"How was the lemonade, Mama?" Theo asked, crashing into her legs.

"It was," she cleared her throat, "delicious, baby."

"I helped Joel with the stirring part. I stirred it real good." He used both hands to create large circles in an invisible pitcher.

"Yes, you sure did."

"Joel, did you like the lemonade?"

She turned him around by the shoulders. "Come on, Theothosaurus. Bath time."

"Mama. I'm not even dirty!"

"Let's go, sweetie. Mama had such a good time that she wants to tell you all about it, and you know bath time is when we catch up. I've been dying to talk to you all day." She looked back over her shoulder. "Thanks for dinner, Joel. And thank you...for everything else."

That night, Theo slept between them.

And there were no nightmares.

CHAPTER 13

Joel tugged on the trigger until it clicked repeatedly. For the last few hours, he'd been down in the "lair," trying to train, shoot, punch, and bench-press his way back to sanity.

Somebody hurt his boy.

Somebody he didn't know how to find.

The rest of the team entered the room.

Mike walked up behind him and studied the obliterated targets, head cocked. "Theo's getting worse," Mike said. "And the asshole in Theo's drawings is real."

Joel set the weapon down. Apparently, their group operating as one mind and one heartbeat didn't mean solely when they were out on assignment.

"It's someone Theo knows as Mr. Veeny," he informed them. "Theo said his name was *Veen*-something. Could be a first name, last name, or an alias. But yeah, he was at the house and Theo's school. He's real."

Gage, voice laced with poison, asked, "Lattimore, what'd he do to Theo?"

"Threatened him. Told him he'd kill him. Pointed a gun in his face." His voice broke. "Choked him. Theo said he didn't

touch him, but this piece of shit still fucking terrorized my little guy, and I can't do a fucking thing about it.”

“Right now,” Dez tacked on. “But, as far as we're concerned, Mr. Veeny is a dead motherfucker.”

“Anything could have happened to all three of them. Did this fucker climb through Theo's window when I was on the island? Was I asleep, probably worrying about petty shit,” Joel's voice broke further, “when this asshole had his hands around my little guy's neck?”

Mike's hand landed on his shoulder. “I doubt that. This motherfucker sounds like your classic coward. I mean, Theo turned four since we've been in Sweden, so he went after a three-year-old. There's no way he was there when you were.”

Giorgio spread knives, one by one, on a table.

“I'm still stuck on how he bypassed the system,” Julien said. “I never received any power failures or outages, so who is this Veeny fuck?”

“Well, some guy from Larke's past has been emailing her constantly, trying to get in contact with her.” Dez chose a Ruger and took each target out, clean and precise. “It's some guy named Nick who used to help her with IT stuff when she still worked as an AUSA. Something about the whole situation feels off.”

“Ayesha ran into an old,” Joel searched for a word, “fuck-buddy.”

It was the exact opposite of the word he'd been looking for. He'd searched his mind and said precisely what he'd been trying *not* to say. But the man touched her. It was one thing that he'd touched her in the past, but at the restaurant, he *put his hands* on her.

All he'd thought about the next day was whether that brief touch had given the fuck-buddy flashbacks to being with her.

On top of her.

Inside her.

It drove him crazy in the most primitive of ways.

"Fuck-buddy?" Mike asked. "Ayesha?"

"It was a guy named Adrián."

"Adrián what?" Dez asked. "Did you see him? Actually, you know what? Never mind. Adrián Delgano is dead. I made sure of that."

Giorgio started on a second row.

While Giorgio had definitely gotten more talkative, stable, and even funny over the course of their brotherhood, they were still pretty confident he was a high-functioning *something-o-path* with a control switch. It was easier now for him to control his urges; however, once he snapped, the only thing they could do was hope not to get caught up in any friendly fire type of situation.

"Lattimore, we've got you on this," Mike said. "You know we do."

Joel nodded. "I know."

"Nothing's going to happen to your wife and kids."

Joel, smiling, shook his head.

He and Mike headed to the lair's octagon cage. They'd known stepping back from the activity level of their lifestyles would have been a drastic mental change, but the need for physical contact, combat, weapons training, and anything that pushed the body to the brink, remained.

After their workout, he headed above ground. The minute he cleared the living room, his phone went off, and he realized it was his fourth missed call from Ayesha.

“Eesh?” he answered. “Did something happen? Is everything okay?”

“It’s not Mama. It’s Theo.”

He picked up on sniffing. “Hey, Theo. What’s wrong? What’s got my little guy sounding so sad?”

“Daddy, are you done working out yet? Because I miss you a lot.”

“I’m going to shower and change, and then I’ll be on my way home. How about that?”

“But we have a shower and soap. Plus, Mama buyed you a lot of clothes. Me and Josiah saw them when the delivery man lefted them by the door.”

“She *bought* me clothes?” Some of the “things” she had of his did look unfamiliar. “When?”

“All the time. Can you come home now? Please?”

Ayesha’s voice sounded in the background. “Theo, who are you talking to, baby?”

“Dad...Joel.”

“Theo, remember, don’t throw—” A slight thud, like a silicone case smacking a palm, popped against the phone speaker. Ayesha’s sigh followed. “Hi, honey. Everything okay?”

“It was Theo who called me,” he said. “I heard that you ‘buyed’ me a lot of clothes. Is this true?”

“What’s next? Will Theo tell you where I keep the gold?”

“I’m pretty sure I’ve already figured out where you keep ‘the gold.’ At least, the treasure I’m after.”

She laughed, and he heard the sultry notes underneath that told him she was getting warm in all of his favorite places.

“You’re all done?” she asked.

“Just about.”

“Did you eat?”

“I had a pre-workout.”

“Okay. I’ll make you,” she paused, “lunch. I’ll see you when you get home.”

A smile stretched, almost painfully, across his face. “Okay. I’m on my way.”

* * *

Before going home, he returned downstairs and searched the lair for Giorgio. From a distance, he took a moment to assess Giorgio’s mood, considering the news he’d shared earlier, but the dark knight was cleaning his knives. It was impossible to guess his moods when Giorgio was cleaning his knives.

“Pozza, got a minute?”

Giorgio looked up.

“I was wondering if you could come with me to see your jeweler,” he said. “I, uh, want to get a ring made.”

“Ring.”

“A wedding ring.”

Giorgio raised a brow.

“It’s not...it’s not for me. My sister’s been seeing this guy, and he wants to get her a ring. I told him I knew a guy.”

Julien walked over, a towel strewn around his neck. “Your sister’s boyfriend wants you to buy her a ring? Does she know it’ll be from her brother?”

“He’ll pay for it, obviously.”

“What does he do?”

“Something with the federal government.”

From across the room, Dez added, “Does he know how much the rings Giorgio’s guy makes cost? And I thought you said your sister swore off guys after her divorce?”

His sister had, and since doing so, she’d been more at peace. While she didn’t have a messy divorce, it had been a one-sided marriage, so the single life brought Audrey an insane amount of happiness. It was precisely what he’d told the guys because he talked too damn much.

“I’ll front him the money.”

Julien wrinkled his nose. “So you *are* buying your sister’s engagement ring.”

Mike joined them. “That’s creepy, Lattimore. Don’t do that shit.”

“He’ll pay me back,” Joel argued. “In installments.”

“Which won’t end until he’s a hundred years old,” Dez said. “Is he prepared to spend a mortgage on a ring? There are nice rings that aren’t in the six-figure range. Places like Verragio, Tiffany’s, and Blue Nile have nice rings that might only set him back four or five figures. Maybe explain to him that Giorgio doesn’t have normal tastes. Remember, we stayed in a castle when we were in Austria.”

“I’d like to at least talk to the guy. See what the options are.”

Mike folded his arms over his chest. “Well, what do you want the ring to look like? I can ask Xar to design something.”

He’d thought of that, but he didn’t know how to ask her to design this particular ring without including the one Ayesha already wore.

“Let me get back to you.”

Gage headed over, removing his hand wraps.

“Hey, Wolfe,” Julien called. “Joel wants to buy an engagement ring for his sister.”

Gage frowned. “A what for your who, mate?”

“It’s not...” Joel dragged his fingers through his hair. “Can you guys not say it that way? It’s her boyfriend who asked me about Giorgio’s jeweler.”

“Steer him in a different direction,” Gage suggested. “And when did your sister start dating again?”

“A while ago. I just never mentioned it.”

Gage started on his second wrap. “When does he need it by?”

They all went silent.

Son of a bitch.

Joel looked around the room.

They’d bet on how long it would take for him and Ayesha to get hitched. Civilian life must have genuinely been driving them stir-crazy.

“He didn’t say.”

“Two days, we will go,” Giorgio said.

Maybe he could ask Xara to draw something and swear her to secrecy. Mike was the gossip in that relationship anyhow.

“Mike? Think Xara could help me that quickly?”

“Help you or your future brother-in-law?” Mike asked.

“Helping me is helping him.”

Dez counted something on his fingers. “You said you and Eesh are going back to D.C. to finalize your condo sale? That’s soon, isn’t it? And can’t you do that virtually? Plus, why’s she going with you but not the boys?”

“Little Theo and Josiah will be with me,” Giorgio said. “I am strongest, so Little Theo will feel most safe.”

They groaned.

Dez pointed at Julien. “Hunter, what’s the waiting period for marriage licenses in D.C.?”

Julien manifested a small tablet-looking device out of thin air. “Oh, would you look at that? No waiting period.”

Gage cleared his throat. “All right, all right. Leave the bloke alone. He and Ayesha are merely two ships passing through the night, docking at the same harbor—repeatedly.”

Mike tried to hide a laugh with his fist.

Julien raised a finger. “Oh, yeah. Back in Fiji, I think our place had a ghost. Me and Ari heard it late one night, roaming the halls. The noise stopped outside Joel’s room, and then we heard his door open and close. We were so disturbed that we went to see if we could spot it, and after it went into Joel’s room, it must have climbed into bed with him because we heard the bed creak.”

Dez sputtered a laugh.

“Did you hear it creak more than once?” Joel asked. “Any moans or wails? No, right?”

Giorgio held a blade up to the light. “Maybe ghost die with gag in mouth.”

Julien, Mike, Dez, and Gage gave in to their laughter. Joel watched them, head shaking as he walked backward toward the exit.

“Bye, assholes,” he said.

As he climbed the stairs, he couldn't help the smile that broke out on his face.

CHAPTER 14

“So, we made a bit of an error last time.”

Sydney and Dmitri looked at each other.

“See this here?” The technician pointed to a blob on the screen. “And see this other one right over here? Congratulations! You’re having twins.”

She looked up at Dmitri standing at the head of the exam table. Sweat poured down both sides of his face. He looked uncomfortable, and ever since Ayesha made the comment about his health, she’d been closely watching him.

“D, you okay?” she asked.

He looked away from the monitor. “Two babies. I don’t know if we’ll be able to afford it.”

She and the technician snorted out a laugh. Dmitri owned the very building they were in.

The technician let them know she’d give them a minute and left the room. Sydney reached for Dmitri’s hand, but it shook so much that she tore her gaze away from the monitor. Tears had collected in his eyes, the rims of his eyes swollen.

“You are taking this very well,” he said.

“Oh, I’m terrified.” She glanced at the screen. “But, I don’t know. I think I’m starting to get excited. What if it’s a boy and a girl? And the boy looks like me while the girl looks like you? What if it’s two girls? Would I dress them the same? I’m not sure yet. Two boys?”

Dmitri squeezed her hand.

Then he was in tears.

“Dmitri?” She sat up, not caring if she smeared ultrasound gel everywhere, and reached for his hand. “D, what’s wrong?”

“Sydney, I don’t know how to tell you this.”

Her heart sank. He couldn’t be married; they spent entirely too much time together. She’d met his business partners and associates, and he’d introduced her as his girlfriend. He’d had no objections when her parents’ publicists shared on their social media pages that their daughter was dating a billionaire. Still, he was loaded enough to hide a second family.

Maybe it was her.

Maybe she’d fooled herself into believing that if she stopped running from relationships, it would be a good thing. That she was too preoccupied with leaving before getting left, seeing as how she’d had amazing men in her life, and this was when her worst fears would finally be realized.

“Just tell me,” she said. “It’ll be okay.”

He shook his head. “Not here.”

He helped her clean up and silently waited while she verified their next series of appointments. He asked her if she wanted lunch, but he knew the answer was yes. If she wasn’t hungry, she was crying. If she wasn’t crying, she was irritable.

Seeing Ayesha with Joel had blindsided her, but she didn't see it as an excuse for grilling Ayesha the way she had.

Change was more challenging than she liked to admit. Being easily forgiven and treasured by her family was a safety net. It was almost like an addiction, and sometimes she wanted to return to what was easiest—doing no wrong in their eyes, regardless of the obvious wrong she'd done.

Then she lost Joel.

A good man.

A *great* man.

Her folks never approved of him, likely because they couldn't make a social media post about his wealth and accomplishments that would make their friends seethe with envy. They were hesitant about Dmitri until, in the middle of dinner, they Googled him.

However, losing Joel hadn't been enough; she'd topped the hurt she'd caused with more pain after the Kofi fiasco. Pain he didn't deserve, and she truly never apologized for. And while she hadn't shown it, watching him fall for someone else nearly ended her.

She'd seen it before him.

She'd watched them on the beach in Malibu, and knowing Joel for as long as she had, she knew what it looked like when his feelings started getting involved in a situation. The day he called when she was in Maui with Ayesha and the boys, she'd known. Joel Lattimore had gone from infatuation to full-blown love.

At first, she cried.

She talked to her folks, her sister, and friends outside of the team, and they'd all said the same thing:

"Joel never deserved you."

That was when she knew it was all bullshit.

Everything he'd done for her during their on-and-off sixteen-year relationship, and that was what they'd come up with? That Joel Lattimore didn't deserve her? Joel Lattimore, who would have walked across hot coals to make her happy, didn't deserve her because he didn't kowtow to her selfish request?

Bullshit.

So, eventually, she stopped crying.

She started looking for who her real friends were, the people who would tell her the things she didn't want to hear because they genuinely cared about what was best for her, and Ayesha stood out like a beacon.

Yet, what did she do?

She'd grilled her.

Being with Dmitri, though rocky in the beginning, was what she'd been searching for without realizing it. Her relationship with him reminded her of her relationship with Ayesha right down to Xara. He challenged her, supported her, and cared for her in an honest way.

With him, she grew.

However, when she walked in and saw Ayesha in Joel's bedroom, the thing that had concerned her wasn't what she'd expected. She'd already known Joel was in love with Ayesha. What she'd feared was that everything Ayesha had told her, from the tough love to the gentle support, had come from

Ayesha's feelings for Joel—not because Ayesha had cared about her.

While she was close with everyone, she'd started seeing Ayesha as her closest friend after that trip to Malibu. It didn't matter that Ayesha and Joel were together; what mattered most was that Ayesha and Joel getting together hadn't been Ayesha's ulterior motive in splitting them up.

She needed it to be that Ayesha still cared. That their friendship wasn't a ruse. That nothing would change now that Ayesha and Joel were in a serious relationship. Perhaps that would have been the case had she not blasted into the training room with raging hormones and misplaced anger.

None of the questions she asked Ayesha were what she'd felt, and she'd clearly understood what she felt. Had she tried, she would have easily been able to articulate it:

“Ayesha, you didn't lie to me, right?”

Everyone else lies to me.

Everyone else acts like I'm perfect or the prize, which drives me crazy.

I mean, how do you stay perfect when you were never perfect in the first place? How do you accept your flaws without living in fear that you'll let everyone down if you show even one of them? How do you live when you fear that one mistake will remove all the 'love' in your life?

That's what happened with Joel.

I messed up, and I get that. Although I'm happy with Dmitri, I can admit that I understand it now.

But here's the thing, Ayesha.

Guess what I fear the most?

I'm afraid you might have lied to me, which scares me more than everything else. For the first time, I found myself in a place where I could fail. Where I could be imperfect and selfish and still be loved. I didn't even have that with Joel.

You are the anchor. I love everyone, but among all of us, you're my anchor.

Tell me, is it still the same?

If I fuck up, will you still care about me?"

Yet, she didn't try.

Instead, she masked it as jealousy.

She and Dmitri got into the waiting car, and he told someone from the staff at the house that they were on their way home and what he would like them to prepare for lunch. Once he finished the call, she turned to him.

"Now, will you tell me what's going on?" She laughed, and it sounded even more nervous than she felt. "You're scaring me, D."

He stared at her face and then looked down at his phone. She watched as he scrolled, darting a look at her every so often before handing her the device.

She read the screen.

And her heart stopped.

Immediately, as if it had been lying in wait, her dream came back to her—her, the twin boys, crying over a casket. Them asking her why their father had left them.

Stupid woman.

This, she'd *never* considered.

“Did you...just find out?” she asked.

“I found out the same day we learned you were pregnant. The baby...well, *babies* is why I waited to say something.”

There was one person she wanted to talk to. The first person she always went to. But she'd fucked that up.

“Are you upset?” he asked.

She tore her gaze from the phone screen. “Upset? About what? I'm upset that...that you have to deal with this. I'm upset that this is...growing inside you. I know this has nothing to do with it, but I hate that it happened to such a good person.”

“Things won't be perfect anymore.”

“Dmitri—”

“Sydney, you said yourself that your ex-husband was essentially perfect. Yet, you still served him divorce papers. This,” he gestured to the phone, “changes things.

“I know. I know.” She closed her eyes, all the taste gone from her mouth. “But it doesn't mean I'll run.”

“Because you're pregnant.”

She felt tears trying to build, the whites of her eyes burning, but she forced them back. Ending the pregnancy without depleting her tear ducts would be an impressive feat.

“Even if I wasn't pregnant,” she met his eyes, “I wouldn't run from this. This might not be the smartest thing to say to your current boyfriend, but my divorce was difficult. Regardless of what I showed, it was one of the hardest things

I've ever done. It was the hardest I've ever failed. I know what I lost, and ever since, it's made me more aware of the value of the people I'm lucky enough to call friends. You, Dmitri, tick me off. You don't give me what I want. You tell me exactly what's on your mind. The thing you say most? 'Syd, how will that help you?' Dmitri, you care about me enough to tell me no. I treasure that. So, babies or not, I would stay by your side."

He stared at her, brows narrowed.

"But back to you," she said. "What's the treatment plan?"

He cleared his throat. "Aggressive."

"Are you afraid?"

"I keep thinking about how I grew up." He reclined against the seat. "My uncle was the head of the Bratva, had all this money, and do you know why he didn't help my mother? She didn't want to be Bratva. So, no matter how much she complained, I got a job young. I had to work in questionable places where I was exposed to various chemicals. Little did I know the effect it was having on my lungs."

She started to tell him that it didn't matter what had happened or that he couldn't blame himself, but she realized he needed to vent.

So, she listened.

"I've never imagined myself as a father," he continued. "But ever since I learned about the babies, it's all I can think about."

"D, we're in this together."

"Is the reason you can't talk to Ayesha because she's with your ex-husband?"

“In a way. I knew they were getting close, but I didn’t know they’d moved in together when we stopped by.”

“That makes you jealous?”

“No.”

He studied her face. “You wanted to make sure she helped you for you and not because she wanted to be with him. That you could trust what she told you.”

“I’m that obvious?”

“I watch you.”

“Ayesha’s helped me more than she probably knows,” she said. “For a split second, I felt like her advice was...*influenced* by her feelings for Joel. But I acted like a bitch to this woman, and do you know what she said to me? That she loved me like a sister.”

Dmitri reached for her hand and stroked her palm with his thumb. “To be fair, *dorogaya*, these days, bitch is what *you* would call your ‘default setting.’”

She laughed. “Do you know I actually thought I’d be able to control pregnancy hormones? I’d hear stories about crying at the drop of a hat and mood swings, and I thought, *pfft*. I’ll just stop it.”

“Out of your control.”

“I’m learning to accept that.”

The interior cabin went silent. They didn’t speak but didn’t look away from one another.

“I am, Sydney,” he said. “Afraid. I want to be here for them. I want to see them grow up. I’d like for us to be a family. You know that’s important to me.”

“I know.”

“Is that something you want?”

“Yes.”

And she couldn't believe how much she did.

He sighed as though he'd been expecting a different answer, but she knew he would track her to the ends of the earth, if need be—especially with his kids inside her.

Not that she wanted to go anywhere.

“I spent my life working to make money and have made a lot of it. And now,” he motioned around, “look at me. I've missed so much life. Even when I had five hundred million, it wasn't enough. I was trying to make so much I no longer felt slighted by my uncle's indifference. That I could forget my mother scrubbing floors and being spit on. When she was sick, I worked. I worked because I wanted to afford the best healthcare for her. I didn't spend enough time with her, and then she was gone. If I go to heaven, do you think she will forgive me?”

Sydney unhooked her seatbelt, scooted across the seat, and wrapped her arms around him. She'd feared losing Joel to death, feared being abandoned, but she saw it now. She understood now. Loving someone meant loving them through those fears. It meant optimistic futures and supporting them instead of running, hoping they would buckle and follow.

“As an almost mother,” she began, and he chuckled, “your mother would have forgiven you. From what you've told me about her, she would have forgiven you. I do have one request, though. While you're undergoing treatment and these two biscuits are baking, no work.”

“Sydney—”

“Delegate, Dmitri. You do that better than anyone I know.”
She passed her fingers through his hair. “Please.”

He closed his eyes. “If one of them is a boy, I want to name him after my cousin.”

“Dominik?”

“You know it was supposed to be my name?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve told you this story?”

“God, so many times.”

He laughed.

“We’ll name one Dominik,” she said. “Then we’ll think of other names once you’re done with treatment. In the meantime, we should probably get the house ready.”

“You’re right. But which house?”

CHAPTER 15

“Oh, my goodness. He’s so beautiful.”

“He’s American?”

“They have men this good-looking there?”

“I could stare at him all day.”

Ayesha rolled her eyes.

Josiah’s school had thrown a family night at the Vasa Museum in Stockholm, and close to all the kids in his grade segment, *mellanstadiet*, were in attendance. Virtually every teacher had also shown up in addition to the typical crowd that flooded the site on the weekends.

Most of the crowd didn’t bother her. She smiled at families walking with their children, young couples, and groups of friends.

But then there were the ones she wanted to dropkick, whispering and staring, fawning over Joel like they didn’t see her standing *right* beside him. Hell, not all of them were single, either. Some of them even had handsome men on their arms. The men weren’t Joel, but nobody was.

Was she not being possessive enough? She held his hand, rubbed his back, kissed and hugged him. At one point, Theo walked between them, holding both their hands. Joel wore his

ring, and she wore hers. Was it difficult for them to conceive that someone who looked like him could be married to anyone but an A-list celebrity or Victoria's Secret model?

"Excuse me?" A young blonde walked up to them, head bowed, unable to meet Joel's gaze. "You have beautiful eyes."

Joel smiled. "Thanks."

Ayesha darted a look up at him.

Thanks?

The blonde hurried off.

Josiah and Theo stood in front of them, looking over a metal railing that separated the visitors from the platform where the ship rested. A tour of the museum was about to start, and it would end with them viewing the massive warship that hung in the middle of the room.

Theo, sucking on those two fingers, leaned against Josiah. Josiah stroked his little brother's head, and she hoped it was always this way between them, even when they fought or disagreed.

Another blonde started in their direction, so Ayesha slipped her fingers through Joel's. He brought their joined hands up to his mouth and kissed the back of hers. She tilted her chin, and he leaned down, letting the kiss linger for a moment.

"Look at you being all possessive," he teased.

"'Thanks,' though?" She frowned. "Thanks? That's it?"

"What else was I supposed to say?"

"Joel, you tell nearly every man who approaches me that you're my 'husband.'"

“That’s because ‘boyfriend’ isn’t as effective these days.”

“What about the guy I tried to help a couple of weeks ago? The one with the cane? He *accidentally* fell against me.”

“Eesh, those older guys are some of the sneakiest. They think, because they’re older, they can grab your ass or a breast, and all you’ll do is giggle at how ‘cute’ they are. Accident, my ass. Don’t fucking touch my woman.”

“I shudder to think what you’ll be like when we’re married.”

“Much worse,” he said. “So much worse.”

She held in a laugh. “So, should I call the blonde back over? Tell her she’s all yours?”

“Huh. I think I like you jealous.” He kissed the back of her hand a second time, puffed up his chest, and raised his voice. “*Excuse me, everyo—*”

She cut him off with a hand on his mouth, grabbing the back of his neck and dragging him down to accomplish the maneuver. A few heads had turned in their direction, and she sent them a smile and shake of her head.

“Joel, what are you doing?”

He pointed at his covered mouth.

She removed her hand.

“Telling the world that you’re mine,” he said, a sly grin on his face. “At least, telling this room. I thought that’s what you wanted?”

She shoved him in the side.

They’d told the boys about their official change in relationship status and exactly what that meant. And she

hadn't seen them happier, even on Christmas morning. Josiah said he "knew it," and Theo had then chimed in with, "I knew it too," even though he had no idea what the "it" was.

The tour began with a brief history of the vessel, which revealed that the museum had been built *around* it, a ship with an even shorter run than the Titanic; it sank only a half-hour after it launched. Over three hundred years later, the massive ship's parts were salvaged.

As the museum orator spoke, Theo loudly asked, "*Why do old ships always sink? Like the one in the movie Mama likes—The 'Gigantic,'*" and "*Did they make them too heavy?*" followed by, "*I'm four, and even I know that was gonna sink.*"

They were poignant questions and observations, but Ayesha gave him a stick of gum to give his mouth something else to do.

The boys' eyes grew wider and wider as they approached the ship's black and dark brown body. Josiah introduced Theo to a few of his school friends, and a couple of the girls who thought Theo was *så söt*, so cute, were able to get Theo to hold their hands for a minute.

But Theo eventually gravitated back to his brother. Josiah's personality often meant people with good hearts flocked to him, and the friends of his they met seemed to fit the bill.

It had been a few weeks since they moved in with Joel, and Theo still slept between them, but he didn't appear to have any more nightmares.

As much as she wanted to jump Joel's bones, she didn't have the heart to encourage Theo to sleep by himself again just yet. She'd gotten used to waking up with his little hands on her face and his feet in Joel's ribs. Sometimes, he woke her up

with kisses, or she'd wake up to find him and Joel still asleep, Joel's arm around him while Theo lay on Joel's chest or across his body.

She wanted to hold on to those moments for as long as possible. Her little guy wouldn't be little forever, and if he shot up the same way Josiah did, he wouldn't be little for much longer.

"Ms. Savea?" Theo's teacher, Lilly Mason, cut through the crowd and made her way over to them, dragging her husband along. "So glad you could make it, Ms. Savea. This is my husband, Trevor."

The man tipped his head in greeting. "Hello, there. It's nice to meet you."

For some reason, the fact that Lilly's husband had an Australian accent made the fine hairs on Ayesha's arm stand up.

"Is Theo having a good time?" Lilly asked.

Ayesha gestured. "See for yourself."

Whenever Theo was enraptured by something, he didn't jump or run or fidget. This afternoon, notwithstanding his giving the orator the third degree, he'd remained so captivated that there'd been little to no desire to wiggle, sprint, or do cartwheels.

"He's such a wonderful boy," Lilly gushed. "I love having him in my class. I'm glad he had a chance to be here today. He is so good with facts!"

Ayesha beamed.

Lilly turned to Joel. "Hello, Mr. Lattimore. Good to see you as well. Theo tells me he loved the book you read

together.”

“So did I,” Joel said.

Ayesha noticed Trevor didn’t offer to shake Joel’s hand, too busy studying her as if he recognized her from somewhere. The man was about as big as Gage, with blond hair, dark brown eyes, and low-cut facial hair that wavered between golden and auburn.

“How has Theo’s sleep been?” Lilly continued. “Good, I hope.”

“Great,” she said. “No issues.”

“Well, you still have the number if you need it.”

She and Joel nodded.

“Sweetheart, you’re crowding them.” Trevor tugged on his wife’s arm. “You two enjoy the rest of your time here. Mr. Lattimore, Mrs. Savea, it was nice to meet you.”

The couple waved and weaved their way back through the crowd.

“Hey, boys?” Joel tipped his head to let Theo and Josiah know he wanted them closer. “Eesh, he called you *Mrs.* Savea. Not *Ms.* Savea or even *Mrs.* Lattimore.”

“Maybe Lilly told him I’m a widow?” she suggested, but even she’d felt the odd chill the man left behind. “And why would they call me *Mrs.* Lattimore?”

He lowered his brows. “You’d have a problem with that? You’d have a problem being *Mrs.* Lattimore? When my heart bleeds for you?”

“Then get a glass. I’m thirsty.”

“Vampire.” He leaned down and gave her a quick kiss. “Stay here with the boys. Right here. I’ll be right back.”

Before she could ask him where he was going, he was off.

“Ma, did something happen?” Josiah asked. “Because there was a man watching us.”

“What man?”

“He’s gone now.”

“Where was he watching you from?”

Josiah pointed. “Right where Joel’s headed.”

* * *

“You want to tell me why you keep popping up in places where my woman is?”

The man turned around.

“It’s Adrián, right?” Joel asked. “You show up at the restaurant, call her phone, and now you’re here. I’m going to need you to explain how that works.”

He’d spotted Adrián shortly after Lilly and her husband walked up, Adrián trying to blend in with the sea of people around them. It probably would have worked had the man been six inches shorter and watching someone else’s woman and children.

Adrián extended a hand. “We finally meet.”

Joel shook it, and they simultaneously drew back before they ended up with permanently set jaws, bent fingers, and fractured wrists.

“To answer your question, I’m not following Ayesha,” Adrián said. “I’m following Theo.”

“And why the fuck are you following my son?” Even though they were in a more secluded part of the museum, he knew the staff wouldn’t appreciate having to clean up human remains. So, he forced himself to think about Ayesha, Theo, and Josiah needing him in their lives to stop him from choking the life out of the man in front of him.

A smirk played along Adrián’s mouth. “I thought his father was dead.”

“Look, I already know you and Eesh have a past, but this shit has got to stop. You’ll get yourself killed fucking with the wrong man’s family.”

The smirk grew, and Adrián’s veil of civility briefly slipped. “I’m following him because of Ayesha. I understand Theo’s been having nightmares. He’s been talking about a ‘veeny,’ but she doesn’t know what it means. She asked me if it was Portuguese, and it’s not, but I did some research, and I think I know what it is.”

Joel told himself the man was lying. Ayesha wasn’t still talking to him; she would have said something. Yet, something sparked in his chest that felt a lot like betrayal. Ayesha’s explanation of who “Adrián” was at the restaurant was incomplete. She might have said they’d had a casual relationship, but her face told him she’d had feelings for this man, and she didn’t entirely leave them in Maui. This fucker, however, was in love with her.

“What does veeny mean?”

“It’s a name,” Adrián explained. “I used to do consultant work in Maui. Some of the work took me to the schools in the

area. My company does a lot of data analysis, data reporting... things like that. There was a janitor who used to work at Theo's school."

It was a lie.

Still, he listened.

Adrian's veil slipped again, revealing hatred. "The man's name was Lavigne. *Lah-veen*."

"Exactly why are you telling me this?"

"I think you know."

"Tell me anyway."

"Because I'm in love with Ayesha."

Joel's jaw twitched. "And you want me to know that you were able to get information that I couldn't."

"I'm looking out for her and the boys."

"I can take care of my family."

Adrian smirked. "Look, it's not what you think. I would never hurt her, Theo, or Josiah in a million years. That's the God's honest truth. I truly want her to be happy, and she is, it seems. With you. But that doesn't mean I won't protect her."

Joel glanced to make sure he could still see them. They'd moved to a bench along the wall, Theo on Ayesha's lap while Josiah sat next to her.

"Look, man." He scratched underneath his chin, needing a distraction from the intense desire to reach for a weapon. "You're going to have to back the fuck off. I've got this. I can take care of my family."

"At least let her know I hope Theo's night scares go away."

Another pang hit Joel's chest. "What?"

"She told me about them."

"She doesn't talk to you."

"She does."

"Why would she talk to you and not tell me?"

Adrián shrugged. "I don't know."

They stared, sizing each other up. This man wasn't who he claimed to be. There was more to him, something that reminded him of their team. Trevor, from earlier, reminded him of Gage. If other groups existed, it was possible they'd all initially been trained the same way. Trevor and this fucker in the same place, at the same time, stunk of surveillance.

"Well, I'll see what I can do with the information," he said.

Adrián offered his hand again. This time, he didn't accept the handshake. If he did, he would break every bone in the man's hand, and then Ayesha would probably get upset and leave him.

Walk into Adrián's arms.

Mourn Adrián's death.

"Keep them safe," Adrián said. "Or else."

Joel raised an eyebrow. "Or else? How about you don't come near my family again, or else."

"I'll still look out for them."

"Then that tells me you don't value your life."

"You think you can protect her better than I can? With what, your fountain pen?"

"Come near her again if you're that fucking curious."

Adrián started to respond, but he turned and headed back to Ayesha and the boys. They finished the tour, grabbed a bite to eat, and took the train home.

Although they'd talked about communication, he fell back on old habits.

He shut down.

The familiar walls went up.

For the rest of the afternoon, he avoided Ayesha. He didn't hold her hand or kiss her and discreetly pulled away when she tried. Each rebuff made her further confused and hurt, and it hurt him to hurt her, but Adrián knew too much shit. She *had* to be talking to him, and she definitely dreamed about him.

Passionately.

He never heard his or even Curtis' name trickle from her pretty lips at night, but he'd surely heard that asshole's.

On the way home, he sent the Lavigne information to Julien. When they got to the house, Ayesha asked if they wanted to help her with dinner, but he took the boys out back to kick around a soccer ball—in falling temperatures.

At dinner, Theo and Josiah did all the talking, and he caught each time she looked at him, her eyes a mix of that same confusion and pain.

After dinner, he cleaned the kitchen and declined her help when she offered, and raising Theo and Josiah had to be the only reason she put up with him like this; she had experience dealing with extended periods of immaturity. But he didn't know how to prepare for the fact that she was still, in addition to dreaming about Adrián, talking to a man who'd fucking seen her naked.

On her way to give Theo a bath, she stopped at the bottom of the stairs and called out to him as he set a stack of plates in one of the high cabinets.

“Joel, what’s wrong?”

He shrugged. “Nothing.”

Her palm suddenly graced the middle of his back, and it was amazing how much that simple touch made him want to hold her and bury his nose in her hair. Yet, he closed the cabinet and went to search the pantry for absolutely nothing.

She sighed a low, “Okay,” and went upstairs.

While she bathed Theo, he helped Josiah with his homework. Once she was done, he grabbed Theo and stayed up, talking with the boys, until Theo fell asleep and Josiah’s eyelids drooped. Then, after saying good night to Josiah, he took Theo to the owner’s suite.

Ayesha looked up from her book, smiling. “Hey, honey. I missed you.”

“Hey.” He set Theo on the mattress next to her and avoided her eyes, intensifying the pain radiating behind his sternum. “I’m going downstairs for a little bit to watch TV.”

“There’s a TV in here,” she said.

“I don’t want to wake Theo. Night, babe.”

He left the room, went downstairs, and turned on the TV as he collapsed onto the sofa. Ayesha and Josiah had gotten him hooked on that *Grimm* show, and he was already three seasons deep.

At some point, he fell asleep.

“Joel, wake up.”

“Hmm?” He rolled onto his back. “Hey, babe. Is Theo okay?”

“Hey, babe’?” She stared at him, lips slightly parted. “Joel, it’s past midnight, and the TV’s watching you. Did you plan to sleep down here?”

He yawned. “Maybe.”

Her eyes watered, and fuck, did it hurt to see.

“You’ve been ignoring me since we left the museum. Why? I thought the four of us had a good time.”

With Sydney, he almost always said the wrong thing. Enough “wrong things,” and who was to say he wouldn’t eventually lose his family? Sure, she liked him now, but the future had blindsided him once before. If she told him that she still had feelings for Adrián, he would one hundred percent say the *wrong fucking thing*.

She sat on the edge of the seat cushion near his chest. Had he treated her better at any point that afternoon, it would have been the perfect position for her to play with his hair while he looked up at her with a million ways going through his mind about how to make their relationship last. This particular stint of difficult, closed-off behavior didn’t exactly make the cut.

“Okay, fine.” She smacked her palms on her thighs. “Don’t tell me. Don’t talk to me, if that’s what you need right now.”

Her hair wasn’t wrapped in a scarf, which meant she’d had no intention of going to sleep without him.

“But don’t do this. Joel, if we argue, come to bed. If we disagree on something, come to bed. I want you there, I need you there, and I love having you there, but you’re ignoring me, turning away from me. This is about me, not something else.”

He changed to a seated position and gave her enough space to kneel on the cushions beside him. As he went to reach for her, she pulled away, and he felt what he'd done to her all day.

“No, Joel. You don't get to treat me like this,” she pressed her lips together, and he spotted a slight quiver, “and then expect to hold me.”

“I'm sorry that I've been ignoring you,” he said. “I really am. We talked about this, and I still hurt you.”

“I don't...” Her eyes filled, and a tear fell onto her cheek that she immediately wiped away before curling her fingers into loose fists. “I don't like this. You know how my brain works. I've been running through all sorts of scenarios, all day, trying to figure out what I did wrong.”

“You didn't do anything wrong.”

They were going to be together. Her pretty ass was stuck with his petty ass. She was his—his girl, his woman, his future. He'd been so sure he could never love again, and then not only did he love again, he loved even harder than before. He would fix this.

“Eesh, can I hold you now?”

She didn't respond.

He drew her toward him. When she didn't resist, he coaxed her bent knees to either side of him, looped his arms around her waist, and kissed the hollow of her throat.

“I'm sorry, Ayesha.” He kissed her again. “I'm sorry.” His lips brushed her neck. “I'm sorry, sweetheart. If you don't forgive me, I won't survive.”

“I'll forgive you if you tell me what happened today that caused this,” she said.

“First, tell me the truth about your feelings for Adrián. He wasn’t just some fling. It hurt when you two broke things off. I saw it all over your face.”

“Where’s all this coming from? Adrián’s what I said he was.”

“That’s not what your face says.”

“Then stop reading my face and listen to my voice. Adrián wasn’t exactly a blight in my life. Yes, I loved being with him, and the sex was amaz...”

She closed her eyes and cursed under her breath, and Adrián moved to second place on his hit list.

“Finish what you were saying, Eesh. Share with the class how amazing Adrián is in bed and how this man knows my wife’s body more intimately than I do.”

“Because of you, not me.”

“Do you know how *difficult* it is to stop myself from fucking you so hard that you might be scared of me for a while?”

“Joel, I pretty much offer myself to you on a platter, and you don’t take it when I know you want me as much as I want you.”

“You want me?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“More than you want Adrián?”

She tried to leave his lap.

His arms kept her in place.

“Ayesha,” he sighed, “I understand your frustration, I do, but think about it. A lot’s been going on for us. Our youngest

son's having a tough time. I'm working to try to make him feel as safe as possible while trying not to spend so much time with him, Josiah feels left out. Then we moved in together, and we're getting married, both of which have their own changes and adjustments. Plus, this shit with Central looms over my head every day."

"What's the deal with Adrián, then? Why is he a factor in any of this?"

"Because this shit with Adrián feels like somebody ripping my fucking heart out of my chest. Your feelings ran a lot deeper for this guy, and you won't admit that for some reason. It's like this man's done more for you than I have."

Adrián figured out who hurt Theo.

Not him.

Not Theo's so-called father.

Someone walked right into Theo's room, and he didn't know. He didn't see the signs, and then when they showed up, he still missed them.

This was his family.

Ayesha, Josiah, and Theo were his world.

It didn't matter that he and Ayesha never spoke the words out loud—he'd been their protector for as long as he'd been in their lives, and he'd failed to the point of causing his son significant trauma.

The night of the sleepover, he'd been helpless to remove the fear from Theo's eyes. Yet, Adrián strolled in with a name.

Ayesha loved him.

He knew she did.

But this shit *hurt*.

“Joel, are you being serious right now?” The last word came out so choked, it was nearly inaudible. “Is that what you honestly think? That *Adrián Queirós* has done more for me, Josiah, and Theo than *you*?”

“Eesh, I can’t lose you.”

“How could you possibly think...” She reached up and thrust her fingers through his hair, which stole a groan from his throat. “Joel, I don’t know what to say here. Throw me a lifeline or something.”

“I think Syd’s pregnant.”

“What?” She dropped her hands to her sides. “Pregnant? Like, with a baby? Of course, it’s a baby. What I mean is, is it...did you...are you two...is it your baby?”

“Ayesha, really? No, baby, it’s Dmitri’s. At least, I’m assuming.”

“Is that what she came to tell you?”

“All she said was that she wanted to talk, but Syd must have forgotten how long I’ve known her. She’s pregnant. I don’t know how far along, but that’s what it is.”

Pregnant by a man she’d known less than a year. How did he know he wouldn’t fall for Ayesha and settle into this life he loved with her and their boys, only for it to be ripped from him? Thinking about how many people he would assassinate just to get them back made him want to institutionalize himself.

“Ayesha, you’re *everything* to me,” he said. “You mean the world to me. I’ve never felt this way in my life.”

“Joel, I won’t leave you.”

“Doesn’t stop me from worrying that you will.”

“You’d find me and bring me back.”

“Yes, but that’s a lot of work.”

Laughing, she kissed his forehead and pressed another one lower, between his eyebrows, her hand back to playing in his hair.

“Honestly, I’ve never thought much about my feelings for Adrián. I was lonely when I met him. So lonely. To be held again, kissed again...it felt more than wonderful, but it didn’t stop me from feeling lonely. I’d say I cared about him. Maybe I still do. He never had a bad word to say about me and always treated me with kindness and respect, but baby, hear me when I say this. He...is not you.”

She kissed his neck.

His grip tensed and relaxed, and he gently eased her forward so he could feel where she was hottest. Where she was probably already soaking wet like the night they had dinner. Had Theo not come barging in, he would have ended up balls deep inside her while he fucked her through the wall.

She had on one of his shirts, which hung too large on her, so he pulled the left sleeve down and off her shoulder. A creamy brown breast with its luscious dark nipple popped out, and since that night in Fiji, he never forgot a single detail of these breasts.

He thumbed her nipple.

She went rigid.

Then he eased her back, dipped his head, and sucked her nipple into his mouth.

“So, I didn’t get a chance to mention that my nipples are very sensitive,” she said.

He sucked harder.

Her fingernails descended into his shoulders.

“Extremely sensitive.”

“Like nipple orgasm sensitive?” He used the tip of his tongue to draw circles along the edge of her areola. While sticking to his plan was important, in his mind, he’d come inside her several times already.

“Close to it.” She spread her legs and rocked against his erection. “Very close.”

“I’m sorry for how I treated you, Ayesha. So sorry, baby.”

He lifted the shirt off over her head, tossed it, and sucked her other nipple into his mouth. It pebbled against his tongue, and he gently trapped it between his teeth.

She took his hand, slipped it into her panties, singled out his thumb, and moved it along her clit. After a few motions, he picked up how she wanted to be touched, and he fingered her while moving between her left and right breast, sucking in time to his strokes.

“Eesh,” he kissed her nipple, “you forgive me?”

“Mm-hmm.” She nodded. “I forgive you.”

He flicked, and she bit down on his shoulder.

He sucked, and the cotton of his shirt muffled her cries as she came. When he felt her cream on his lucky ass fingers, he closed his eyes. Now his mouth and dick were jealous.

At some point, she’d unlaced the drawstring on his pants, so by the time he noticed where her hands had gone, she’d

already pulled him out.

“Joel, I don’t want anyone else but you.” She rose and rubbed his swollen head along her slit, back and forth, then lined him up.

He angled her hips.

“Mama? Joel? Where are you?”

She tossed her head back. “You’ve got to be kidding me. I left him in a dead sleep.”

Despite the interruption, his head spread her open, and her moan reminded him of watching a breeze move over the lake’s surface out back.

“Mama?”

“Stay...right there, Theo. Mama’s come—”

He thrust inside her, at the end of his restraint, and she felt so good, he pushed air through his clenched teeth. His mind tried to remind him of the plan, of the romance, but by then, he’d pulled out to thrust again.

“Ah, fuck, Ayesha.” He sank back in, and her body eagerly swallowed him. *“Fuck.”*

“Joel,” she shivered, “you feel incredible.”

“So do you.”

“Don’t stop. Please fuck me, baby. I want this. I want it so bad.”

“I had a plan, but your pussy...” Groaning, he drew her to him, prepared to hold her in place while he fucked her as hard as his years’ worth of pent-up desire for her.

“Mama? Daddy? Are you downstairs?”

Begrudgingly, and after having her slide along his shaft two more times, they separated.

“Are you coming to bed?” she asked, winded.

“Yes.” He looked down at his erection, firm, aching, and uninterested in anything outside Ayesha’s body. “In a minute.”

“I wish I could help you.”

“Oh, me too.”

She slipped back into his shirt, headed for the stairs, and then called down to him that Theo went back to sleep the second she stepped into the room.

“Come on up,” she added. “Let me help you.”

He turned off the TV, went upstairs to their room, and she took his hands, pulling him to the bathroom.

“Lock the door,” she whispered.

He did as he was told.

She sat on the edge of the tub and had him in her mouth before he could blink. Then she wrapped her fingers around him and hollowed her cheeks, and he nearly buckled.

He stared, hypnotized, as her lips slid along his shaft. Although there was tile underneath his feet, each time she took him to the back of her throat and then slurped as she withdrew, his toes tried to curl.

He was so hard.

Painfully hard.

He cupped the back of her head to hold her in place, and she locked gazes with him as he slipped in and out, between her lips, his dick hard as marble and sticky with her saliva. With how she worked him with her lips, tongue, and even

slight grazes with her teeth, it didn't take long before he felt a tingle.

Then she moaned.

And he came in her sweet, sweet mouth.

She didn't look away the entire time she swallowed, and that eye contact fucked with his head in ways he would never be able to explain.

“Now that the edge is off,” she licked away a bead of fluid at his tip, “how about we clean up and get ready for bed all over again?”

For a moment, he simply stared.

A little under an hour later, they climbed into bed. When Theo's body registered their weight on the mattress, he woke up slightly and scooted over to Ayesha before falling asleep again.

“Eesh?” Joel eased out of bed, went to her side, and kneeled. “There's something I've been meaning to ask you.”

The weariness she'd worn on her face seconds before disappeared.

“I can't give you the ring yet,” he began. “I'm saving that for our wedding day, but I hope you know how much I love being with you and the boys and how much I'm looking forward to finally being your husband. When I think about what you've had to face for us to get here, it makes me feel sick with guilt, but know that I will honor you, our family, and my vows for as long as I live. Ayesha Savea, I'm in love with you. *So* in love with you. I want you to be my wife and not for one year or two. Will you be my wife for the rest of our lives?”

She searched his face, his eyes. Gently, to avoid waking Theo, she slipped away, scooted to the edge of the bed, closed her eyes, and touched her forehead to his.

“Yes. One hundred million times, yes.” She buried her face in his neck. “And I love you too, Joel Lattimore. I love you so much.”

CHAPTER 16

There were knots in his stomach, just like the first time. Only, this time, part of his nervousness didn't come from having over five hundred guests attending his wedding, some of whom he'd watched on movie screens as a child. It was strange that he was nervous at all, considering how much he wanted this, wanted her.

Truthfully, very little would change.

They would get married and then hop on a plane to Malmö. That way, they would only be gone for the days they'd said they would be gone to finalize the sale of his condo, which he'd sold right before their trip. Everyone suspected they'd flown out to get married, and while they fully intended to come clean, there was something kinky and erotic about keeping the secret.

Ayesha's voice sounded through the speaker on his phone. "Can I be honest? I don't like what this makes me think of. I don't like thinking about...you know. Death benefits. Yours, specifically."

"It's just a precaution." He cocked his head to the side, studying himself in the mirror. "But I understand how this could affect you, considering what you've gone through."

"Promise me you'll never die?"

He smiled. “I can’t—”

“Pretty please?”

He imagined her, her hands clasped and her lovely eyes wide and pleading as she looked up at him. Ayesha looking up at him was lethal, which he’d learned a long time ago, but it was reinforced that night in the bathroom.

“Because it’s your wedding day, Ayesha,” he began, “I promise you that I’ll never die.”

Uneasiness settled in his stomach. It was as if the minute the words left his mouth, something changed trajectory. As though, simply by making that promise, he’d guaranteed her heartbreak.

“Joel, you there?”

He adjusted his tie. “I’m here. I was just thinking about how much I can’t wait to see you.”

“I’m all done,” she said. “What about you? I feel like I did too much.”

“I doubt that. And yeah, I’m done. Be there in a sec.”

He took one last look at his outfit, took a deep breath, and headed for the door to his hotel suite; they’d gotten separate rooms to preserve the mystery of revealing themselves to one another before heading to the courthouse.

When he opened the door, he was expecting, at most, the hallway. Maybe someone from the cleaning staff. What he didn’t expect was to find Ayesha standing there, waiting for him. The minute their eyes met, she smiled, but it took him a moment to return the gesture.

His lips parted, but no words left his mouth, although he didn’t know what he would have said. Beautiful didn’t cut it.

Neither did stunning. Not this time. Not with her standing across from him wearing a *wedding dress*, to marry *him*, that hugged her silhouette and flared at her hips. Then she'd gotten boho box braids—he'd learned just about all the style names—and her makeup enhanced her natural beauty.

She spun. "Too much?"

His brain checked out a second time as he gingerly touched the embellishments on the dress.

"Joel, Joel, Joel." She slid her palms over the front of his jacket. "The way you fill out a tux...good lord."

It was ironic because he loved her no matter what she was wearing, though he did have a preference for half-naked underneath him on a bed in Fiji. That "outfit" never left his memories.

"You look incredible," he said, finally. "Perfect."

She wrinkled her nose. "Don't say that."

"For me. You're perfect to me. Everything about you is a ten out of ten, Ayesha. I could turn you around right now, and in the mirror, you have green skin and seventy-five eyes, and I'd still be like...damn, my lady's gorgeous."

She laughed and continued to run her palms down the front of his tuxedo. "So, Mr. Lattimore, do you have any expectations of me going forward? As your wife?"

"Keep referring to yourself as my wife and continue to call me out on my bullshit. I promise to be good to you, and I'll love you a little more every day. I never want to lose you, so tell me when I'm messing up. And stay with me, stay by my side, not because I want you to feel trapped, but because it gives me the chance to keep loving you. To keep being good to you." Unable to help himself, he kissed the back of her hand

and leaned down to brush one over her lips. “Now, same question, babe.”

“Continue to be a wonderful partner and,” she smiled, “an amazing father. I have no plans not to be by your side, and I’ve always been in your corner, even before we spoke our love out loud. You are everything I could have hoped for, Joel, so happiness, for me, is having you in my life. ”

He cleared his throat. “Damn. You’re gonna make me ruin my mascara.”

She burst out laughing.

He took her hand, pulled her into his hotel room, sat her on the bed, and kneeled in front of her.

“I have something for you,” he said.

He reached into his pocket. It didn’t matter how much he trusted that she loved him. In essence, he’d destroyed something important to her.

He retrieved the ring box, and she covered his hand with hers to steady them. Then she raised his hand to her lips, planted a soft kiss along the side, and released.

He opened the box.

She looked back and forth from him to the ring, her eyes glossing over with unshed tears.

“Xara designed it,” he said. “I mean, it’s not like you and Curtis got divorced. He’ll always be a part of you and this family. Giorgio’s jeweler created it. We went with a twisted wedding band. The first band and the jewels? They’re from Curtis’ ring. The second band and the main gem’s my ring to you.”

He studied her face, trying to get insight into her thoughts through her expression, but his nerves blocked all his logic and understanding. In his mind, she was seconds away from walking out, flying back to Sweden, and moving back into her place.

“Joel, this is...” She blinked, and a tear snuck down her cheek. “This is...”

“Are you pissed?”

“Pissed? Joel, this is the best thing anyone has ever given me,” she said. “This is the most beautiful...I can’t believe I didn’t figure it out when you told me you were getting it cleaned. It’s perfect. So perfect.”

He removed the handkerchief from his pocket and lightly dabbed at her eyes.

“Ready?” he asked, standing.

She took his hand. “So ready.”

He kissed her, keeping it light when he wanted to ravage her. Then they walked to the door, stopped, and faced each other. This was it. There would be no turning back. They’d go to the courthouse and walk out, officially, as husband and wife.

* * *

More people were getting married in DC than he’d expected, and for whatever reason, he and Ayesha had captivated them. It was why they currently had a small audience egging them on, and having a bunch of strangers witness their union gave him a pang of regret that the people they loved most weren’t there.

“Don’t be shy!” A woman wearing a black wedding dress waved a bouquet of black roses. “Kiss!”

Whistles rose.

Claps thundered around them.

“Let’s give the people what they want, baby,” Ayesha said. “And what your wife wants.”

He bent while she rose onto the tips of her toes, one hand at her lower back to anchor her to him.

They kissed once, twice, then pulled away.

Hunger stoked, he cupped the back of her head, lifted her slightly off her feet, and thrust his tongue into her mouth. She moaned, her tongue immediately finding his, and she slid her fingers into the hair at his nape.

The cheers rose.

They barely noticed.

When they finally ended the kiss, he stared at her face, hoping she saw that it would be him, her, and the boys until the end of time. They were all he needed, everything he needed.

The officiant gestured to them. “I’d like to announce, officially and for the first time, Mr. Joel Lattimore and his wife, Mrs. Ayesha Savea-Lattimore.”

As they left, they received hugs and well wishes from complete strangers, wished them the same, and then raced back to the hotel to change. He finished first, so he headed to Ayesha’s room.

Just as he stepped across the threshold, his phone went off. Brows narrowed, he raised the phone to his ear.

“Hey, Syd. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. How’s it going?”

“Things are,” he watched as Ayesha slipped into a skirt that hit her mid-thigh, “amazing. Are you sure everything’s okay? You sound weird.”

“Yeah, I was just calling to let you know that the jet’s at the tarmac.”

“What jet?”

“Dmitri’s. The guys said you and Ayesha needed it for your trip to Malmö.”

He lowered the phone and stared blankly at the screen before returning it to his ear. “They said that?”

“Yeah. Something wrong?”

“Do they know why me and Eesh are going to Malmö?”

“They said they’re not sure, but they think it’s probably,” he heard the smile in her voice, “honeymoon-related. It was just a guess, though. Did you and Eesh get married?”

It felt weird denying it to Sydney, as though denying it to feed his and Ayesha’s weird kink would morph into hiding it because Sydney was his ex-wife.

“Yeah, we did. Today.”

She went silent.

Then he heard a snuffle.

“I really mucked things up if she doesn’t even want me at her wedding.”

“Syd, it’s not like that. We did the courthouse thing. It’s just me and her. She would want you there.”

The sniffles slowed. “Oh.”

Ayesha nodded at him to confirm, grabbed a small zippered bag, and disappeared inside the bathroom.

“Man, exactly how pregnant are you?” he teased. “Those tears came pretty fast.”

“You know?”

“Syd, come on.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” She paused. “It’s twins.”

“Congratulations. Are you nervous?”

“Nervous but excited. It’s like...it’s like I can’t wait to meet them, you know? I even dream about their little faces. We don’t know yet, but I think it’ll be two boys, so I might need to come to you and Eesh for advice.”

Life had taken a turn he’d never expected. Ten years ago, he’d believed happiness could have only come from one place—Sydney Donovan. Now, he was happy, she appeared to be happy, and he was happy for her, and all they’d had to do to get there was get divorced.

“If they’re both like Theo, don’t come anywhere near our house.”

She burst out laughing. “He’s so sweet, though.”

“It’s not the sweetness, the cuteness, or the giggle. It’s having to be ‘on’ at all times to keep up with him. Me and Eesh only manage because it’s one of him. Theo could try Gandhi’s patience.”

She laughed harder.

Ayesha poked her head out the bathroom door and waved. Smiling, he waved back. Then she disappeared again.

“Oh, and the jet will wait for you,” Sydney said. “Me and D won’t be needing it, so it’s all yours until whenever. Congratulations to both you and Ayesha, and let her know I miss her and love her.”

“Did something happen between you two?”

“I wasn’t the nicest to her recently. It was after I stopped by. I wasn’t expecting the two of you to be living together, and I...questioned her about it. Stupidly.”

“I don’t understand. Why would that bother you?”

“It’s not what you think. It’s more about my relationship with her than my relationship with you.”

“Are you guys good now?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. This one’s on me.” She released a quick, nervous laugh. “But go, Lattimore. Your honeymoon awaits. Me and Dmitri were getting ready to head out for another look at these troublemakers.”

“And you’re sure you’re okay?” he asked.

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“All right. Talk to you later, Syd.”

“Same.”

He ended the call, stood, and joined Ayesha in the bathroom. While she curled a wand along her eyelashes, he hugged her from behind.

“Is she okay?” she asked.

He kissed her neck. “She’s having twins.”

“Oh, wow.”

“We should have twins.”

“Absolutely not.”

He laughed, crouched, and pushed up her skirt. “Mrs. Lattimore, where are your panties?”

“Didn’t think I needed them.”

“Oh, you’ll need them.” He massaged her clit with his thumb. “Or else you’ll be wet all down your inner thighs.”

She gripped the edge of the counter. “Thought you could handle it for me?”

“That’s when you were trying to be clean. This is our honeymoon. You’ll be spending the entire thing covered in my...” He leaned forward and swiped his tongue along her clit.

Her palms landed in the sink.

“Lean forward for me, Eesh.”

She obliged him, and he swept her clit with soft, firm flicks of his tongue until she moaned, gasped, and came, shuddering and gripping the faucet.

Licking his lips, he stood, gripped a handful of her hair, and leaned near her ear. “Don’t forget. You asked for this.”

Then he released her, left the bathroom, and returned to his seat, waiting like before as if nothing had occurred between them.

CHAPTER 17

The first activity he'd planned for their honeymoon was biking, and the Sydkustleden biking path would take them to their second destination—the beach. It all culminated in dinner, and a night she couldn't prepare for if she tried. By the time he was done with her, she would be reduced to nothing but moans, hard nipples, and a hot, dripping pussy.

Joel tried to keep his fingers out of Ayesha while they were in public. Then, he'd tried to keep his hands off her on the jet, but she spent the entire flight riding his face or with his tongue inside her from behind.

By the time they landed, she was exhausted, but she caught her second wind when they reached their lodging—a private beachfront cottage.

That first night, she took him to the back of her throat, nearly breaking him. She rode his tongue until she screamed his name, her fingers in his hair. Then, as hard as it had been, he watched her writhe herself to sleep and hoped his teasing wouldn't backfire, only for him to come the second he entered her.

“What's first, hubby?” Ayesha asked, her hair whipping about her head.

She was so damn cute standing in front of him, the sun at her back. Plus, the temperature couldn't be more perfect for a trip, alone, with his new wife.

“Biking to the beach,” he said. “We’ll know we’re in the right place when we see multicolored bathing huts.”

“Bathing huts? That sounds—”

“Kinky? Yes, I know.”

They found the bathing huts lining the beach, tiny cottage-like homes all facing the water's edge. He and Ayesha chose a yellow wooden shack with a purple door, and each time she tried to hook her bikini top, he unhooked it. Once she got it hooked, each time she tried to adjust her breasts, he popped one out, bent, and sucked on her nipple until she all but left claw marks on the wooden walls.

It wasn't like it was his fault.

He loved her breasts.

They were beautiful and the perfect size for his hands. Plus, she had sensitive nipples. Extremely sensitive nipples. Simply knowing that made him hard.

He covered her mouth with his to muffle the cries from her climax. Then, as he went to leave, she dragged him back, pushed him up against a wall, and made his toes curl until his toenails became claws.

Spent and panting, they emerged.

Dozens of people lay spaced out on the sand, only a few covered by umbrellas since it was a lovely day out.

Some read.

Others slept.

Everyone else swam.

Ayesha found them a spot while he headed for the water, and there was a specific reason he'd asked her to set up their area. It was because of this—her walking toward him in a red bikini, looking more toned than he'd ever seen her, a splash of light on the gray canvas his life had been for what had felt like an eternity.

Everyone else disappeared among the greenery, the sand, and the waters. Today, he didn't care if anyone stared. He didn't care about the two, three—*twelve? What the fuck?*—pairs of eyes on her. As a matter of fact, he only made eye contact with three of them, and he didn't even promise death in his gaze—only blood and broken bones.

She walked right into his arms.

He picked her up, and she wrapped her legs around his waist. They were in Europe, so this level of PDA was like holding hands back in the United States, and the way she looked at him made him feel like he was the sole possessor of all the world's riches.

“Sorry,” she said, holding his gaze. “I was just admiring the way you look right now. I never want to forget how you look right now.”

“You like looking at your husband?”

“I *love* looking at my husband.”

He kissed her and fell backward, toppling them into the water.

Their next stop was a visit to Malmöhus Castle. Ten minutes in, they found it creepy as shit, checked out early, and went for lunch and ice cream nearby.

Joel watched, without blinking, as Ayesha's tongue carved paths in the spiraled vanilla tip above her waffle cone. Cream dripped down the sides, over her fingers, and she lapped it up with her eyes on him. Clearly, they wouldn't be able to leave the table until she was done eating, or he would be arrested the minute he stood.

"So, apparently, we're not castle people," he said. "I mean, what the fuck?"

Her eyes widened. "Yo, that one lady statue?"

"You almost knocked her the hell out when you came around the corner and saw her standing there."

"Mrs. Malmöhus was about to catch these hands." She held her stomach and giggled. "What about those black and white pictures everywhere?"

"You know those people's ghosts were watching us go through their shit, pissed as hell they couldn't throat-punch us." He held out his cone. "Want to try mine?"

While she'd stuck with a traditional vanilla ice cream cone, he'd branched out and ordered Black Licorice.

Eyes once again locked with his, she took the entire top of the cone into her mouth and lightly sucked into a point as she drew her head back. If she said anything after, he didn't hear it.

"Question," he said. "Do you have any objections to me putting things inside you?"

"No."

"You didn't ask where."

"Still no."

“You didn’t ask what.”

“My answer is the same.”

They spent the rest of their afternoon biking through and around the city. The people were friendly, the landscape was beautiful, and they found two more private beaches where they made out like teenagers.

Ayesha picked up a few local pieces to take back for Xara. Xara was looking to expand her brand, and one of her favorite things to do was showcase local artists from around the world.

Afterward, they ditched the bikes and walked around the city center, hand in hand, taking in the Art déco palette as people whizzed by on bikes and skateboards.

They agreed to return with the boys and spend an entire week, especially since they’d stumbled upon the Malmö Reptile Center.

“By the way, Theo wants to know if we can get a pet iguana.”

Ayesha’s head snapped around. “No. Hell no.”

“Aww man, are you sure?”

“Joel.” She clutched at her chest and shuddered. “Think about it. It breaks free from its cage. The boys are at school. We can’t get Gage on the phone. Who’s trapping this monster? Not I.”

“I’ve got you.”

“You were afraid of Carlton.”

He shrugged. “Or maybe you jumped into my arms, and I enjoyed it so much, I didn’t want it to end.”

“You let me be terrorized to satisfy your own affections?” She released his hand and put a few feet of space between them. Each time he tried to close the gap, she moved further away until she was running.

He caught her against the wall of a canal bridge and kissed her until they were winded, and not a soul looked at them like they were strange, probably because they had “newlyweds” written all over them.

At sunset, they returned to the cottage to relax before getting ready for dinner. The cottage had only one bedroom, which was all they would need, and the attached bathroom had a clawfoot tub he planned for them to soak in. The cozy living area had an attached L-shaped kitchen, and wooden double doors opened to a porch overlooking the ocean. Even when closed, the doors’ six windows brought in a great deal of light.

A two-person breakfast table housed everything they’d picked up on their self-guided tour—chocolates, local pottery, gifts for all the kids, a comic book for Josiah, and a stuffed iguana for Theo as recompense for their upcoming news about the real one.

While Ayesha showered, he finalized the arrangements for later that night in the cottage’s living area. As he’d told her, he was a romantic kind of guy. Anything he could do to make her feel special, he would do.

And she appreciated everything he did.

Everything.

They walked side by side in the relationship, neither one lagging. Doing things for her didn’t drain him or leave him resentful, and he had enough energy to keep it up for the rest of their lives.

If he'd had a say or choice, he wouldn't have chosen Ayesha, as it could have been a messy situation. But it was decided for him that the best person for him would take his heart, hold it, keep it, and cherish it.

“Hey,” Ayesha poked her head out the bedroom door, “want to check in with the boys now since we might be *busy* later?”

He nodded.

They climbed into bed with the iPad.

Ayesha leaned back against the headboard, and he sat next to her, one hand tucked behind his head while they waited for the boys' faces to pop up on the screen.

“Ma! Joel!” Josiah grinned. “How's your vacation? We miss you!”

Familiar pride moved through him at seeing Josiah's face. He would get to watch Josiah grow and no longer from a distance. He would even have a hand in Josiah's growth, coaching him through his first moments, which could include—as long as Ayesha didn't find out—Josiah's first MMA tournament.

“We miss you too, baby,” Ayesha said. “And the vacation is wonderful. How are things at Mo and Giorgio's?”

Josiah raised an elbow. “I got a bruise, Ma! Uncle Gio's teaching me mixed martial arts.”

“You got a *what?*”

“That's amazing, Josiah,” Joel cut in. “And a bruise is a fighter's badge, Eesh. If he's learning mixed martial arts, he'll get a few bumps and scrapes, unlike his mother who, apparently, ‘runs into’ things.”

It was funny how she thought he didn't know the reason behind her extremely toned body and shoulder bruise. He and the guys just didn't know *where* they were holding this mysterious book-slash-fight club.

“Uncle Gio says I'm a natural.” Josiah grinned wider, his eyes like daybreak in an evergreen forest. “And we got halfway through building Aleksí's swing set, but Auntie Mo says we're missing a piece. We're going later to pick up what we need from the home improvement store.”

“How's Theo?” she asked. “Is he okay?”

“He's taking a nap right now.”

A mop of curls appeared at the bottom of the screen, and Josiah lifted Aleksí onto his lap. Aleksí's once haphazard head of blondish-brown hair had turned into a mountain of dark, nearly jet-black curls. He even had some of his father's expressions down, but he'd inherited his side-eye from his mother.

They talked for a while longer, Aleksí leaning against Josiah while Josiah filled them in on what they had for breakfast—chocolate chip pancakes. Lunch was sandwiches with Giorgio, Mo, and Aleksí by the lake, and they were having pizza for dinner. A day like that was paradise for Theo, which was likely why Mo and Giorgio orchestrated it that way.

He and Ayesha filled Josiah in on their bike ride and tour around the city with a promise to look at pictures with him when they got back.

“What about you guys?” Josiah asked. “What are you doing later?”

Ayesha bit down on the inside of her bottom lip, squinted, and tipped her head to the side. “We're...getting something to

eat.”

“And then what?”

“Um,” Joel rubbed his nose with the back of his hand, “maybe some dessert or something. We had a long day, so we’ll probably fall asleep as soon as we get back from dinner.”

“Where are you going to eat?”

“I found a cool restaurant,” Joel said. “It’s got live music.”

“Like karaoke? Are you gonna sing, Ma?”

Joel slid a glance her way. “Sing?”

Ayesha shook her head. “I don’t think so, baby.”

“Why, Ma? You have a really pretty singing voice, but you only sing for me and Theo. You should sing for Joel.”

“Yeah, you should.” Joel nudged her arm. “I want to hear this pretty singing voice.”

Goosebumps prickled his arm where their skin touched. He’d had no idea she sang. For as long as they’d been together, it surprised him that he’d never heard her.

“They have skateboard parks out here too, Josiah,” he added. “We’ll come back with you and Theo. You’ll love it.”

“That would be awesome.” Josiah stared at them, his smile not so much as wavering. “Well, let me let you kids go have fun.”

They laughed.

“We will,” Joel said. “I love you. Let Theo know we called.”

“I love you too. I love you, Ma.”

“I love you, Josiah.”

He waved, still smiling.

Aleksi yawned.

They waved back until he disconnected.

“Singing voice?” Joel teased.

Ayesha left the bed, walked to the closet, and pulled out her outfit for the night—a top with the back cut out and skin-fucking-tight leggings he knew she’d wear with heels to show off her legs and those curves she claimed she needed more of.

Nope.

For him, she was perfect, and he would show her what he thought of her body until she was too spent to disagree with him.

CHAPTER 18

The restaurant wasn't packed, the atmosphere was comfortable, the lights were low, and the food was delicious. The performers, so far, were all remarkably talented. Some had entire bands and had been performing for a while. Others were amateurs who'd wanted to face their fears and sing in front of a crowd for the first time.

Ayesha was surprised to find most of the music had more of a soulful vibe. There were Spanish, Swedish, German, and English songs. Even the ones she couldn't understand, she felt the depth behind them. The pain of losing a love, missing one, or needing one.

She glanced at Joel, whose gaze was fixed on the stage. For dinner, they'd had the infamous Swedish meatballs. Joel took his with a side of veggies and mashed potatoes, and she went with egg noodles. After dinner, they shared a slice of *kladdkaka*, a dense chocolate brownie-like cake. Then they relaxed and enjoyed the show.

He felt her looking, turned, and smiled, and her heart flopped like a fish pulled from the ocean. How he could have ever thought she'd want anyone else but him was beyond her. It didn't matter what she said in her dreams. *He* was her

dream. He was her thoughts, wishes, and her renewed hope, and she couldn't believe she'd found him.

A round of applause broke her stare, and the host for the night, a man who'd introduced himself as Zaid, hopped up on the stage. "She was amazing, wasn't she?" he said. "Can we have a hand for Dahlia one more time, please?"

The audience clapped and whistled.

"Now, I had someone pull me aside and ask if she could perform tonight, even though she is terrified. She's never sung in front of even her closest friends. The lovely Miss Ayesha, are you ready?"

Joel looked her way.

Ayesha bowed her head, said a quick prayer, and headed toward the stage. Zaid held out a hand to help her onto the platform. Then, to her surprise, he gave her a tight hug.

"You are with family, okay?" He stepped back and stared into her eyes. "You don't have to be afraid here."

She nodded. "Okay."

Zaid walked her over to the band, and she greeted them while simultaneously giving herself a mental pep talk. Once introductions were done, the band asked her what song she wanted to sing.

"You might not know this song," she said.

"You might be surprised." The drummer smiled. "What's the song?"

"It's called, 'I Didn't Mean to Fall In Love' by Snoh Aalegra."

His smile grew. “You mean one of our very own Swedish sisters? You sing, Ayesha, and let us handle the rest.”

She faced the audience.

Lights shined in her face, and anxiety stomped with both feet on her chest.

Joel had come closer to the stage, and she could see him watching her, the long fingers on his right hand tapping those on his left. All he’d worn was a simple navy blue shirt, a blazer, jeans, and leather boots, and he was the best-looking and best-dressed man in the room.

By far.

The piano came in first, followed by the drums.

She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and let her voice do the rest.

“I tell you all my secrets...”

Behind her closed eyelids, she saw Joel’s smile and his eyes, his disheveled hair in the mornings. She saw him back in Maui, her walking in from a rough day to find him rocking her baby and singing to Theo in the kitchen.

She saw Josiah’s love for him.

She saw him sitting with her on the sofa, the boys doubled over laughing at something he said, teasing her as usual, and her rolling her eyes, trying not to smile. He’d looked up at her, looked through her, his head pressed against the back of the sofa. It had been yet another rough day, and he’d been there, as he always seemed to be.

She saw him in the middle of a dance party with the boys, one she’d been too tired to join in on until he twirled her into

her arms, rocking with her until he'd coaxed her to dance.

She saw him and Josiah at the three-legged race and the look on Josiah's face, the adoration and pride. She saw the ceiling in her bedroom in Maui as she listened to him and Theo talk through the baby monitor.

"I didn't mean to fall in love..."

She saw Joel winking at her from the kitchen; him asleep in her living room as the sunset bathed him through the glass doors; him holding her hand in the car the night after the school fair; him in bed asleep with Theo on his chest; him on one knee, telling her that he loved her; and his hands linked with hers as he said, "I do."

"Now that I need you, baby..."

Ayesha opened her eyes, tears on her cheeks, and looked directly at him.

"Tell me we'll never, never part..."

She drew out the last note as the piano finished the outro.

The audience stood, whistled, and clapped. Joel stood, but he didn't clap or whistle. In fact, he stood so still, it looked like he barely breathed. He didn't look away from her, didn't blink, and his pupils were so large, they'd turned his otherwise sapphire irises black.

Ayesha bowed and returned the microphone to Zaid.

"You were amazing," Zaid whispered in her ear.

Heat pricked her face. "Thank you."

No longer a statue, Joel stepped forward to help her down the steps, slipped their fingers together, and walked them straight out of the restaurant.

They took the bus back to the cottage.

Even though he didn't say a single word to her on the entire ride, when she leaned against his side, he wrapped an arm around her.

He didn't break his silence as they walked up the beach steps. So, she asked him if everything was okay, and when he looked at her, every nerve cell in her body awakened.

They entered the cottage.

She stopped in the entryway.

Candles covered nearly every surface, in glass jars, candelabras, and on trays nestled between bouquets. Flower petals created a freckled red carpet from the door to the bedroom.

The door shut, the sound followed by Joel's warmth behind her, and Snoh Aalegra's raspy yet soothing voice lifted around the room as he set down his phone.

"Is this her album?"

He kissed her neck. "Mm-hmm."

"How," her eyelids fluttered, "did you find it?"

"I googled the lyrics."

He angled his head, she turned hers, and his breath brushed her cheek right before their lips met. There was no soft prelude to ease her into the kiss—his lips crushed hers, and she tasted chocolate and wine on his tongue.

All too soon, it was over.

“Did you like it?” she asked. “The song, I mean. I sang it for you. It reminds me of you.”

He grunted a response and cupped her breasts, his index finger and thumb tweaking her nipples. A current of desire sparked between her legs, and as he sucked at her neck, a jolt shot to her nipples in a never-ending circle of pleasure.

“Joel, hold on.” As difficult as it was to do, she stepped away from him. “You did this for me. I did something for you. Give me a second?”

His eyes darkened.

“Please?”

“Okay.” He nodded. “A second.”

She hurried to the bathroom, stripped, and poured herself in white lace and garters. It would all be off in under five minutes, but she’d always wanted to wear bridal lingerie, an opportunity she didn’t have with Curtis. After her and Curtis’ wedding, he’d had to fly out on assignment. She’d also been pregnant with Josiah at the time, and it had been at a point in her pregnancy where even the slightest touch overwhelmed her.

She finished the three-piece outfit with a pair of pumps, left the bathroom, and came to a dead stop. Joel lay on the bed, his shirt gone, the button on his pants undone, and his hand wrapped around a stiff, straining erection.

Then he spoke.

And wet heat flowed between her legs.

“How does she do this to me?” He squeezed, and his hips jerked. “How the fuck does she do this to me?”

Trembling and dizzy, she made her way over to the bed and stood over him. He didn't open his eyes, and she took a moment to take in the evidence of how much he wanted her.

“Calm down.” He lowered his hand to the base of his shaft. “She'll be here soon. Trust me, she'll be worth the wait.”

She bent and sucked his head into her mouth as she climbed onto the mattress, settling between his legs.

He opened his eyes. “Eesh, I'm supposed to give you an oil massage.”

“Nope.”

“I had a plan.” He bit down on his bottom lip. “Let me see you.”

She stroked him with one hand and gestured to her outfit. “Does my man approve?”

“Yes, your man approves. Now, come here. I want to see something.”

“Nope.” She stroked him with one hand while she licked and sucked at his sac. “And yes, they're crotchless.”

“I don't appreciate you keeping my pussy from me.”

“Your pussy?”

“See that ring on your finger?” He attempted to point, but pleasure momentarily seized him, angling his head into the pillow. “You're mine, Ayesha. Every part of you is mine.”

She took him to the back of her throat, and he held her in place with a hand in her hair. As she raised her head, she slurped, coating his shaft until it glistened.

“Then this is mine too.” She swallowed him again, hollowed her cheeks, and sucked, her head bobbing.

Every grunt and moan that left his throat made her pulse, but she nearly climaxed when he moved his hips, thrusting into her mouth.

“Ayesha...” He thrust faster, weaving his fingers between her hair strands. “Ayesha...fuck. You want it?”

She wanted it like an anniversary gift.

“Where, baby?” he asked.

In response, she bobbed faster, sucked harder.

He hissed, exhaled on a deep moan, and came down her throat like he hadn't had an orgasm in millennia.

She watched the entire thing, addicted to the pleasure-filled dip in his brow and the mix of confusion and ecstasy on his face as he came. And she didn't release him until he jerked and spasmed as she sucked him dry.

“Every,” she licked his tip, “last drop.”

He stared at her, chest heaving. “The fact that anyone thinks your little freaky ass is innocent astounds me.”

She laughed.

“Lie on your back,” he ordered.

They switched positions.

He nudged her legs apart and entered her with both fingers while his thumb played with her clit.

She cupped her breasts, the lace rough against her palms, and the moment her fingers made contact, pleasure tore through her, lifting her hips clear off the mattress.

“Ayesha, you are so damn sexy.” He ran his unoccupied palm over the flimsy ribbon ties at her hip. “When did you buy this?”

“A...while ago.”

“What’s ‘a while’?”

“Ordered it when...we were still in...Fiji. The night after we agreed to get married.”

He dipped his head and kissed the exposed swell of her breast. “Tell me why.”

“I couldn’t—”

He trapped her covered nipple between his teeth, and the rest of her response got lodged in her throat.

Using a single hand, he unhooked the bra’s front clasps. When her breasts spilled out, he groaned and shut his eyes, as if restraining something inside him that preferred to be unleashed.

“I was excited, Joel. I couldn’t wait to be yours. Couldn’t wait to finally be Mrs. Lattimore.”

“Jesus, Eesh.”

He sucked her nipple, and the hot contact woke every nerve from her breasts to the quickly intensifying pleasure between her legs. Shuddering, she threaded her fingers through his hair.

“Joel...”

“Hmm?”

He teased her nipple with the tip of his tongue, sucked it back into his mouth, and then let the firm bud slide along the roof of his mouth as he released.

He continued to finger her in unhurried strokes, his thumb, middle, and ring fingers working in concert. She begged him for harder and faster, but he denied her, silently letting her

know the pace was in his control. He also knew, like this, her climax would build in tight waves, forcing her to feel every single pull of pleasure as the sensation grew.

“I don’t know how I’m going to do this,” he whispered, his lips brushing her nipple. “I want to be inside your pussy so fucking bad.”

She shook her head. “Please...”

“Don’t beg me. I’ll fuck you.”

“You’re in my head.”

“Serves you right for sucking the life out of mine.”

She moaned.

He flicked her nipple, faster and faster, until she cried out, splintering into blissful fragments.

Before she could fully catch her breath, his mouth was on hers. The smooth strands of his hair tickled her fingers as she returned the kiss and spread her legs wider, waiting for him to climb over her.

“I want another one,” he said.

He broke the kiss and grabbed something from the bedside table. Something that buzzed. A few seconds later, she felt the buzz inside her, followed by his tongue lapping at her clit.

It seemed sinister, in a way, that he could lick her so gently yet keep his tongue so firm. Then, without pausing, he thrust the vibrator inside her, over and over, fucking her with it, the motions effortless considering she was so wet, she could slide on fabric.

“Joel...” Her body gradually went stiff. “Oh...my...god.”

Another orgasm ripped her in two.

He continued until, laughing, she pushed him away.

Spent and pulsating, she lay like melted plastic on the bed while he quietly undressed her, pressing soft kisses all over her bare skin. She lazily lifted her hips and shoulders until she was stark naked underneath him, except for the pumps.

He was steel against her hip.

Again, she waited.

And again, instead of satisfying her desire to be filled, he poured warm lube onto her breasts. Next, he added more toys, two that he attached to her breasts that combined suction with a motorized tongue, and it was like he'd taken her breasts back into his mouth. She couldn't remember a time when she'd been more wet.

“How does that feel?” he asked, his voice throaty and hoarse. “Too hard? Soft?”

“Feels...mmm...”

Chuckling, he kissed her, his tongue roving her mouth in that slow, torturous rhythm, and the heady, sensual music around them made her no longer feel her back against the mattress.

He bit down on her bottom lip, and her hips lifted, pushing her sex against the crown of his dick. She angled her body so that his head pierced her entrance.

“Eager girl.”

“Very eager,” she said.

“You want me to fuck you, Ayesha? I thought you said I didn't want to. That I didn't want you.” He trailed a line of kisses up her neck and brought his lips to her ear. “Hold them.”

She held the toys to her breasts.

“That’s my girl.”

He moved down to her inner thighs and sucked her skin hard enough to leave a bruise. Then he went from one thigh to the other, back and forth, licking the cleft of her sex before bruising a path up the other leg, over and over.

In the middle of one pass, rather than blaze a trail up her thigh, he dipped his tongue between her slit. Again gently, and again with a carefulness she could only describe as sweet torture, he tongued her clit. Her hips rose and fell, taking his mouth and head along for the ride.

The toy licked her nipple.

Joel sucked her clit.

“Joel...” Her hips bucked. “Joel Lattimore.”

Suction pulled until her nipples grew taut as he plunged his tongue inside her. Tears leaked from her eyes, and she attempted to call his name but managed only odd sounds and vocalizations.

He continued to fuck her with his tongue.

She tried to remove the toys.

He gently nipped her clit.

So, she gave in, coming so hard she went momentarily hoarse and could feel her lips quivering against his mouth.

Despite how painfully erect she could see he was, he calmly removed the suction from her breasts. However, as though he could hold out no longer, he spread her legs, slid the crown of his dick inside her, and they moaned in tandem.

“Tell me if it hurts,” he said.

Even their romp on the sofa had left her sore, but Joel had more than prepared her. Regardless, she was tight, and he was thick, but he took his time, stretching and spreading her, firm inch by firm inch.

“Eesh, any pain?”

“What if I want it to hurt?”

Smiling and shaking his head, he turned on the vibrator and gently touched it to her clit. Her body went from warm to molten and clamped down on his head.

“I want another one,” he said.

Without waiting for her response, he placed the trembling device in her hand.

“Keep it there.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

He angled her hips, spread her legs wider, and entered her in one long, slow, deep thrust.

“Fuck.” He pulled out, thrust again, hissed. “Ah...fuck.”

“Joel, baby, you feel so good.”

“So do you, Eesh. So fucking good.”

He groaned.

Moaned.

His strokes increased until he drove into her in steady thrusts that tapped the deepest parts of her body.

She nearly cried.

With the vibrator on her clit and his dick sliding over the nerve endings inside her, along with the fact that he didn't attempt to stifle his grunts of pleasure, she came again. It was

the most potent climax of them all, the sensation heightened as her body gripped him like he and his magical dick would disappear.

“So beautiful.” He leaned down, hovering over her. “You are so beautiful, Mrs. Lattimore. Do you know how long I’ve wanted to get you under me?”

She trembled underneath him. “I love being under you.”

“You do?” He surged inside her. “You have no idea how good you feel, Eesh.” He pulled out, surged again. “I wanted to come as soon as I felt your pussy.”

He was deep.

So deep.

“Joel, I love you.”

With a groan, he pulled out, thrust hard, and her body devoured the ridges inches of his shaft.

“Joel,” tears leached from her eyes, “I love you.”

“Ayesha.” He grew harder inside her. “Baby, I love you too.”

She placed a weary kiss on his lips.

“Give me one more,” he said.

“I can’t.”

“*Give me one more.*”

As she slid the vibrator between them, he dipped his head and teased her nipple with those *soft fucking flicks*, and she found herself wondering whether she should have mentioned her sensitive nipples in the first place.

“You sang that song to me,” he said. “For me.”

Sweat drenched their bodies, dripping from his neck onto her damp chest. His hair was nearly black. She stared up into his face, and his brow creased.

“I’ve been waiting so long to say this,” she whispered, pleasurable ache building inside her. “Come inside me, baby.”

He started to smile, but it faltered.

“I’ve wanted you to come inside me since that night in the hotel suite in Australia. The next day, in the shower, I touched myself while thinking about you, and when I came, all over my fingers, I cried your name.”

“*My* name?”

“*Your* name.” She gasped, rolling her hips. “Come with me, Joel. Come with me. I’m coming, baby. I’m—”

She shattered.

Groaning, he went rigid as deep inside her as she could take him. She felt him tremble, felt him jerk and pulse at her entrance.

His head fell.

Exhausted, she turned off the vibrator and lazily fingered the soaked strands of his hair.

When she lost Curtis, she’d assumed everything she would have ever been, everything that had made her who she was, would have remained stripped from her. If she’d dared to try to love again, there would have been no longing, passion, or the kind of recklessness that came with falling in love.

But this?

Oh...this.

After several moments, she noticed the music had ended, though she couldn't recall when. Now, the only noises in the room were their alternating breaths, which had gone from ragged and harsh back to mellow and even. They were still joined and probably a mess, but wild and sticky was her favorite way to make love.

“So,” she twirled a damp strand around her middle finger, “I see you found my...devices.”

He raised his head. “And you have quite the selection.”

She'd been a woman trying to replicate a scenario that had lived only in her imagination until tonight.

“Aren't guys supposed to be afraid of incorporating toys?” she asked. “Threat to their masculinity or something like that?”

“First of all, I'm not 'guys,'” he said. “I'm your husband. The only thing I care about is my wife's creamy pussy, so I'll make you come anyhow I please and as hard as I want to.”

And he'd done exactly that.

Several times.

“By the way,” she slid her fingers over his scalp, and his eyelids fluttered, “the ones you put on my breasts weren't meant for my breasts.”

“Then why'd you have two?”

“Just in case one has a dead battery, and I'm...desperate.”

He smiled. “Did you like them on your breasts?”

Heat swirled from somewhere inside her that she'd been sure, moments ago, had nothing left to give. “I loved them on

my breasts, especially when they're working with your tongue. You do amazing things with your tongue, Mr. Lattimore."

His smile transformed, becoming sinister though in a non-threatening way. At least physically non-threatening.

"Joel, you can't possibly...*mmm*. Never mind."

"Eesh, with how pent up I've been and how long I've been dreaming about you? You weren't the only one getting yourself off in the shower to thoughts of us." He kissed her forehead, resuming his strokes. "In short, Mrs. Lattimore, prepare to get fucked all night."

CHAPTER 19

“Sir, I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

The store clerk looked at Giorgio and Mo, Aleksi asleep in a baby wrap against Mo’s chest with Theo’s hand in hers. Josiah read a book beside them. For the most part, they looked like an average, everyday family. At least, if they didn’t take Giorgio’s size, voice, or presence into consideration.

“You want something *sharper*?” the clerk asked.

“Bez.” Giorgio extended a pair of hedge-trimming shears. “Feel.”

She pressed the tip of each blade. “It didn’t even draw blood.”

“It can kill not even paper.”

The clerk swallowed and clasped his hands beneath his chin. “I’m sorry. *What* are you trying to do with them, now?”

“Not kill.” Giorgio handed over the shears. “Bez, how you say...*maripi mo te rakau*?”

“Knife for tree?” Mo thought for a moment and then shook her head. “Thank you for your help, sir. We don’t need a chainsaw.”

The clerk scurried off.

“Did you get the *barackets*, Unco Gio?” Theo asked.

“Da, Little Theo. I get bracket. We can go. Nothing is here for me.”

On the way to the SUV, Theo regaled Mo with the facts he’d learned from his museum trip. Josiah walked next to Giorgio, his attention not so much as budging from the page, but he didn’t need to look up walking next to Giorgio Pozza.

“How’d they fit a ship that big inside a building?” Mo asked, Theo’s small hand lodged in hers.

“This is the bestest part, Auntie Mo.” His eyes opened wide. “They built it *around* the ship. The lady at the museum told us that.”

“That’s so awesome.”

“You want to come wiff me next time?”

She squeezed his hand. “I’d love to, puka.”

A figure in the distance, partially hidden behind the building, caught her eye. Underneath the outdoor lights, she made out the shadow of a large male frame.

“You see him, Gio?”

“Da.”

Theo sniffled, and the front of his little jeans was suddenly darker than they’d been seconds ago.

“Sweetheart,” she crouched in front of him, “what’s wrong?”

Theo didn’t respond.

She looked up at Giorgio, whose attention was fixed on where she’d seen the man. She made sure Josiah was still engrossed in his book and covered Theo’s ears.

“Gio?”

He glanced at her.

“Kill him.”

Giorgio started off. “Da.”

* * *

Giorgio brandished a Bowie knife.

So, *this* was Mr. Veeny.

The guys had told him that if he ever encountered the piece of shit, the agreement was not to kill him for whatever reason.

To *not* kill him.

To *kill* him.

Lavigne opened his mouth as if to say something, but Giorgio shoved a fist into his face, forcing him to stumble backward.

Lavigne then whipped out a blade of his own, but Giorgio rushed forward and lodged the Bowie through Lavigne’s shoulder, narrowly “missing” the mudak’s neck.

Long streams of French spurted from Lavigne’s mouth. Sweat sprung on his pale skin, darkened by streaks of what looked like dirt and blood. The mudak squinted and reached for the knife, but Giorgio pulled it out and stepped back.

Blood dripped from the blade’s tip onto the asphalt. Hopefully, if someone discovered it, it would force the store to carry more substantial blades. What was the point of a knife if it couldn’t pierce flesh?

He flicked his wrist to discard the droplets, regretting that he hadn't grabbed his Ka-Bar from the trunk of the Cayenne. Nobody knew how he got his hands on the knife, and it was a funny story.

Something crackled behind him.

He used the sound to time this second person's movement. When they were close, he ducked away from a chokehold, turned, and lodged the knife's tip into the person's abdomen. He brandished another blade, a spear point, and pierced the person's neck.

Now that he faced them, he made out a man's face. The man gasped, grabbed his neck, and fell to his knees. He stared as the gasping assailant—if he could even call them that—went from his knees to the asphalt. This man looked...what was the word?

Unimpressible?

Uneventful?

Where was Bez when he needed her?

Whatever the word was, this man with his dark hair and regular brown eyes didn't look like a killer. Then again, he supposed that was the point. People said *he* looked like a killer, but what did that even mean? Was it his scars? How did they know he hadn't gotten them from playing too roughly on a playground as a child?

"I said, 'Who the fuck are you?'"

Giorgio looked up directly into the barrel of a gun and cocked his head to the side.

"You will not shoot?"

“Nique ta mère!” Lavigne waved the gun. “Fuck you. If I shoot you, I am dead.”

“Why do you wait?” he asked. “Because I am not three-year-old boy?”

Lavigne spat on the ground. “Enculé.”

“I am asshole? Mudak, pull the fucking trigger.”

“Tell your guy to stand down. I have to get Wes some help. If not, we’re all going to die today.”

Behind the mudak, Dez steadied a rifle.

Lavigne inched toward his comrade.

Giorgio watched Lavigne’s every movement, Gage’s request echoing in his head. Veeny had to live so Lattimore could be the one to kill him. Veeny had to live so Lattimore could kill him. *Lattimore wanted him to kill Veeny.*

Lavigne grabbed his dying friend and backed up toward the shadows. Giorgio turned and headed back to Bez and the boys.

“Pozza,” Dez called, following him. “You can’t ask someone pointing a gun at you to pull the trigger. We talked about this.”

“I did not ask.”

“Which is worse.”

“You are there, da?”

“Yeah, I’ve got your back, but—”

“So what is problem?”

Dez sighed. “There are none, I guess.”

When he and Dez reached the Cayenne, he picked Theo up, opened the back of the SUV, and sat Theo down. He removed one of his shirts and draped it over Theo's body.

Theo's lip trembled. "I'm sorry I had an accident, Unco Gio."

He gently bumped their foreheads together. "Is okay, Little Theo. This will happen. Your Uncle Gio is not angry. But Mr. Veeny will not bring you harm. If he try, I will take knif—"

"Notice," Mo cut in. "He'll take notice and handle it."

"Bez, this is not what I will do."

She kissed the side of his arm, and he liked when she kissed odd places. He also liked when she carried Aleksi in one of those things she wrapped around her like bedsheets. Knowing she was happy even though she was with him was better than all of his cars, even the Ferraris.

Unassuming.

That was the word—unassuming.

He laughed to himself, head shaking, and changed Theo out of the soiled jeans. When Theo's tears returned, he picked him up and held him close. So tiny, Theo was, that if he didn't grow soon, Aleksi would look him in the eyes.

"Little Theo, forever, we will protect. Do not worry. Mr. Veeny," he glanced at Bez, "he will see Hell."

"Gio..."

"I did not say kill or murder, my Bez."

She sighed. "True."

He tickled Theo's side. "You trust your Uncle Gio, yes?"

Theo giggled, nodded, and squeezed him tight, head on his shoulder.

Bez smiled. "I love you, Gio. Please don't ever change."

"I love you too, Unco Gio," Theo echoed. "Thanks for being my scary uncle."

CHAPTER 20

“Gano, did you turn your comms off?”

Adrian spun away from his laptop and faced the now open and unlocked doorway. Hyeok, the fucking light-foot, stood in the light streaming in from the corridor.

“It’s not like I can’t,” he said.

“Well, we’ve been trying to reach you. It’s Wesley. Lavigne disappeared on us again, so Wesley followed him. They ran into somebody outside of a home improvement store, of all places. Gano, Lavigne checked in about a half hour ago. Wesley’s dead.”

That was...unexpected. Not that he felt anything—remorse, sadness, a twitch of grief—but he hadn’t expected them to be a five-man team before going up against Gage Wolfe’s people.

“Who killed him?”

Hyeok folded his arms, leaned against the doorframe, and shrugged. “Don’t know.”

“How’d it happen?”

“Two blades. One to the neck, the other to the midsection.” Hyeok glanced at the laptop screen. “Lavigne got a little sliced up too. Said it all happened in less than two minutes.”

Adrian shut the lid. “Lavigne uses blades. Sure it’s not him?”

“Whoever did this is crazier.”

For a long time, they’d had no idea Central had formed other teams from the grueling training exercises that had brought Omega together. Each team was treated like they were the only ones, never crossing paths until the Curtis Savea incident.

“One more time, Gano,” Hyeok said. “Does Ayesha Savea still have any contact with anyone from Alpha?”

Yes.

“Not that I’ve been able to glean. Why?”

“She’s in Sweden, and we now believe at least one of Alpha is in Sweden. Can’t be a coincidence. If Ayesha’s here and the guy who did this to Wesley and Lavigne might be Alpha, it gives us reason to believe Alpha’s here as well.”

Which further complicated things.

Back when they were together, Ayesha told him she’d cut all ties with “Curtis’ friends from the military.” However, their reconnaissance had revealed that she’d kept in touch with Gage Wolfe—one of only two names they knew.

The other was Curtis Savea.

Trevor and Gage served together in Australia, so when Trevor spotted Gage that fateful day of Curtis’ demise, he’d recognized him. Central had created the teams all in a similar fashion, so this blade-wielder was likely Lavigne’s equivalent. Dez, the man with Larke Tapley in D.C., could be another.

Although he’d been listening in on some of Ayesha’s conversations, it remained unclear all who made up Alpha, but

her new boyfriend ranked high on the probability list.

“So what do we do now?” he asked.

“I don’t know what *we* do now,” Hyeok pointed at the laptop with his chin, “but I suggest *you* find something useful from or about Ayesha, who I know you’ve been watching. Something that can lead us to Alpha before I start believing we can no longer trust you.”

They never could trust him.

If the contract had been to kill his team members in exchange for his freedom, they would already all be dead. Omega was not Alpha. They were not close, they were not friends, and they for damn sure weren’t family. Lavigne should have been the dead one. And why would anybody who possessed that much skill leave Lavigne alive?

“Where’s Ayesha?” Hyeok asked.

He knew exactly where to find her, but getting into the complex was a different story. About three miles from the entrance, unauthorized vehicles tripped an alarm, triggering an electromagnetic pulse strong enough to disable a car’s microprocessor system.

After running into Ayesha at the restaurant, he’d tailed her. The next thing he knew, he was sitting in a dead hunk of metal.

He’d considered returning with an older model or trying to enter on foot, but he had the advantage of knowing who lived inside the complex. More than likely, he would be dealing with advanced security even Spettro couldn’t bypass.

“I don’t know exactly,” he said. “That’s what I’ve been trying to find out, but she takes off the ring now.”

“And the ring’s how you’ve been keeping tabs on her?”

Not exactly.

Listening but not tracking.

“Yeah.”

“Can’t say it’s not clever.” Hyeok pushed off the doorframe. “Take me with you next time. I’ll follow her back to wherever it is she’s staying. Nobody’ll see me.”

Like hell, he would.

“Sure. It’ll give me one less thing to do.”

Hyeok left, shutting the door behind him.

Adrian turned back to his laptop. He’d already planned to let Ayesha know he was watching over her, but if she was still connected to Alpha, getting to her at home would remain virtually impossible. Luckily, he knew where the boys went to school.

CHAPTER 21

Joel opened his mouth for Ayesha to pop a grape inside. “The guys would gag right now if they saw us,” he said. “Sick for days.”

They’d made love twice more last night and once this morning. She’d brought them breakfast in bed. Afterward, he’d pulled her onto his lap for them to finish their fruit, naked with the sheets pooled around them as Ayesha popped grapes and chunks of melon and pineapple into his mouth.

“We’ll have to tone down our disgustingness before we get back,” she joked.

“I don’t know.” He gripped her hips. “Seems kind of hard.”

That one sentence was all it took.

While she gripped the headboard behind his head, he held her hips to guide her down onto him. She rode him, and he sucked on those sensitive nipples, her moans resonating like the Boston Philharmonic. Each time a shock of pleasure moved through his body, he had to toss his head back, her breast involuntarily falling from his mouth. But then he would miss the sensation of the bud rolling around on his tongue.

He'd learned how she liked to be touched, so he slipped one hand between them to soothe the tight ache he knew was building in her clit. Between the strokes from his fingers and his teeth gently tugging her nipples, she cried out as she came, gasping and shuddering, and the fact that she trembled when she climaxed made him release his load before he was ready.

Breathing hard, she wrapped her arms around his neck. He kissed her shoulder, his breaths mimicking hers.

“Want to check out the private beach?” he asked, barely getting the words out.

She nodded. “Sure. We should probably get some sunlight today.”

They cleaned up and went to the beach.

While he wasn't sure whether they were alone, the beachfront was empty. The coast stretched further than they could see, and small hills covered in lush greenery created an exclusive oasis.

For a moment, he'd forgotten people wore bikinis and swimsuits to the beach. And, to be fair, Ayesha had worn a cover-up. It wasn't until she took off the coverup to reveal the burnt orange, halter-top bikini underneath that he remembered. So the minute she was in his arms, he fucked her, slowly, in the Baltic Sea.

Barely stopping to catch a full second wind, he next wore her out among the trees hugging the coast, her fingernails skating the tree bark while he sunk into her from behind, over and over, until her shudders made him come.

Exhausted, they staggered back to the cottage, ate lunch, and fell asleep. When they woke up, they went out for dinner. They'd even dressed for dinner. But Ayesha couldn't stop

staring at him, biting her lip and squirming, so they took their food to go. He'd planned to wait until they were inside the cottage, but most of their clothes were off by the time they reached the front steps.

He bent her over the back of the sofa and licked her until she spasmed. Then he stood, and when the head of his dick breached the gateway to her heaven, her eyes rolled back, and she held her breath. She didn't release the breath until he was as deep as he could go.

"I love that," he said, squeezing her hips. "That little gasp."

He fucked her until the sofa shifted, his knee banging against the frame, but he felt no pain. She reached back, her fingernails sinking into the skin on his arms, but that, he liked.

The room blurred.

The sounds of their bodies coming together intensified as his vision clouded.

She felt so good.

Amazing.

The burn of release and the sensation of it shooting from his tip hit him at the same time. Her name echoed on his lips, his on hers.

Two hours later, they ate.

"You done?" Joel asked, pointing to her food container.

She took one last bite of spinach and mushroom lasagna and shoved the container in his direction. He tossed them in the trash and returned to bed. They went home tomorrow, so tonight, he would indulge in holding her while they were both naked and warm and boneless.

“Question.” He wrapped his arms around her from behind and nuzzled her neck. “How effective is that IUD again?”

“IUDs are highly effective,” she said. “Why?”

“All the times I’ve come inside you? We’d end up with a little Joelita before the end of next year. Guaranteed.”

She laughed. “If we end up with a little ‘Joelita,’ we can’t say we didn’t take *some* precautions.”

“If you got pregnant, would you be disappointed?”

“Disappointed to have your child?” She looked back at him over her shoulder. “Oh, baby. That’s in there deep, isn’t it? That hurt.”

“I guess I’ll let you shrink my head, seeing as it’s the only head that shrinks when I’m around you.”

She started to say something, paused to search his face, and then smiled. “Joel, it’s the opposite. I would be excited. Actually, I want to grow our family one day...if you’re interested.”

Blood rushed to his groin.

He slid a hand down her body, lodged his fingers between her legs, and waited to see how she responded—if she twinged or showed any hurt, considering his beautiful, nasty wife wouldn’t tell him.

When she didn’t, he rolled her onto her back and fingered her until she climaxed, her breast in his mouth.

With an erection so hard the vein in his forehead throbbed, he sank inside her, and the sigh that left her lips whenever he entered her to the hilt almost always made him come too soon.

“I’m sorry.” He kissed her neck. “I promise we’ll slow down after this.”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to.”

Groaning, he closed his eyes and pressed his forehead against hers. She cradled both sides of his face and raised his head.

“I want to have your baby, Joel.”

“You mean that?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Eesh, really?”

“Yes, Joel. Really.”

His orgasm tore from him, spilling hot out of his swollen tip in steady jerks. He came when he was at his deepest, and it was a miracle of nature he had anything left. Each time he found himself inside her, his balls sighed. They hadn’t worked this hard in a long time.

“Eesh, I promise I won’t make you regret trusting me with something so precious. I promise.”

“You’re a good father, Joel.” She kissed his forehead, nestling her lips between the damp strands of his hair. “I don’t regret building a family with you today, and I won’t in the future. You can trust me, okay? I love you, baby. I love you.”

* * *

The next morning, they checked in with the boys. More disgusting cuteness between them came in the form of her wearing the pajama top of the set, of which he wore the bottoms.

Ayesha sat on the bed while he rested his head on her lap, and it was funny the difference a day made, even in the intimacy of their positioning.

Theo greeted them this time, and he wasn't smiling. Joel looked behind him to ensure he was still at Mo and Giorgio's.

"Hey, buddy. You okay?"

Theo nodded.

"Baby, did something happen?" Ayesha asked. "You seem sad."

Theo shook his head.

"Where's Josiah?" they both asked.

Theo shrugged.

Joel got out of bed, grabbed his phone, and called Mo. When she picked up, she didn't sound like herself either.

Something happened, and it was bad.

"I didn't want to say anything until you got back," she explained. "But when me and Giorgio took the boys with us to pick up brackets for the swing set, Theo had an accident in the parking lot, and it really embarrassed him."

He headed to the living room and sat on the sofa arm. "Was he sleeping or awake?"

"Awake."

"Mo, who'd he see?"

"Mr. Veeny."

Joel glanced at the open bedroom door. It was the same Mr. Veeny he realized he still hadn't told Ayesha about. She didn't even know he'd found out the "veeny" from Theo's

dream was an actual person and that he'd gotten the information from the man she used to have casual sex with.

He'd essentially created his own clusterfuck.

"Gio said Eesh doesn't know about 'Mr. Veeny,' so I didn't want to say anything," Mo said. "And, trust me, Theo's more sad about his accident. He said not to tell 'Mama or Daddy' about what happened because he didn't want them sad on their 'happy trip.' I'm sorry you had to call to find out."

"No, no, I understand," he reassured her. "You didn't want him to feel betrayed by going against his wishes. I get it."

"Gio saw Lavigne. He said there were two men, but he killed one of them. Dez was with us, and they let Lavigne go."

They'd saved him the last bite of a good ass dinner. What better brothers could a man ask for?

"Do you want *us* to tell Ayesha?" Mo asked. "Gio said Lavigne was in their house in Maui. When Ayesha finds out, she won't take that well. We can do a girls' night or something and break the news that way."

"It has to be me, Mo."

She sighed. "I know. Just...don't do it out there. Wait until you get back. You two deserve this."

Ayesha appeared in the bedroom doorway.

"We can come home tonight," he said.

In the background, Aleksi cried out, the cry followed by Giorgio's voice.

"Joel, we've got this until you get back. Take your joy when you can because, as usual, there'll be times we won't get to have any of it."

He locked gazes with Ayesha. “You’re right.”

“Say hi to Eesh for me.”

“I will. I’ll see you tomorrow, Mo.”

He ended the call.

“I didn’t get Theo to talk,” Ayesha said. “Josiah didn’t want to talk either, but it was because Theo told him, ‘Don’t tell her, Jojo,’ when he started to explain.”

“He had an accident yesterday when they were at the home improvement store, and he’s embarrassed.”

“Oh, no.” She crossed the room and sat on the sofa. “But how? Did he fall asleep in the car?”

“No, he was awake.”

She scooted over, and he took the cushion next to her.

“Joel, I can’t help but think this ‘veeny’ is a name. I think an actual person terrorized my baby, and he must have repressed it until recently. Theo’s behaviors are similar to those of a child being abused. A dream wouldn’t terrify him to this extent.”

He drew her into his arms. “I know.”

“Joel, I don’t know what to do here.” A sudden flood of tears wracked her body. “What if this ‘veeny’ is a person and he...he *hurt* my baby, and I didn’t know? What kind of mother would that make me not to know someone hurt my little boy?”

His heart tugged, but he knew this was a mild reaction compared to what would happen if he broke the news to her right then.

“I keep trying to tell myself, ‘You’re doing your best, you’re doing your best,’ but the fear that I’m failing never

seems to go away completely. And now,” she choked out a cry, “what if...Joel, how would Theo come back from that? How could I not protect him from that?”

She buried her face in his shoulder, and he pressed kisses into her hair. Would telling her now make this better or worse? How could he reassure her without making her feel even more like a failure because she hadn't known Lavigne was in their home? Lavigne likely specialized in getting into locations undetected, but how much of that would matter to Ayesha?

“Eesh, I asked Theo if anybody ever hurt him like that. He said no.”

“And you believe him, right?” she asked.

“Yes. I do.”

She curled her arms around him.

“Babe, you're not a failure as a mother. The boys are smart, thoughtful, kind. This is just an obstacle we have to figure out to help Theo over or through. You're an amazing mama.”

The stress of it all affected her more than she showed. After doing everything on her own for so long, she never quite relearned how to lean on others. Then she treated everyone else's problems like a distraction, allowing her pain to fester beneath the surface.

“Thank you, Joel.”

“You don't have to thank me, babe.” He leaned back and swiped hooked index fingers along her cheekbones. “But I need you to hear me when I say this, okay? Ayesha, we're married. I love you. You're my wife. We're in this together. Truthfully, we've been in this together for a long time. I'm here, and I'm not going anywhere.”

CHAPTER 22

“This is Ayesha,” Ayesha said, phone to her ear while she waited for Joel to return with snacks for their train ride.

“This is your doctor’s office,” the woman on the other side said. “We’re calling to let you know you’re due for an appointment. It’s time to check your IUD.”

Without a period or baby to worry about, she’d forgotten all about finding a gynecologist in Sweden.

“Oh, I forgot to let you guys know I moved. I live in Sweden now.”

“Fancy.”

She laughed. “I mean, I like it. It’s not perfect, obviously, but it doesn’t have to be.”

“Well, we can send your records to your new doctor whenever you’re ready,” the woman said. “Keep in mind, however, that your model lasts around three to four years.”

She stilled. “Three to four? I thought it was ten?”

“Don’t worry; that’s a common misconception. Copper IUDs last up to ten years, but the hormonal ones have varying lengths. Yours is in the three to four-year range.”

“Would I be able to tell if it’s no longer effective?”

“Eventually, but not right away. It can take months, maybe longer, for your period to return. But as soon as the device stops releasing the hormone, you technically would be able to conceive. It doesn’t mean you immediately will, but it’s something to consider.”

Joel headed her way.

“Um...well, thank you,” she said. “I’ll make sure to have my records sent up here.”

“You’re welcome. Good luck in Sweden.”

She ended the call.

Joel took a seat beside her and handed her a pretzel. “You okay?”

Roughly only five percent of what Joel had “given” her during this trip had entered her body via her mouth. Everything else, he released inside her, and it was plenty.

“Ayesha?”

“Um, yeah. I’m okay.”

She raised the pretzel to her nose and felt him watching her, but he didn’t ask any questions.

When her stomach didn’t turn, she exhaled. It would probably be too soon, but the possibility was still there if the IUD had tapped out as early as the night they’d half-made love on the living room sofa. They’d talked about a Joelita, but they never discussed what it would mean if Joelita was already growing inside her.

“You...sure?” he asked.

“Yeah.” She nodded. “I’m sure. I do have a question, though. What do you think would be a good time to start

trying?”

“Trying what?”

“For a baby.”

He looked into her eyes and glanced down at her midsection before meeting her eyes again. “Uh...at least after we tell the boys, and everyone else, we’re married. That’s the main thing. Then we should take a few months to fully immerse ourselves in wedded bliss...right?”

“What about next year?”

For whatever reason, he kept trying to hide how hard he wanted to smile, like they both didn’t already know how much he wanted this. He chewed on the inside of his lip, his grin larger than the train station.

“Next year, then.”

Depending on how the gynecologist appointment she needed to make, ASAP, went, she might not have to wait long.

She danced in her seat—hopefully, her excitement would ease his doubt.

Laughing, he bit into his pretzel and stared at the station’s interior. Then he faced her again, his gaze darting from her belly to her eyes.

“God, you’re so cute like this.” She leaned back, took his hand, and set his palm on her lower abdomen. “Here. Practice.”

His face flushed, and his hand settled in place.

CHAPTER 23

Joel crouched and scooped Theo, who came running at full speed, up into his arms. Even Josiah *ran* to them, locking his arms around Ayesha as if he never wanted to let go. They'd talked to the boys before leaving for the train that morning, and it had eased Ayesha's worry that they'd been in better spirits.

Aleksi, who didn't want to be left out, toddled over and held up his arms.

Joel scooped him up as well.

They thanked Mo and Giorgio, endlessly, and said their goodbyes. When Aleksi realized he wasn't leaving with them, he bawled and squirmed in Giorgio's hold as they walked out the front door.

The four of them made a pizza together and watched movies.

Josiah snuggled up against Ayesha for the entire movie without a book, tablet, or e-reader in sight. After their movie afternoon, which led to a movie night, they prepared for bed.

Behind the closed bathroom door, Joel overheard Theo telling Ayesha how much he helped on the swing set and how much Aleksi loved it. A chatty Theo was a happy Theo.

He went to Josiah's room and found Josiah sitting on his bed, staring off into space.

"Hey, Siah. Everything okay?"

Josiah nodded. "Yeah. Everything's great. You got a minute?"

"For you? Always." Joel took a seat next to him. "What's up?"

"I want you to know that I don't feel bad about you spending so much time with Theo. He's going through a lot right now, and he's never had a dad, so he's still learning what it's like. Me, I have a little more experience in that area."

Joel smiled and raised an eyebrow. "Do you, now?"

"Well, *yeah*," Josiah emphasized, smiling himself. "I'm practically an expert."

"Break it down for me, then."

"Well, I was talking about it with one of my friends at school. She asked me if the guy who drops me off sometimes is my father. I said no, he's my dad."

Joel cleared his throat. "Really?"

"Yeah. Like, when Dad was still alive, I remember laughing a lot. I remember being excited to come home so we could talk or play games together. Dad was different from Ma, but in a good way. Ma makes you feel loved. Dad made me feel safe. When you put those two together, you get this feeling like you can do something you thought you never could because they'll have your back." Josiah's head fell, and he studied the striped pattern on his comforter. "When Dad died, and this isn't saying I don't feel safe with Ma or

anything, things felt different. Ma cried a lot. She tried to hide it, but I still heard her.”

The bathroom door down the hall opened and closed, and Theo’s chatter echoed until it was muffled by the door to the owner’s suite.

“Do you think she was sad a lot?” Joel asked.

Josiah raised one shoulder in a quick shrug. “Yeah. I was sad too, but I think she cried a lot because she was scared and alone and needed more people who loved her around. So, when she made up with my uncles, I was happy for her.”

“Did you feel safe again?”

“A little bit.”

“Do you feel safe now?”

He grinned. “Yeah. Very.”

Joel matched his grin. “When did that change?”

“When you started coming to Maui more.”

It had started as once in a while. Then, he was in Maui every month. Eventually, he stayed until the guys needed him. For the last couple of years, he and Ayesha practically lived together. When he wasn’t in Hawaii, she was with him in D.C.

“I felt guilty at first,” Josiah went on. “Ma didn’t tell me too much, but I heard stuff, so I knew something happened with you and Aunt Sydney.”

“Why’d you feel guilty?”

“Because when you started coming to Maui more, I started...I started wanting you to fall in love with Ma.”

“And that felt wrong.”

“I didn’t want Aunt Sydney to be alone, but when you started coming to Maui more...”

“You felt safe.”

Josiah nodded.

“When did you stop feeling guilty?”

Josiah shrugged again, with the other shoulder. “It just kind of went away the more time you spent with us. Then, I saw you look at Ma.”

Joel, so damn proud of his boy, grinned wider. “You saw me look at Eesh? Like how?”

“You started looking at her *a lot*. Like...staring. I knew that meant you liked her. Plus, you started mean-mugging the guys who tried to look at her body and stuff.”

“That in itself was a full-time job. Your mother’s beautiful.”

Josiah’s face tinted. “Some of my friends think so, too. It’s weird.”

“Give me their names.”

Josiah laughed, eyes lighting up. “Joel, you’ve felt like my father for a really long time. Spending time with you makes me remember my dad, and that’s how I know you’re supposed to be part of our family. And I don’t mean this in a bad way about Aunt Sydney or anything, but I think you were supposed to be part of our family all along.”

He draped an arm around Josiah’s shoulders. “I think so, too.”

“Joel, when it’s just us, do you think I could call you Dad, or would that be too weird?”

“It’s not weird at all.”

“Cool. I mean, I don’t want Ma to feel weird about it, like I don’t love Dad anymore.”

“I understand.” He squeezed Josiah and planted a kiss on top of his head. “The three of us will do something together soon. And now that I’m back, I can take over your MMA lessons.”

“Really? That would be so awesome.”

“I’ve got you.”

“Oh, and I noticed Ma’s ring is different.”

Joel squinted. “*How?*”

“I’m very perceptive.” Josiah folded his arms and nodded. “I’m not saying you two secretly got married, but if you did, one, you’ve always had my blessing. And two, have a wedding so I can wear a tux.”

“To impress Malia?”

Red engulfed Josiah’s entire face.

“Would be a nice occasion to invite her to, don’t you think?” Joel nudged him with an elbow. “A wedding.”

“That’s not why I want to wear a tux. And you’re as bad as Ma. You two deserve each other.”

“Siah, you’ll be twelve at the end of the year. Twelve is the age when you start noticing your appearance more—”

Josiah covered his face. “I can’t...”

“—and when you find yourself in the throes of attraction.”

“*Throes?*”

“And soon, you’ll start experiencing milestones as you explore your sexual maturity, such as your first ki—”

Josiah shoved him in the shoulder.

Joel, laughing, fell back on the bed. Josiah, laughing with him, fell in the same way, their heads close as they stared at the ceiling.

“So, Dad,” Josiah began. “Were you serious about who I could invite to the wedding?”

An hour past Josiah’s bedtime, they said good night.

When Joel entered the owner’s suite, Theo was asleep and tucked against Ayesha. She was awake, but her eyelids drooped.

“You can go to sleep, you know,” he teased, going to her side of the bed. “You don’t have to stay up for me.”

She covered a yawn with the back of her hand. “I wanted to make sure I said good night. Plus, I overheard some of you and Josiah’s little convo.”

“How much of it?”

She smiled. “Dad.”

“You okay with it?”

“I told you, I left that up to the boys. They’ve bestowed upon you the title.” She used her arm to “knight” him. “And if they feel like you deserve it, you deserve it.”

“Do you feel like I deserve it?” he asked.

“You more than deserve it, baby.”

He kissed her forehead. “Go to sleep, Eesh. You know we haven’t slept much in the last several days. I’m gonna shower and join you two in a minute.”

She nodded and turned onto her side, pulling Theo closer.
“Good night, honey. I love you.”

Joel smiled, heart racing. “I love you too.”

CHAPTER 24

Joel sat forward in his chair, massaging the back of his neck in a futile attempt to release the tension that had accumulated there. Gage stood in one corner of the tech room at the lair, his arms folded, while Giorgio stood in another. Mike reclined in a chair. Dez had taken Thandie, Theo, and Josiah to school, so the rest of them were currently staring at images displayed on Julien's wall of screens.

“So, back in the day, there was a mercenary who went by the name *Broydos*, a play on *broyeur d'os*—‘bone-crusher’ in French,” Julien explained. “The bone-crusher name was given to him because he had a penchant for, well, crushing bones.”

Giorgio made a noise in his throat.

Lavigne's face came up on each screen, each backdrop different. Some were blurry, and across the panel of images, he went from a youthful, unmarred face to lines, scars, a buzz cut, and pounds of muscle packed onto his frame. A cigarette dangled from his lips in nearly every picture, and Joel prayed his lungs didn't take the man out before he got the chance.

Julien continued. “It's probably all hyperbole, myths and legends and whatnot, but Broydos started out as Siriano Lavigne. Some years back, Lavigne disappeared off the map and was officially declared dead by his only known living

relative, a mother who died several years ago. Still, facial recognition was able to link him to several high-conflict areas across the globe.”

“You’re thinking he’s Black Ops?” Gage asked, angling his head as he studied each image.

“I’m pretty sure he’s part of a ghost unit. Like us.”

Mike frowned. “When you say ‘like us,’ what do you mean, exactly?”

“I mean, I think he’s part of a team created by Central,” Julien clarified. “From what I’ve found so far, there are at least three more—Delta, Gamma, and Omega. I’m thinking each name coincides with the inception of the specific team, which is why we’re—”

“Alpha,” Gage finished. “If Lavigne’s like us, it would explain how he got around the security you had installed at Ayesha’s and how he climbed into...into Theo’s room.”

The air in the room transformed into gas seeping toward a budding flame, and Joel hung his head and waited for his blood to return to a viable temperature.

Giorgio withdrew a switchblade and sliced it across the tip of his finger. They all knew it had taken a great deal of self-restraint for Giorgio not to kill Lavigne when he saw him, and Joel had told him multiple times how much he appreciated it. Maybe he would ask Giorgio to take part in the retaliation. It would be a nice “bonding” exercise.

Next, Julien presented an image of Curtis. “I’m not sure if it’s his entire team or Lavigne himself, but I think they might be here in Sweden because they’re tracking Ayesha. And I think they’re tracking Ayesha because Lavigne’s team might have had something to do with Curtis’ death.”

Mike snapped to attention.

Giorgio looked up from his tortured fingers.

“What?” Gage growled. “They *what?*”

“One of the images I got of Lavigne came from an op we ran years ago. The one that took Curtis. I’ve combed through that footage more times than I can count, looking for answers or explanations about what happened that day, so when Joel sent me Lavigne’s information, I recognized the face. Then I linked the face to the name.”

The muscles in Gage’s folded arms grew twice their size. From what Joel understood, they’d never gotten any clarity or closure on the op that would have taken all of their lives if Curtis hadn’t sacrificed himself. They’d assumed it had to do with something they’d overlooked, but this wasn’t a group that easily overlooked things.

“How?” Mike asked. “How is this Lavigne fuck connected to all of this, and can you kill a man more than once because I want a piece of him too.”

Julien stared at the image of Curtis reclining in an easy chair, raising a can of beer, and he responded only after a groaning sigh that carried against the choking silence of the room.

“I’m not sure, but everything I’ve been able to piece together says Lavigne is a problem. He’s got no family ties, no vulnerabilities. People like him, like us, we’re not defeated on the battlefield. You have to target our minds.” Julien glanced at a photo of Ari, Thandie, and Ty on his desk. “Our hearts.”

Mike scoffed. “Why not tell us more teams exist? I mean, I get it. A lot of shit happens around the world. There are multiple SEAL teams, so there’d be multiple...whatever the

fuck we were. Why treat us like some prototype or beta version?”

Gage rubbed his forehead, occasionally squeezing his brow bone with his middle and ring finger. They all appeared to come to the same conclusion at the same time.

“How long have they been trying to take you guys out?” Joel asked. “Because that’s what this is, right? Lavigne’s team was sent with you guys as the main objective. That’s how your location became known, and the entire op was compromised.”

Gage released a tight laugh, his eyes like emeralds being crushed under the weight of the world’s pressure. “Each time we were ‘compromised,’ it wasn’t because Central had a leaky vault,” he said. “They were sending teams to execute us while *still* sending us on ops. We’ve been waiting for the retaliation for going off the grid, but there’s been a target on our backs for a while.”

Joel snorted, now fully convinced Ayesha’s run-in with Adrián was no accident. The bastard was part of all this.

But Theo was four now.

Why would Adrián still be attached to Ayesha after all this time?

Then he thought about it.

He was attached to Ayesha his-damn-self.

“Eesh’s old fuck-buddy is part of this,” he said. “It’s no coincidence that him, Larke’s old tech guy, and Lavigne all popped up at the same time, and that Lavigne had a guy with him when Giorgio ran into him. If the teams were all created with the same blueprint, the tech guy’s their Julien and Lavigne’s their Giorgio.”

Giorgio made a deeper noise and mumbled something in Russian. He tossed the knife, lodging it in the ground, and pulled out another, streams of red painting his hand.

Joel shot a text off to Mo.

JOEL

Hey, Mo-mo.

Blood glove.

MO

Aww, Gio.

Ok. Omw.

They'd learned the full extent of what Giorgio had endured at the hands of his father from Mo. The man known as *Vater* did a number on Giorgio, even forcing him to bury his mother, so it was no surprise that Giorgio sometimes "broke." He was most vulnerable to snapping whenever children being harmed or disadvantaged, in any way, came into play.

Joel tucked his phone away and continued. "By the way, me and Eesh met Theo's teacher's husband at that school trip to Vasa Museum. He could be part of all of this too. There was something about the way he called Ayesha 'Mrs. Savea' instead of 'Mrs. Lattimore' that didn't sit right with me."

They looked at him.

"Or 'Ms.' Savea," he quickly added. "I was just using Mrs. Lattimore as an example."

"I'm surprised you lasted this long." Gage smiled, although the expression was empty. "Unless you two pulled a Dez and Larke and got hitched without telling us."

Joel shrugged.

“What’s his name?” Julien asked. “Theo’s teacher’s Mrs. Mason, right?”

“Yeah. He went by Trevor.”

Gage’s eyebrows raised. “Trevor Mason?”

“You know him? He sounded Aussie.”

“I served with a Trevor Mason in Special Forces, but he wouldn’t introduce himself with his actual name if he’s part of the group watching Ayesha.”

“She wouldn’t be a threat to him,” Mike pointed out. “More than likely, he did that shit on purpose, probably trying to see if she recognized the name. So if we have Lavigne, Adrián, Trevor, Larke’s tech guy, and the dead guy, there’s a missing Asian. I guaran-fucking-tee you, he’s Asian.” He clasped his hands in front of his face. “Please, let me go find out who this last motherfucker is.”

“Hello, you handsome lads,” Mo greeted, stepping into the room. Giorgio looked up, and she smiled. “Hey, boo.”

“Who has called my Bez?”

“Nobody did, Gio. I just missed you.” She crossed the room, over to him, and took his hand. “What were you guys talking about?”

Giorgio glanced around the room.

“Theo,” Joel answered.

She nodded, and they watched as she pulled a roll of gauze from her jacket pocket and wrapped it around Giorgio’s hands and fingers. Giorgio’s gaze alternated between the top of her

head and the white roll she wound until no red could be seen through the mesh.

“Giorgio, I love who you are,” she said. “I love how you take care of us, and I don’t mean only me and Mr. Aleks, the CEO of the Pozza household. *All* of us. Remember how you carried Ayesha when she was sick? She does. We talk about it all the time. And Ari, she sees you as a brother, not a brother-in-law. Think about it—I feel as close to you as I am to my twin sister. Plus, Theo! Theo adores you, and you make him feel safe. You mean the world to us, every last one of us, and for me, you’re my whole world.”

He watched as she finished wrapping his hand and tucked away the roll, and it was like he’d never seen a wound tended to before in his life.

She turned around and sent Joel a wink. “You guys just about done? I was thinking about taking Aleks to the park or something. It’s nice out, and the CEO requires a break.”

“Me and Tay’ll bring Grey,” Gage said.

The three of them left.

Mike rose and headed for the door. “And I’ll go track this mystery Asian.”

“We don’t know he’s Asian,” Joel called after him. Once he was sure everyone was above ground, he turned to Julien. “What’s the damage you’re not telling us about?”

“An official kill order.” Julien’s expression transitioned from sorrowful to deadly. “It came in this morning. I’ll say something tomorrow, but I want everybody to have one more normal fucking day.”

Joel’s phone rang, and a picture of Ayesha in the burnt orange bikini popped up on the screen. “Hey, Eesh,” he

answered. “We’re just about done here. I’ll be home soon.”

“Oh, I’m not at home,” she said. “I’m at Theo’s school.”

“Alone?”

“Dez is nearby. Theo forgot his lunch, so I dropped it off. You know he’s got that texture thing, and he’ll give Lilly hell if she tries to make him eat fish in any capacity. You’d never guess this kid was born on an island.”

“You’re on your way back right now?”

“Yes. Why?”

“You know why.”

“I’ve created a monster.”

He dropped his voice. “Yep, and he’s hungry.”

She laughed, and the sound drew a broad smile to his face. “I’ll see you in about twenty, then. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

They ended the call.

When he looked up again, Julien was staring at him. “Guess what I found when I went through the District of Columbia marriage records?” Julien asked. “I’ll give you three tries.”

Joel scratched the back of his head. “Why were you randomly going through marriage records?”

“It wasn’t random.”

“Did you say anything?”

Julien gestured to the doorway. “Come on, Lattimore. We all know. We just didn’t have proof until the certificate, and then Ari said Ayesha’s ring is different.”

How did everyone notice so quickly?

“But, if I’m being honest,” Julien shrugged, “I wish we could have been there.”

Joel sighed. “Yeah, we thought the same thing, but the civil ceremony was only for the dossier to get the boys added to my benefits as soon as possible. We plan on having an official ceremony, especially since my folks would kill me if they found out I married Ayesha and they weren’t there.”

“They do love them some Ayesha.”

“Exactly.”

Dez’s face appeared on one of the monitors. “Hey, you guys remember the FBI agent in D.C. me and Larke had to deal with?” he asked. “He’s here.”

Joel frowned. “Here...where?”

“At Thandie and Theo’s school, talking to Ayesha.”

Dez flipped his phone screen, and Joel was suddenly reminded of a nature show he and the boys watched where a hyena kept infringing on a lion’s pride. Now that he thought about it, it might have been a little violent for the boys to have been watching with the way the lion had snapped the hyena’s neck.

Ayesha obviously didn’t understand the depth of his recent descent into the realm of *fucking insane* if she thought talking to her little ex-lover in secret was even close to being a good idea.

“Adrián’s a Fed?” he asked.

“*That’s* Adrián?” Dez flipped his camera back around. “That’s the ‘FBI agent’ who interrogated Larke after the

break-in at her office. Said his name was Martin. Ryan Martin.”

Joel stood. “Julien, you want me to get Thandie?”

“I’ve got her,” Julien called after him. “I’ll get Theo and Josiah too. You have more pressing shit to deal with. Call me if you need bail money.”

CHAPTER 25

“Adrián, what are you talking about?” Ayesha asked. “And why are you at my son’s school?”

Adrián searched her face, his gaze lingering on her mouth before their eyes met again. “I came here to see you, Ayesha. I’m serious. You’re being followed.”

“By who? Because you appear to be following me, and I don’t appreciate that.”

Joel would appreciate it even less.

“It’s about Curtis.”

The blood in her veins stopped flowing. Behind her, she heard the faint noise of children screaming on a playground. A cold breeze blew, and she wanted to blame the goosebumps on her arms on the slight nip in the air whenever a strong breeze blew, but this wasn’t one of those moments where she could find comfort in suspended disbelief.

This next question she was about to ask, it was imperative that he answered in a certain way. She didn’t have sex with the man who killed her husband. She hadn’t found herself caring for the man who stole half of her soul. This man, who played with, fed, and cuddled Theo as an infant, wasn’t responsible for Theo being fatherless in the first place.

“What about Curtis?” she asked.

“The men following you? One of them is tied to his death.”

She took a step back. “Is it you?”

“Ayesha—”

“Answer me.”

His dark eyes remained fixed on hers. “No, I’m not responsible.”

“Adrián, I need to believe you’re telling the truth. Because if I don’t, I’ll be torn in half. You do understand that, right? You understand why something like that would...destroy me, right?”

“Let’s go somewhere and talk.” He scanned the entire length of her body. “Did you eat? Let me take you to brunch.”

“No.”

“What about later? We can—”

“No, Adrián.” She pointed to one of the picnic tables in the school’s front yard. “I’ll talk to you there, but I’m not going anywhere with you. I can’t. You know that. I’m with someone, and it’s not okay for you to keep dropping in on me like this.”

“Do you love him?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Does he love you?”

“Yes.”

“More than I do?”

Her stomach twisted. “It doesn’t really matter, does it?”

He stepped aside and gestured to the table. “Okay. After you.”

Her legs somehow took her across the spongy green, the soles of her low-heeled ankle boots temporarily crushing the blades. Adrián walked close behind her, his hand hovering near her elbow, and she could see his head moving about from the outline of his shadow on the ground.

While the sun was out, the air was cool. Having come from the tropics, she had to wear a sweater or light jacket everywhere, and she layered Theo until he complained. However, in about another year, they would better appreciate weather this agreeable.

Adrián sat across from her, facing the sun, his hair dancing in the wind. There was more of a shadow on his jaw than when she’d last seen him, along with a strained element to his expression. He was one of the lucky few who hadn’t so much as a freckle, his face unscarred and unblemished while she still wore parts of her teen years on her cheeks.

“What do these ‘people’ want with me?” she asked.

He squinted, his thick brows lowering and his thumb moving along the tabletop near her fingers. “Curtis used to be part of an elite tactical unit,” he said, and she remained quiet, fine with letting him assume she knew nothing about what Curtis used to do. “One of the men you’ve been seen with before, Gage Wolfe, is part of that unit.”

He blinked slowly, looking at her the same way he did all those years ago, so intense she felt the knots in the rope that kept her gaze tethered to his.

“I’m also part of a similar tactical Black Ops team,” he went on. “The ‘people’ watching you are my men, the men in

my unit, and they've been watching you for a while now."

"Because I'm Curtis' widow."

"Yes."

"What do they want?"

"They wanted to kill you."

She bristled and took a moment to rearrange the parts of herself his revelation had knocked out of order.

"But I stopped it, *querida*. I told them the truth, that you didn't know anything about what your husband did."

"Did they want to kill me *and* my boys?"

"Yes."

Dez sent her a text asking if she was okay, and she quickly responded that she was fine and would be done in a minute. There was no point in pretending she didn't know he was watching. What she didn't know was whether he'd reported her current "situation" back to Joel without knowing the full story of everything she and Joel had been dealing with related to this man.

"Do these men still want to kill me?"

Adrián leaned closer. "Even if they did, I wouldn't let them."

"Aren't they part of your team or unit or whatever it's called?"

"Yes, but that won't stop me from killing them when it comes to you."

He looked away, and she moved her hand to her lap when she felt his thumb brush her pinky.

“Ayesha, I didn’t lie to you back then. I fell in love with you. I...I’m still in love with you.”

“You can’t be.”

“I am.”

“Why?”

“Ah.” He laughed, and the slightest tint of red colored his olive skin. “It’s difficult for me to explain, but I’ll be honest. When we met, it was because my job was to keep tabs on you. Quickly, *very* quickly, I stopped caring about the job and started only to care about you. I’ve noticed that it’s those who get labeled as monsters that often fall the quickest. We’ve spent our lives being seen as a threat, so when someone sees the human inside us, naturally, love follows.”

It made her think of Giorgio.

Until Mo, everyone assumed he used his skill to exert power. Instead, having had a target on his back his entire life, he’d defaulted to defending himself with violence. It was even how he showed affection; if someone threatened those he loved, he hunted them. If someone threatened a child, he tortured them. The lucky ones were those who quickly met the end of his blade.

“You still haven’t answered the question, Adrián,” she said. “Why should I believe you? You obviously want me to take comfort in the fact that you’ve got my back, but it’s been years. We haven’t seen each other in all that time.”

“I know, I know.” He shifted in his seat, his skin coloring even deeper. “Okay, do you remember the day the café in our office complex had that terrible zucchini?”

She couldn’t stop herself from smiling. “The oily one?”

“Yes. It was one of the times you worked through lunch, and I wanted to make sure you ate, so I didn’t realize what it looked like when I tossed it into the container.”

The smile grew. “It was fine, Adrián.”

“It was bad, *Ayesha*.” He grinned. “When I opened that container and saw that oil all over your yellow rice and beans, I was so embarrassed. It was so much, I could have scooped it up, bottled it, and sold it at a market.”

“Your whole face turned red. Even your ears.” She reached up and gently grabbed the tip of his left ear and prayed Joel wasn’t somewhere watching. Just because she wasn’t in love with this man didn’t mean she hated him, but to Joel, anything other than her hating Adrián’s guts was an admission of longing.

He wouldn’t lose her, yet he worried that he would. To her, his security in their relationship mattered. If she was allowed to be afraid he’d die because of her past, he was allowed to have a similar fear because of his.

“I loved laughing with you that day,” he said. “It was like we’d known each other longer than we did. It was the first time I noticed that the sound of you laughing makes me feel... high, almost. Then I started to notice how much I love looking into your eyes, and I thought about you the *second* my eyes opened every morning. That first time I kissed you, I knew I would never return to being the man I was before.”

He seemed closer.

She’d been watching him the entire time, and she didn’t see him move, but he seemed closer. And while she knew that she needed to move away, she didn’t.

It wasn’t that she couldn’t.

She simply didn't.

“Then, we made love.” Amusement blended with rising desire in his eyes. “So, to answer your question—I love you, querida, and because I love you, I'll never let any harm come to you or the boys. If it means your happiness, I won't let any harm come to your new man either. Anyone who has a chance to meet you, even once, deserves to have you in their life.”

She broke what she hadn't realized was a stare they'd held for far too long. Joel had accused her of having stronger feelings for Adrián than she'd said or even believed, but that wasn't true.

It couldn't be.

Adrián entered her life at a time when she didn't know whether she was coming or going. During the day, she'd plastered on a brave face for the boys, but at night, she'd cried until her head hurt. She'd cried wrapped in Curtis' shirts and with the ties he sometimes wore in his hair around her wrist.

When Adrián came along, she stopped crying.

For a little while.

But when they decided to end things, did it hurt? Did she think about him afterward? Stare down the hall where his office had been, hoping to see him one last time?

No.

No.

She'd only been a widow for a little over a year when they met, and she loved Curtis with every single bone in her body. Having feelings for Adrián so soon after her husband was *killed* was the ultimate betrayal.

However, there was something, some feeling or emotion she'd overlooked when it came to Adrián, and the fact that it was trying to rise from the depths with him sitting across from her made her finally add space between them.

"You lost your mother when you were young," she said. "I understand why you'd look out for the boys the way you did, so thank you."

"I won't stop protecting you."

"I have someone who—"

"Ayesha, I don't care."

"You're going to have to. For us both, you're going to need to move on."

He frowned. "I don't understand."

"I think...Adrián, I want you to be happy, but I can't be the one who makes you happy."

"And I can do that by, what, getting over you?" His mouth curved into a wry smile. "You say that like it's easy. I've never had someone mean something to me the way you did. I've never felt the feelings you brought out of me. After my mother died, I kept people at a distance. Everyone. Ayesha, you're the only person who knows how she died, how *they* left her. You're the first woman I've ever let in."

"Am I the first to try to get close to you?"

"Look at me, querida." He gestured to his frame, his eyes glinting. "What do you think? I'm constantly beating them off with a stick."

She smiled. "You're still as modest as I remember."

The side of his mouth quirked, his eyes glinting as he tucked a twisted strand of hair behind her ear. His hand remained at the side of her face. “But do you understand what I mean, Ayesha? When I say you’re the first woman I’ve ever let in, do you know what I’m saying to you? Why you’ll always be special to me?”

Whatever she was about to reply died on her lips when his gaze shifted behind her head, and his expression changed. His shoulders tensed, and the muscle in his jaw pulled tight like a man gearing up for the fight in “fight or flight.”

Joel.

She spun around, and there he was, looking damn near edible in a black crew-neck sweater and gray jeans, strolling toward them. Her husband was sexy as hell, regardless of whether his face would be the last thing she saw before the white light.

“Don’t get up,” Joel said. “I would hate to interrupt.”

She stood anyhow. “Hi, baby. So, Adrián—”

“Popped up again. Interesting.”

“Joel, if you’d let me explain—”

“I’ve been following her,” Adrián said, standing as well, and this wasn’t exactly how she’d fantasized about being sandwiched between two large, handsome men. “But not in a way to harm her.”

“I’ve got her. She’s good.”

“I think you might be in over your head with this one...
Joel.”

“Oh, aren’t you adorable?”

“You have no idea what you’re dealing with. If you did, you’d understand the privilege of having someone like me watching out for Ayesha. You’d be able to better grasp the advantage of having a man with my expertise protect your woman in ways you’ll never be able to.”

Joel didn’t flinch, but she pressed herself back against him, silently professing who she supported while allowing her body to be a barrier.

He tipped his head, pointing behind him. “Let’s go, Eesh. Evidently, we have some shit we need to clear up.”

“Do you feel unsafe, Ayesha?” Adrián asked. “Because if you do, you can come with me.”

“Adrián, don’t do that,” she said, begged. “I already told you that you can’t do this anymore. I appreciate you looking out for me. You know I do.”

Joel’s gaze flicked in her direction.

“But it can’t be like this.”

“You think this pretty boy can protect you?” Adrián tipped *his* head, pointing at Joel. “Better than I can? Better than I will?”

She blinked, and Adrián was suddenly bent, awkwardly, back against the picnic table. Joel’s forearm was lodged against Adrián’s windpipe, the tip of a blade pressed against Adrián’s skin, and a dot of blood sprouted where the tip met Adrián’s throat.

“Stop it,” she hissed. “If you kill each other in front of my baby’s school, I’ll revive you both and kill you again.”

Adrián had a knife to his throat but didn’t look terrified. Joel was pressing a knife into another man’s throat and looked

amused. They were about to kill each other in front of her child's school, and it served her right for messing around with unstable men.

"I'm not going to repeat myself. Get your shit together. The two of you."

Joel stepped back and lowered the knife. Adrián straightened, dragged his fingers across his neck, and barely glanced at the red stain left behind.

"Sit down."

Both men looked at her.

"I'm so serious right now." She pointed to the bench. "Sit."

They slowly sat, taking opposite sides of the wooden surface.

"This has got to stop," she whispered. They were far enough from the school not to be heard, but after that display, her anxious mind told her someone would come running. "Joel, I'm in love with you. You know that. Adrián," she pivoted, "I love—"

"Who?" Joel cut in.

She massaged her temple. "Him. I was going to say I love 'him.' As in, I love *you*, and can you please put away that... dagger, or whatever it is?"

"It's a combat knife," Adrián said. "A fixed sheath tactical Bowie. Would've torn a hole in my throat."

Joel tucked away the blade. "He's right. Non-slip grip. Serrated edge. Would've fucked him up."

Adrián flicked a thumb at him and nodded.

Her jaw nearly fell to the ground. They were trying to kill each other. She was sure they were going to keep trying to kill each other. Yet, they were correcting her about a knife.

“I’m...gonna go. You two are going to drive me up a wall.”

“Querida, I was only having a conversation with you,” Adrián argued. “Then your boyfriend tries to slit my throat.”

“I’m her husband,” Joel spat. “And I wouldn’t have killed you here.”

Adrián looked around. “Is it the terrain?”

“The visibility.”

“Right. The school.”

Joel pointed off in the distance. “See that tree over there? What’s that, a spruce? That’s where I planned to do it.”

Adrián looked in the same direction. “Oh, yes. That makes sense. Plus, the ground over there is fairly absorbent.”

“Exactly. Then I could have—”

“Left my body at the bottom of the hill.” Adrián nodded. “It might have been years before anybody found me, and the dirt would have sucked up my blood before I took my last breath. *Filho de puta*, that’s a good...wait, husband?” He looked up at her. “Querida, you got married? When?”

“Recently,” Joel said.

“In Sweden?”

“D.C.”

“Oh. Courthouse, or there was a wedding?”

“Courthouse. We’re doing the wedding later.”

“You know what? That’s a good id—”

She spun and headed across the lawn, the remnants of their pseudo-psychotic conversation disappearing in the wind. Once she was inside the car, she locked the doors and waited.

Joel tapped on the driver’s side window. “I’ll follow you.”

She went to look in the rearview mirror.

“Don’t you dare.”

“I was checking for cars.”

“We’ll talk when we get home.”

At least he wanted to talk. He wasn’t shutting her out like he’d done after the museum. That meant he was trying.

He tailed her back to the house.

When she pulled into the driveway, she’d half-expected him to tell her she’d taken a wrong turn and to head back to her house because he was done with her. Instead, he parked next to her, got out, and held open the garage door for her to walk through.

“Are you hungry?” She tossed her purse on the kitchen counter. “I still have some of those chicken burritos I made the other day in the freezer. There’s enough for when Josiah gets home and needs his second lunch and pre-dinner snack.”

“Ayesha…”

“What about soup?”

“Living room, Ayesha.”

She faced him, tapping her fingers together. “Are you mad?”

“Yes. Go sit down.”

“Are we breaking up?”

“Never. I love you.” He pointed. “Now go sit down. We have some shit to clear up.”

She shuffled to the living room and eased down onto the sofa. He dragged over the ottoman and sat facing her.

“First of all, Eesh, what the actual fuck.”

“I didn’t know he was going to be there.” She scooted to the edge of the cushion. “He caught me just as I was leaving the school. This wasn’t some planned tryst or anything like that.”

“Ayesha, I have your heart. I know that. I know how much you love me. Still...never mind.” He leaned forward, placing his elbows on his thighs. “Look, the guy you know as Adrián Queiros, Dez and Larke know as Ryan Martin. He might even be a man named Adrián Delgano. In D.C., he impersonated a federal agent and interrogated Larke after a break-in at her office. We think he did it to confirm her information and find out more about the guys.”

She hesitated. “I trust him, Joel. He won’t hurt me.”

“You believe that, why?”

“He...said so.”

He searched her face. “He told you he’s in love with you, didn’t he?”

“Um...well, something like that. He said he’ll look out for me and the boys whether or not I want him to.”

He rubbed his palms on his thighs and leaned back. “We have reason to believe he’s part of a ghost unit much like, if not identical to, the one me and the guys are part of.”

“He is. He told me that today.”

Surprise softened his features. “He *told* you that?”

“He said the guys from his team have been following me. It started back in Maui. They wanted to know if I knew what Curtis did for a living. They also wanted to kill me, but he intervened.”

“Why?”

“Because.”

“Because he loves you. Why can’t you say it?”

“I,” she looked down at her fingernails, “don’t know.”

“Tell me the truth about how you feel about this guy, Eesh.”

As if it were that easy.

Until a few moments ago, she’d been certain about her feelings for Adrián. They’d spent time together, laughed and talked and made love, but how could it have been more than a passing infatuation? How could she have missed him when he never met Josiah or saw where she kept her coffee to wake her up with the smell of hazelnut brew?

They’d had sex on desks and office floors, in hotel rooms, and at his place. There was that one time, at that conference in Vancouver, where they spent four days together. She realized now that her being there for work and him for a business meeting had been him “keeping tabs” on her, but things clearly fell apart for him at some point. They’d spent every free moment eating, drinking, touring the city, or wrapped around each other.

She knew what love felt like.

She'd been lucky enough to experience it twice in a way that made her want to be bathed in it forever. Forever never crossed her mind with Adrián, but if he hadn't offered to end things, would *she* have?

"The truth is, I don't know how I feel anymore. I thought I did, but..."

She shrugged.

Joel dragged his tongue over his top row of teeth. "Are you in love with him?"

"No, baby."

"But you care about him."

"Yes."

"More than a little bit."

"I think so."

"Enough to care whether he lives or dies."

"Yes. I'd...prefer the former."

"I know. He would have already been dead, but I saw that he meant something to you."

He stood and walked a few feet away, increasing the space between them at the very moment she needed him closer.

"Eesh, I don't know what's happening to me. It's like, every time I look at you, in my head, I hear, '*finally*' and '*mine*,' over and over and over. Sometimes, when you're asleep, I stare at you, thinking about all the people I'd kill to keep you safe, and God help anybody who ever tries to hurt you. Baby, I *crave* you, and that shit...it's not normal." He strode over and crouched in front of her. "I loved Syd, and

yet...fuck, I've never experienced *this*. This isn't love. This is a fucking obsession."

It *was* love.

How *they* loved.

He truly was meant for this team.

Combined with their lethal personalities, this was how it manifested when it peaked. They knew how dangerous the world was more than most, so when it came to their families, threats weren't simply threats. They were targets to be destroyed to ensure the problem didn't return. To guarantee their family's everlasting safety.

Right now, it wasn't about solely protecting her. It was also about protecting little people even more vulnerable than she was, who depended on him and loved him unconditionally. His protection also wasn't merely physical; it extended to safeguarding the boys' self-confidence and self-assurance. They looked up to him as a leader, a father figure, and a role model.

But was it too much?

Had he thought being in their lives, that being "Dad" and "Daddy" would entail much less than this, so now that he had to deal with the pressure and reality of it, it was overwhelming?

"Joel, let me ask you something," she said. "You've been a husband before, and you're familiar with that role, but you've never had a kid want to call you 'Daddy' or 'Dad,' and it's a lot on you. Do you think—"

"No, that's not it, babe." He shook his head. "You three are not and won't ever be the problem. The fact that the boys want

to call me Dad and Daddy only makes me want to do everything I can never to lose that respect in their eyes.”

“So, maybe you’re worried that having us this close means something bad’s going to happen? Or that you’ll mess up somehow? Or—”

“Ayesha, I never knew I could love someone this much.”

A rush of emotion snared her throat.

“Does that make you feel guilty?” she asked. “Joel, none of this changes what you and Sydney had. None of it changes what I had with Curtis.”

“You’re,” he squinted, “close. I’ve never felt like this before, and you know how gone I was over Syd. This is worse. Much worse.”

“And if your feelings are this intense, you’re wondering if you can handle losing us. Am I close?”

“You’re hovering around the bullseye.”

“Joel, you know how this Adrián situation bugs you? *My* issue is that I don’t know how to get you to accept that I have zero plans to betray you. I love Sydney. You know I do. But, if I’m being honest, I hate that she hurt you like this. I don’t think she meant to, and she was doing her best with what she knew at the time. Still, it breaks my heart that you had your heart broken this way. I want to put it back together, baby. So much.”

“You are,” he insisted.

“Not if you think I’m thinking of leaving you. Not if you’re comparing my past with Adrián to the future I hope to build with you.”

She brushed a kiss over his lips, and he cupped the back of her head to hold it longer, his fingers disappearing into her hair.

When they separated, he smoothed her brow with his thumb, and it was an incredible thing to be able to see on his face exactly what he felt for her.

“I once went to a psychology conference where one of the speakers shared that they asked a client, ‘If you had a child, would you be proud for them to grow up a mirror image of your spouse?’ Now, this client was in an emotionally abusive relationship, so the speaker was looking for a way to get them to see things from the outside looking in. Joel, there are over a dozen qualities and traits that I could list to explain why I feel about you the way I do. But the one that sticks out is that I would be proud for Theo and Josiah to grow up like you.”

“You would?”

“You know I would. You’re just trying to get me to shower you with more sweet words.”

The side of his mouth lifted. “Eesh, I’m yours. In every way you could imagine. *Thinking* about not having you is enough to drive me crazy, and, shit, it felt like it crept up on me. It’s been in here,” he hovered a hand over his heart, “for a while now, hiding. And I knew, you know? Fuck, I knew it back in Maui, even. I’d fly down, stay for a while, and then when it was time to go back, something would just...” He set his hand on his chest. “It was like a hook. I’d be on the plane, and it would be...agonizing, I guess, is the best word for it. I wanted to go back. The minute I left you, Eesh, I wanted to go back to you.”

She wrung her hands behind his head, needing to busy them to contain the nervous energy moving through her body.

This wasn't the direction she'd seen the conversation heading when she spotted him walking up at the school. She'd been expecting him to shut down.

But he was trying.

Trying for her.

For them.

For their family.

"You're so much more than my wife, Ayesha," he continued. "I want you forever, point blank. I want to wake up next to you every morning and call you Mrs. Lattimore until my eyes close for the last time. I want how your body feels when I hold you close to me. Your scent. Your lips. Your voice." His brows crooked as if he was suddenly struck by a jolt of pain. "I never want to live without the three of you, and I know, without a doubt, you'd fight for me. You'd fight for us. You don't love me because I'm good to you. You love me because you see something inside me that makes you want to be good to me, too."

A cry snuck from her throat, followed immediately by another, and another, until she had to press her eyes into his shoulder for his shirt to catch her foolish tears.

"I stopped you because I was scared," she said. "The day after you found out about Sydney and Kofi, I stopped you from saying you love me because my feelings for you were so...so *powerful*. Then, you were still in love with Sydney. I thought for sure you would go back, and I knew how much that would hurt. Joel, for much longer than I was willing to admit, I wanted you to come back to Maui too. Whenever you left, I'd sit at the airport, crying my eyes out, scaring the airport staff."

He kissed the side of her head. “I was convinced you shut me down because I read our relationship all wrong. And I won’t lie. That shit devastated me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I think we’re good now.”

“Joel,” she sighed, “I had feelings for you in *Malibu*.”

She felt him go still.

“Tell me what you mean,” he said. “Please.”

“I’d hear you and Sydney at night since her room was right next to mine. The more you went to her, the more lonely I felt. The more salient Curtis’ death felt. For the first time since Curtis died, there was someone I wanted, someone I could see myself with for a long time, but he didn’t want me back.”

He raised her head.

“And she was right,” she went on. “Part of the reason I was adamant that she stop stringing you along was because I wanted to treat you the way I was dying inside to treat you. I would have respected it if you two had gotten back together, but God...I knew I could be so good to you. All I wanted was a chance. I wanted a chance before hurt and pain changed you, and we need people like you in the world. I needed you in mine.”

His hands shook.

She swiped at her face.

“Thank you,” he said.

“For what?”

“Fighting for me.”

“But it was selfish.”

“How?” He kissed her nose. “You saw something good in me. You saw something worthy of being appreciated. You saw it before I saw it in myself. Eesh, I do not hate Syd. I will never regret my marriage to Syd. But I would have been pissed at you if you never gave me a chance to fall in love with you. You, sweetheart, are the love of my fucking life.”

They could have stayed downstairs; she would have willingly made love to him on the sofa. But as he crept over her on the bed they shared and slowly undressed her, eyes never leaving hers, it was perfect this way.

In between undressing her, his mouth ravaged hers. Those large hands of his swept her skin. He sucked on her nipples while he stroked her with his fingers until she climaxed with his name on her lips. When that wasn't enough, he brought her to a second orgasm using his tongue. Then he brought her to a third, using both.

Joints wiry, she climbed onto all fours.

He grabbed her hips and entered her, unhurried, growing thicker as each ridged inch disappeared inside her body. Their bodies slapped together while she gripped the sheets and cried for a reason that had nothing to do with heartache.

Each crash of their bodies yanked a moan from his throat, the sound vibrating deeper and deeper until he had no choice but to draw her back to his chest and press his forehead against her shoulder.

And he came.

Filled her.

His fingers created craters in her hips, and his groans scattered the warmth of his breath down the middle of her back.

She wanted to say something, tell him again that she loved him. Tell him how sure she was that he was the man she wanted to be with even if the world burned and crashed to its fiery end the next morning.

He collapsed onto the bed, dragging her down with him. She lay sprawled across his chest, the heat of his body mingling with hers, and looked at the ring on her finger. Seeing something different wasn't as shocking as she'd initially thought it would be, but this was the only man she'd ever dreamed of changing that for.

She'd worn Curtis' ring everywhere, needing his love and protection in the only form he could have provided. Now, he funneled it through the man underneath her.

"Joel, the ring." She pushed up, her palms on his chest. "I think it's the ring."

He looked at her through sleepy eyelids. "Hmm?"

"When you had it redesigned, did they find anything inside? Like any small devices? A tracker? A speaker?"

"Not that the jeweler mentioned, but," he yawned, "I wouldn't be surprised if he found something and thought one of us put it in there."

"Do you think Adrian did something to it? That's why he knew all those details and where to find me?"

It took a moment for it to sink in, his post-coitus fatigue strong. "It would make sense that *that's* how he knew about Mr. Veeny."

"Joel?" Dread burned through the last vestiges of her orgasm. "Who's Mr. Veeny?"

CHAPTER 26

Ayesha's foot slipped on a step, and she lazily reached for the staircase railing before continuing. Behind her, she heard Joel's voice, and it sounded like he was either calling her name, telling her to stop, or both, but there was something wrong with her ears. There was something wrong with the world around her.

Things looked warped.

Fuzzy.

Some even looked sepia-toned with torn edges. Like she was walking through a living, breathing print photo from decades past.

“Eesh.”

Fingers pressed into her upper arm, bringing her to an abrupt stop. She'd quickly and distractedly tossed on the clothes she had on before, but the sweater was backward, cutting across the base of her neck. One bra strap was twisted, and remnants of their lovemaking dampened the middle of their panties.

“Eesh, where are you going?”

She looked up. “What?”

“Where are you going?” Joel repeated.

She didn't know, but she needed to get out of there, get some distance from him.

She wasn't upset with him—not for the reasons he probably assumed. She needed space to think, air to breathe. She needed to leave before she lashed out at him for letting her learn the truth about what he'd so expertly concealed until now. Had he tried harder to keep it from her, she would have never known. She would have been able to go to her grave, convinced she'd been a good mother once upon a time.

“Talk to me,” he said, naked except for a pair of boxer briefs. “Remember how we talked about communicating? About not shutting each other out?”

The voice that left her was someone else's. Some broken, *broken* person.

“The drawings were real.”

He slowly nodded. “Yes.”

“A real person. A man.”

“I'm sorry for not telling you.”

“Was he in the house?”

“Ayesha—”

“Okay, so he was.” She nibbled on her bottom lip, peeling the skin with her teeth until the flesh was raw and tender. “Was he in Theo's room?”

“This isn't your f—”

“Okay, so he was.”

“This wasn't your fault,” Joel said, and she didn't know why he was wasting his precious breath on useless attempts at

reassurance. “The guy who did this isn’t someone you had a chance with. He—”

“What’s ‘this’?” she asked. “What did he do to Theo?”

Joel’s chest deflated, causing his shoulders to fall. He was making himself smaller, whether intentionally or unintentionally, to prepare her for news that would scare her enough on its own.

“Ayesha—”

“*Just tell me!*” She dragged away from his hold and took a few steps back. “Don’t sugarcoat it. Don’t hide it. Tell me what I let him do to my child. You didn’t mention this ‘Mr. Veeny’ to me for a reason. It’s bad. I know it’s bad.”

He reached for her again.

She increased the space between them. “Joel, don’t touch me. Don’t comfort me.”

What had made her think she could have successfully been a widow and single mother before the age of twenty-six? What had made her believe that she would, all of a sudden, know what she was doing when Theo came along? She’d barely known what she was doing with Josiah. Initially, she’d even tried to refuse the money the guys had sent her directly after first refusing to access the trust Curtis had set up—with a little boy and another one in her belly to take care of. Children her dead husband had trusted her to take care of.

Honor Curtis for once in your life.

Bring his child home.

Stupid woman.

She should have left Josiah with Curtis’ family and given Theo to Gage or Giorgio. Had she done so, they would have

been better off. None of this would have happened, and she would have spared her four-year-old from the terror he was unfairly being forced to endure.

Joel, as if he would have preferred his foot in a bear trap than reveal what he knew, exhaled and ran his fingers through his hair. “Theo told me about Mr. Veeny the night he and I had the sleepover, and I found him in the pantry,” he said. “Adrián was at the museum, and he gave me info that suggests Mr. Veeny is actually a man who goes by the name of Siriano *Lavigne*.”

“And why would Adrián do that?”

“You can answer that yourself.”

“Is that why you were upset that day? Because of your run-in with him?”

“Yes,” he confessed. “He knew about the ‘veeny’ incident, so I thought you were talking to him and lying about it.”

She stared at him. “You don’t trust me.”

“Trusting you isn’t the point.”

“Don’t do that.” She squeezed her eyelids shut and circled a hand in the air. “Answer me directly. Do you trust me?”

“Yes.”

The tears knocked again, as if she’d stopped crying in the first place. “We shouldn’t do this. Joel, adopt the boys. Raise them. They’re better off with you. Once the adoption process is complete, we’ll get an annulment.”

“No.”

“A divorce.”

He bristled. “No. Ayesha, you’re spiraling. Your head’s not in the right place. We’re not doing any of that.”

He was right about that.

She was tiptoeing on the line of delusion.

“Joel,” she balled her hands into fists, “what did this man do to my child?”

He paused. “He...terrorized him.”

“How?”

“Threatened him. Choked him.” He stretched the muscles in his neck, his top lip twitching. “Aimed a gun at him.”

Her legs gave out.

Joel tried to catch her, but he was thankfully too late. Her kneecaps hit the hard floor, and she prayed one of them fractured. She wasn’t a mother. How could she call herself a mother when she’d had no inkling about what had been happening underneath her roof? How could she call herself a mother when her little boy didn’t feel comfortable telling her about the terror he’d faced? Multiple times, if his drawings were any indication.

There were only a few moments in her life when she’d felt like she’d lost control of the steering wheel of her mind—when her mother suddenly died, when her father didn’t take her home with him, and she temporarily ended up in foster care, when she lost her aunt and her father in the same year.

Curtis’ death.

Now.

All she had left were a few threads. Anything more, and she’d snap completely.

Joel tried to help her up, but she refused his hand, so he dropped to his knees in front of her. “Ayesha, you’re punishing yourself when you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Threatened Theo, how?” she asked. “What did he tell Theo he would do to him?”

“It’s why he never said anything,” Joel explained. “Lavigne told Theo he would kill you and Josiah. Then he would kill him like he...”

He trailed off.

“Like he what?”

“I can’t.”

“Joel, I asked you not to do that.”

“And I’m telling you that you’re on the edge.”

She stared at his face, her mind fragmenting. The boys would miss her, but they loved Joel. As they grew older, they would eventually see that she’d done right by them.

“You said this person isn’t someone I could have handled,” she said. “Is this man like you and the guys?”

He nodded.

“So, he’s on a team?”

He nodded again.

“Joel, can you get me a glass of water?”

“Of course.” He stood, and on his way to the kitchen, he grabbed both sets of car keys.

He did know her well.

Too well.

Still, she had two legs. So, while he got her a glass of water, she walked right through the front door. When her foot cleared the last front step, he grabbed her again.

“Uh, where are you going?”

“I need to walk,” she said.

“Then I’ll walk with you.”

“Alone.”

“No.”

“Joel, I need space. I need room to think and breathe, and I can’t do both inside that house. Don’t...don’t take it personally. Sometimes, a woman just needs time to herself when everything’s falling the fuck apart.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose, eyes closed. “Ayesha, you asked me not to run.”

“I know.”

“And you’re running.”

“I’m not perfect.”

“Everything’s not falling apart. Baby, I promise you that it’s not.”

“See, here’s the thing,” she began. “This man terrorized my child. This man is also part of a team like yours. Adrián told you about this man. So, want to know what conclusion I came to? The reason Adrián knows who this man is, is because he’s part of Adrián’s unit. If Adrián’s unit is like yours, this man is highly skilled.” Her bottom lip trembled. “And Theo drew a picture of him in a grave next to Curtis.”

Joel scrubbed his face until his skin was mottled with splotches of red.

“This man told Theo he would kill him because he killed Curtis, right?” She tugged until he was forced to release her. “The man who terrorized my child killed his father, didn’t he? And I slept with his brother. I slept with the brother of the man who killed my husband.”

Joel, frowning, shook his head. “They’re not brothers. Their team’s nothing like ours. They’re *nothing* like us. If they were, Adrián wouldn’t have told me about Lavigne, and in what world do you think we’d tolerate a motherfucker like that in our unit? We would have killed him on day one.”

She continued to back away.

At one point, she stumbled and fell on her ass. Pain radiated through her tailbone, but she ignored it and returned to her feet while what was left of her mind shattered.

“Ayesha, I can’t let you walk away while you’re like this. I’ve never seen you like this, and you can’t possibly think I’ll let you deal with this on your own.”

“Joel, I think I killed Curtis.”

His voice changed, as if his vocal cords had gotten trapped underwater. “Sweetheart, you didn’t. How could you?”

“The second I let Adrián touch me, I practically danced on Curtis’ grave.”

“Was Adrián the first man to approach you since Curtis died? I guarantee you that he wasn’t. So, maybe there’s a reason you let yourself...feel something for Adrián. I can’t stand the man, but I’m positive he would never do anything to hurt you. Neither would Curtis. Neither will I.”

His words simultaneously made perfect sense and no sense at all.

“Where’s Theo?” she asked. “Josiah?”

“They’re at school, remember?”

She glanced over his shoulder at the large body of water that spanned one side of the property. Tears seized her throat, and she stopped short of screaming to release the agony inside her that didn’t have anywhere to go.

“I didn’t protect him,” she whispered. “I didn’t protect him. I didn’t protect him. What if he’d killed him? What if I’d walked into my baby boy’s room and...” She clutched her stomach. “Oh, God. He could have killed my baby.”

“Ayesha, you are the *best* part of me, Theo, and Josiah’s lives,” Joel said. “Babe, you’re my mornings, my evenings, my nights. You’re my thoughts,” he closed the distance between them and set her hand on his chest, “and the strength behind each beat of my fucking heart. How could one thing, that you had no control over, make you a bad mother? Do you think Josiah would say you were? Theo? Say you forgot my birthday...does that make you a bad wife?”

The rims of his eyes had turned red.

His voice was unsteady.

Professionally, she knew anxiety could get severe enough to essentially send the mind into fission. It was why she worked so hard to make sure her clients never reached this level of despair. In the absence of any diagnosed psychosis, severe anxiety could cause delusions and hallucinations, and she was not on the stable side at the moment.

“I’m going for a walk,” she said. “My head...I’m going for a walk.”

Joel stared at her, those unnaturally beautiful eyes of his piercing holes in her steadily crumbling soul. “Ayesha, can I

help you?”

“Where are Josiah and Theo?”

“At school, sweetheart.”

“I need to walk.”

“Let me—”

“By myself. I need a...give me a minute.”

She toyed with the roped strands of her hair and walked backward, heading down the driveway toward the road that looped around the giant piece of property.

Joel’s eyes followed her the entire way.

When she reached the road, she turned and started down the tree-lined road pathway. Josiah and Theo meant the world to her. They came from her body, and even before she saw their faces, she’d promised to love and protect them to the best of her ability. Yet, in the most egregious way, she’d failed them.

* * *

Cool afternoon winds chilled her nose. The road surface left indentations in her bare feet. Every so often, her heartbeat stumbled behind her sternum before returning to its muted cadence.

There had to be some sort of divine punishment for what she’d let happen to Theo. Some celestial consequence. In the few days she’d lasted in an online breastfeeding group, she’d felt like a witch in Salem in the seventeenth century after sharing that she’d given Theo infant formula. Had she

revealed this bit of information, they would have sent the Secret Service.

The stress episodes started when she was a child. When she found her mother facedown in the backyard with blue lips, she'd run for the "needle pen" her mother had told her to use and called 911. By then, it was too late.

A wasp killed her mother.

An Eastern yellowjacket.

Then her father came to stay with her and went to the funeral and cried over her mother's casket. He cried again when he had to leave because his wife didn't know she existed, and that week, she learned that her mother never knew he had a wife. Her mother had assumed he was in the military, so she'd settled for seeing him four times a year, anticipating the day he could come home for good. It was something they'd talked about often, her father coming home for good.

When her father left, they sent her to a building with other kids where good things didn't happen, like sugar cookies "*just because*" and squishy mud between her toes and her mother's laugh. Then they sent her to live with a couple who didn't have children, and she'd hear them arguing when they thought she was asleep. Most of their words were muffled, except for the night when her foster mother said, "It's not the same. She didn't come from my body."

A little after that, her father found out she was in foster care and came for her. She still couldn't live with him, but she went to live with her aunt. "*Paradise*," her father had called it, and it was with its palm trees, colorful birds, and water like glass marbles. Even the air smelled different, and although her aunt's house had to hold two adults and a skinny child, there

was plenty of room when those three people genuinely loved each other.

So, she lived with her aunt.

Every month, her father came to see her.

Eventually, he stayed in Maui, and she never asked what had changed, too young and selfish to care. The dream had come true—her father came home for good.

Then, her uncle died.

Her father and aunt got sick.

In a blip, she was alone, and she never dealt with the loneliness until she blurted out to a university clinical psychology intern that she ruined things. That she ruined everything. Whatever she touched, rotted.

With the counselor's help, she overcame, and she decided she wanted to do the same for others. Slowly, she healed, so when a drop-dead gorgeous, tattooed, and dark-haired Adonis walked into the restaurant where she worked, she gave him a chance.

On her third date with Curtis, she asked him if he was married, seeing as how he had to be away so often. He told her he would like to be, one day, if she was interested. That night, they made love for the first time, and he spent so much time inside her after that, Josiah didn't come as a shock to either of them.

They got married.

Had a son.

She thought that maybe she didn't ruin everything—until her husband died. Until, in her grief, she'd sometimes forget to make Josiah's breakfast and lunch or pick him up from school.

Until she would lie in bed staring at the ceiling while Theo wailed, and she wouldn't immediately move to tend to him.

There were the days she didn't want to get out of bed and contemplated asking the guys to take the boys and leave her somewhere in the middle of a South American jungle.

Instead, they helped her.

With them, she made it, and then they brought her Joel freakin' Lattimore. With Joel came Curtis' laugh, Curtis' presence. Somehow, loving Joel brought everything back, even Curtis' voice. Loving Joel reawakened everything that died inside her when Curtis did.

"I've been gone a lot more than usual this year, and it's just you and Jojo down there," Curtis said. "I know it's hard, but how hard is it? Tell me the truth, Eesh."

Ayesha shrugged and changed positions on the bed, lying on her belly. "I mean, it's not necessarily easy, but Josiah's the most wonderful son a mother could ask for. The worst part, honestly, is not having you here. I miss you, Curtis. I miss you so much."

A soft smile pulled at his mouth, and she got the distinct feeling something was bothering him, but he'd never tell. That was Curtis—Mr. Fix It. He never wanted her to worry about anything he had the power to resolve, so if it was something he didn't think was worth sharing, she'd trust him.

"Thinking about you down there alone with him, without me," he sighed, "I don't sleep sometimes. Neither of us had a solid family foundation at the start of our lives, so when I started thinking about my future and a wife and children, I always had that worry, you

know? Will she be good to them?” A trace of emotion deepened his voice. “But I know, as long as you’re his mother, Josiah will be the happiest, smartest, and most wonderful kid in the world.”

She dabbed her fingertips at the corner of her left eye. “What if we end up with another one?”

“Another one? I did put in some work when I was down there last.” He searched her face as if, on it, he’d be able to read the secret she was holding onto until she was in his arms again.

She could already hear the happiness that would enter his voice once she told him. Plus, when he came home, the guys would have one of their longest breaks in years. He’d be there for the entire pregnancy and their future little one’s birth.

It was perfect timing.

“Eesh, if we have a million kids, I trust that you, as my wife, will be the best mother they could ever hope for.”

He’d had so much faith in her.

So much misplaced faith.

A car headed in her direction, but she didn’t look up, not that she needed to. Their property was locked down like a secret government facility.

The person parked along the side of the road, hopped out of a car she didn’t recognize, and ran up to her, grabbing her shoulders.

“Ayesha?”

She met their eyes.

“Are you okay?” Sydney asked.

“No.”

“Where are you headed?”

“My house.”

Sydney glanced at something, or someone, behind her head and nodded. “Can I take you? Come on. Let me drive you.”

“I could kill you.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

Sydney took her hand, walked to the car, and helped her in. Then she zoned out until they were in front of her former house. The house combined American and Scandinavian architectural elements, but she loved Joel’s house more, though not because of the farmhouse vibe.

Because Joel was there.

“Come on, honey.” Sydney took her hand again. “Let’s go inside.”

They walked through the entrance, and Sydney sat her down on the floor in the sparsely furnished living room.

“Eesh, I’ll be right back, okay?”

Sydney disappeared and returned with a pair of thick, fluffy socks, ignoring her protests and slipping the socks onto her pebble-roughened feet.

“Did Larke do those faux locs?” Sydney asked, easing down onto the floor. “Faux locs, box braids, passion twists... they’re always so gorgeous on you.”

She shook her head. “Surprisingly, I got them done in Stockholm.”

“I was thinking of getting braids or something.” Sydney smoothed her silky, flat-ironed ponytail. “Would give me one less thing to worry about, especially with Thing One and Thing Two’s due date quickly approaching.”

Ayesha’s gaze fell.

Joel had mentioned that Sydney was pregnant, but she hadn’t been expecting this far along. Sydney’s light-colored sweater dress clearly displayed a sizable belly over a pair of leggings.

Sydney rubbed her stomach, her other arm braced behind her. “They’re both boys.”

“They? Both?” Ayesha’s eyes opened wide. “You’re having twins?”

“That’s why I was on my way to your place. I needed advice on how to manage two boys. You and Joel are the only two people lucky enough to be bestowed with the privilege.”

“I don’t know if I can help you with that.”

Sydney swatted the air. “I’m joking, I’m joking.”

“Joel knows.”

“I know. We talked.”

“Is that why you were on your way to the house?”

“No, I wasn’t going to see Joel. I was coming to see you.” Sydney smiled, but her eyes reflected more sorrow than joy. “I wanted to tell you how sorry I am for how I treated you the last time we spoke.”

“You already apologized.”

“I wanted to do it again. And again and again, until we were friends like we used to be.”

“Syd, we never stopped being friends. Plus, it’s the babies. They do that to you, you know? Make you irritable. When I was pregnant with Josiah, I tried dicing an avocado, but the cubes didn’t come out right. I...had a moment.”

Sydney laughed. “While I know there’s some truth to that, let’s not pretend I wasn’t a raging bitch before I got pregnant.”

Ayesha shrugged. “You were never raging.”

Sydney laughed harder.

Ayesha felt a smile try to take hold of her face.

“I miss everyone,” Sydney began. “But I miss you the most. I always appreciated the way you treated me. My parents coddled me, you know? Me and my sister. They sheltered us without realizing it was because they assumed, without them, we would fail. So failure, abandonment...it all became like a fate worse than death to me. But you, Eesh? You told me the truth every single time.”

“Selfishly.”

“How’s that?”

“I was falling for your husband.”

“Ex-husband,” Sydney corrected. “And had I gotten out of your way, he would have been happier much earlier. That night you guys walked on the beach in Malibu, I watched you from the window. I know Joel. I knew then that he was starting to feel more than friendship with you. Honestly, it scared me.”

“With how long you two were together, of course, losing him would scare you.”

“That wasn’t the only reason.” Sydney leaned forward and plucked lint from the toe of the right sock. “I knew, back then, that I was looking at the love of his life. I knew the minute he realized it, he would see that what we had was...okay. Good, at times, but too rocky to be considered successful. Marriages are challenging, yes, but if you feel like you’re in an active war zone, something’s wrong. Then I kept putting the blame on him because I was too afraid to change, but Joel is a *good* man.”

She knew he was.

A rarity of his species.

“And look how I treated him.” Sydney wrinkled her nose. “I tried that ‘princess’ shit with Dmitri. He told me that he wanted us to be in an exclusive relationship. I told him I wanted to play the field. He said ‘okay’ and walked off.”

Ayesha chuckled. “The man’s a *billionaire*, Syd. He’s not used to taking orders.”

“Oh, I know that now.”

“What happened next?”

“My desperate ass chased him—literally. It didn’t help that we were in the Caribbean. Tequila might have also been involved. I told him I was sorry, and he told me it wasn’t enough to apologize. An apology didn’t mean he would do what I wanted. Either I would agree to be with him, or we were done because he wasn’t going to share me or waste time entertaining multiple women. ‘Time is priceless, Sydney,’ is what he said. ‘We can build something together or not, but I won’t waste time playing at a relationship. I didn’t get to be as successful as I am by bullshitting.’ Eesh, the man laid ground rules.”

“Bet you got pregnant *that* night, didn’t you?”

Sydney patted her stomach. “So pregnant. Birth control didn’t stand a chance, and even when we knew I’d missed a pill, we didn’t always remember to use backup protection. After that, all he had to do was say my name, and my legs opened.”

Ayesha laughed.

The stress in her body eased.

Sydney gave her a moment before asking, “Ready to talk yet?”

She rubbed her temples, trying to massage her thoughts and memories back into place. “A man got into the Malibu house and terrorized Theo. Joel told me earlier. I’m not handling it well.”

“I mean, I go for walks sometimes to clear my head. That’s normal.”

“In the cold?”

“It’s not that cold outside, Ms. Maui, but yes. Being pregnant is hot. No one told me that.”

“Like a furnace.”

Sydney scooted closer. “Can I tell you a secret? When I found out I was pregnant, I freaked out. What if, at the end of the day, I’m just not a good person? What if I raise my child to be like me?”

Ayesha squeezed her hand. “There’s nothing wrong with you, Sydney.”

“I’m selfish.”

“Human.”

“Self-centered.”

“Human.”

“Capricious.”

“Still human,” Ayesha said. “You also have Olympic gold medals and major world championships in female boxing, inspiring a generation of future boxers. You’re a loving friend, a loving aunt. Sydney, just because you’re not good all the time doesn’t mean you’re,” Joel’s words echoed in her head, “a bad person. No one wins when we compare ourselves to perfection. Plus, you want to be better for your children. How many people have we met who’ve been straight assholes that try to justify it by saying some shit like, ‘That’s just how I am.’”

“Or, my favorite, ‘I’m just honest,’” Sydney said. “That’s my mom. She’s just ‘honest,’ but she’s never positive. It’s never just ‘Your hair’s cute, honey.’ It’s more like, ‘Sweetheart, get some bangs cut. Your hair is cute like that, *but* you should know better than to go without a side part. Something to cover that forehead you got from your grandfather. It diminishes your beauty.’”

Ayesha thought back to Gage and Tayler’s wedding. Sydney had shown up wearing bangs, but considering how that green dress had kissed Sydney’s svelte silhouette, she was certain virtually no one noticed those bangs after the first glimpse.

“Theo’s strong as hell,” Sydney added. “I’m sure this dickhead told him he’d hurt either him, you, Josiah, or all of you. Little as he is, Theo took it upon himself to protect his mama and older brother. Gosh, what a kid.”

Ayesha’s throat tightened.

“I hope my boys are like Josiah and Theo. They can fight with each other, argue, whatever. But the love Josiah has for Theo and Theo has for Josiah? I hope I can give my boys whatever they need to love each other like that. How do you do it?”

Ayesha uselessly tried to swallow her emotions; it felt like she'd been crying for weeks.

“Kids watch more than they listen. I love them the way I want them to love those who care about them.”

“You gave them the blueprint.” Sydney slowly shook her head. “You're such a good mother, always worrying about them, wanting to make sure they're happy. You never withhold your love, even if they're in trouble. The way you care about who they become? About making sure they're healthy both mind and body? Some parents say shit like, ‘You had a roof over your head and food to eat.’ Why be proud of that, only giving your kids the bare minimum when love is free?”

Ayesha, smiling, wiped the tears from her eyes.

Sydney reached forward to help. “You're a good mama, Ayesha. I hope I'm half as good.”

“You will be.”

Ayesha glanced at the door.

“He's trying to give you space,” Sydney said. “But knowing Joel, he's *prowling* right now.”

“Is that who was behind me?”

“Yeah. I called ahead to see if you guys were home, and he told me to stop you if I saw you on the road. He was on foot, so I think he followed you the whole time.”

Ayesha took another glance at the door.

Joel was right. She'd asked him not to shut her out and then turned around and did the same to him. It was what she'd done with the guys, and it was as if she hadn't learned from her mistakes. It didn't matter if the people who loved her were nearby or on a different landmass altogether—she was never alone.

Sydney patted her thigh, clumsily rose to her feet, and went to rummage through the near-empty pantry. Ayesha joined her, and they found an unopened, unexpired box of pancake mix and flipped a couple of stacks that they ate around the coffee table.

“Is Dmitri okay?” Ayesha asked. “When he was here, he looked like he might be coming down with something.”

Sydney cut a triangle piece of pancake but didn't bring it to her mouth. “Um...so, we found out that Dmitri has stage two lung cancer.”

Ayesha's fork hung mid-air. “*What?*”

“The treatments are going well,” Sydney quickly added. “I mean, he's lucky enough to be able to afford all the latest innovations for his condition, but they're still not easy on him. At first, I tried to do the whole ‘be strong for him’ thing, but I broke when I caught him crying while looking at one of the ultrasounds. So, I stopped hiding, and it didn't stop me from being strong for him. In fact, I feel stronger. I mean, there's a reason the body emotes, right? What good is bottling up what it wants us to release? Even if it's severe anxiety that's highly justified given the situation.”

Ayesha reached across the table and took her hand. “Tell me what you need.”

“Honestly, I just need you. I miss my friend.”

“Even if she’s crazy?”

“Specifically because she’s crazy. Can you imagine? Someone with nothing wrong with them? I’d shit my pants.”

They laughed.

“Ma?”

Ayesha’s head popped up. That sounded like Josiah, but Josiah was at school. How far into her delusions had she fallen that she’d yet to come out of them?

“Ma?”

She and Sydney looked at each other.

It *was* Josiah.

And it sounded like he was crying.

Suddenly, an arm wrapped around her neck. Next to her, the same happened to Sydney. At least a dozen masked men descended on the house, and if they’d come looking for her, they knew enough about either Joel or the entire group to know they couldn’t come empty-handed.

Only one person could have warned them. Only one person, who’d been following her every move, could have led them to her.

Josiah’s shadow moved down the stairs, and her heart dropped into her stomach when she saw he wasn’t alone.

A familiar-shaped object appeared to be up near the region of his precious head. Then Josiah’s face appeared, and it had been years since she’d seen him look so much like a little boy. Like he was only a year or two older than Theo.

If she followed Theo’s drawings, this short, wiry man without a cigarette in his mouth wasn’t “Mr. Veeny,” but it

didn't matter. This man had a gun to the back of her son's head and wore a smile on his face that she wanted to wipe away with a six-inch blade.

She kept her voice level. "Baby, why aren't you at school?"

He sniffed. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. Are you feeling sick?"

"I left early. I called Aunt Larke and told her I wasn't feeling well but couldn't reach you or Joel. She said Uncle Dez would come get me, but I told her I was already on the train."

"Why'd you leave early?"

"Because I wanted to come to the house to look for something. I thought I had it, but when I couldn't find it, I figured I must not have packed it. It's this bracelet I made. It's...stupid."

They'd recently agreed to let Malia visit when school was out, and she was certain the bracelet had something to do with Josiah's trip back to the house. School wouldn't be out for a few months, which meant he could have waited, but she had to remember how old he was and who the gift was for.

"What do you want?" she asked the man. "Whatever it is, I'll give it to you. Just please let him go."

The man smirked. "I don't want anything. I'm waiting."

"For what?"

"A friend. He'll be here soon."

"You mean Lavigne?"

The man's smug expression momentarily slipped.

“Did he tell you whose property you’re on? Did he tell you he sent you and your little gang to their deaths?” She motioned around. “He sent you here to confirm that this is the location he was looking for. He’s probably miles away from h—”

The man fired a shot into the air.

Josiah cried out and covered his ears.

She struggled to get to him, but the man behind her tightened his hold. Then he lowered his head and pressed his cheek against her hair.

“Olà, querida.”

Goosebumps covered her body.

Before she could process what was happening, the man with the gun to Josiah’s head made a gurgling noise, his eyes wide as crimson fluid spilled down his face.

He collapsed.

Joel’s figure emerged, yanking an axe from his skull, Joel’s dark hair matted to his forehead. Blood created outlines and patterns across his face like a Mexican wrestling mask.

She’d never seen him like this—eyes blank, body unnaturally relaxed, veins thick and visible.

A bullet pierced the window.

Joel tossed the axe, lodging it in the center of another masked person’s face. She ran to Josiah, dragged him to the floor, and tucked as much of his body beneath hers as possible.

Then, chaos erupted.

CHAPTER 27

He didn't know how to do this part.

He didn't know how to see Ayesha suffering and let her walk away. And while he understood the importance of letting her have her space, he didn't know how to fucking do this. It felt like his chest was on fire. The woman he loved, his *wife*, was hurting, and she didn't want his help.

After Sydney left with Ayesha, he returned to the house. He took a shower, but nothing changed. He checked his phone and found no missed calls or new messages. He even tried to eat but didn't make it through half of his meal. The only thing that brought him comfort was prowling through the house as if caged.

A phone rang.

He searched the house until he found Ayesha's phone in the kitchen, and he knew who was calling without looking at the screen.

"You don't listen," he answered.

"Lavigne sent men," Adrián said. "They're on the property."

He headed for the garage. "How'd they get in?"

“I don’t know, but Nick probably helped. He’s part of Omega. Calls himself ‘The Ghost.’ Annoying little shit.”

It was interesting that “Nick” had suddenly managed to disable the system to enter the property when Julien had been doing a decent job of keeping “The Ghost” out otherwise.

“Is this ‘Nick’ on the property too?” Joel asked, barreling down the long driveway.

“Nick’s not a fighter, but he’s probably close by. I’ve been following Lavigne, and from what I understand, he recruited some canaries. Fall guys. My best guess? He wanted to confirm the location and test the security.”

“How does Lavigne know where our property’s located?”

“Probably because he followed me.”

“And how do you know?”

Adrián didn’t respond.

“Delgano, how long have you been tracking my wife?”

“Technically, I started tracking Ayesha a while ago,” Adrián said. “I would only check up on her every once in a while. It didn’t become a regular thing until she arrived in Sweden. A few times, I returned to Maui to ensure she was okay, but she never saw me.”

“Is it in her ring?”

“No. That’s not where the tracker is. That’s where the microphone is. The tracker...well, in Maui, she gave blood. I hired a proxy to slip the tracker into the needle. I admit, it’s not one of my proudest moments, but I knew where Omega was at all times. I had to make sure those times weren’t near Ayesha. Lavigne managed to go undetected, which is how I

didn't know about him visiting Theo. I'll never forgive myself for that."

Joel brought the car to a stop several yards from Ayesha's house. "How do you expect me to get that out without her knowing you put what's probably a six-figure satellite-based location device inside her?"

"Not inside her. Just under the skin near the bend in her elbow. It's right underneath where she has that birthmark that looks like a teardrop. Do you know the one I'm talking about?"

"You're asking if I know my wife's body? Remind me to kill you when I'm done."

"I will put a reminder in my phone."

"If you were listening in," Joel said, the muscles in his jaw growing taut, "then you know who I am. What I do."

"I had an idea, but you don't talk about your...*career* as much as you think. Not around Ayesha. Then, I lost the ability to listen in when she changed her ring."

"Because I swapped out the tech." Joel went to the trunk and pulled out a duffel bag. "You were listening. Does that mean, before I changed the ring, you heard when we—"

"Since you're already going to kill me, yes. I listened to her moans. I'm in love with her. Did you expect me not to?" Adrián's voice dropped a few octaves. "Okay, I'm now about ten yards from the house."

Joel worked his jaw to prevent it from clenching so hard, his whole face collapsed. "How many bodies?"

"Three at the front. One at the back. Can't get a clear view of how many are inside."

He unzipped the bag and removed a karambit, a couple of Bowies, a push dagger, and an axe—all gifts from Giorgio. The man could give them each a knife a week, and it wouldn't put a dent in his collection.

“Do you have any weapons on you?” he asked.

Adrián snorted. “Always, my friend.”

“We're not friends, but you take the front. Go in quiet. I'll go around back. Wait for my signal.”

“What's your signal?”

“I'm a killer, Delgano. When I kill someone.” He ended the call and contacted Julien. “Hunter, you know they're here, don't you?”

“Yeah,” Julien said, relaxed, which meant there was no way he knew Sydney and Ayesha were inside the house. “I watched them come in. I intentionally exposed a vulnerability in order to lure ‘The Ghost,’ but Lavigne's not with this group. Should be an easy-in, easy-out. Gage and Dez are on rifles. Mike's with Giorgio.”

“Where's Giorgio?”

“Hunting.” Julien paused. “Someone else just showed up.”

“That's Adrián.” Joel headed for the house. With Dez and Gage on rifles, he wouldn't need a firearm. “Ayesha and Sydney are inside.”

“What the fuck? I don't have eyes inside, but give me a second. I'll see if I can get us audio. Wait, why the fuck is Adrián there?”

“Because he's in love with Eesh.”

“Uh...say what, now?”

“I’ll explain everything later.”

A few moments later, voices sounded in his ear, and the rest of Joel’s sanity dissolved when he heard Josiah’s voice. Josiah, who was supposed to be at school. As much as it would kill him, considering how good of a kid Josiah was, once they were finished, he was going to ground him until he was fifty.

“Is that Josiah?” Julien asked. “Why the hell isn’t he in school?”

Whoever this group was, they were indeed canaries. Only one person covered the back door, and that guy was currently laughing at something on his phone with his gun hanging at his side.

Joel walked up behind him, lodged a blade in the man’s shoulder, and took the gun as the man fell to the ground.

The man yanked off his mask with the uninjured arm. “Please don’t hurt me. I don’t mean any trouble.”

Joel pointed with the knife. “Leave.”

“Yes, sir.”

The man scrambled to his feet and ran off.

“I’ve got him,” Dez said.

He disposed of two more bodies in the entryway with the karambit and climbed the back stairs. It was another sign of amateurs—no one was on the second floor.

Not a single soul.

Ayesha’s voice floated up to him, and he wanted to kiss that viciously sweet mouth of hers until it was sore. He knew she was scared, but her voice revealed zero evidence of fear. It

was all for Josiah, and if hearing Josiah in tears caused him physical pain, he could only imagine how it affected her.

Axe swinging, he descended the stairs.

The masked man holding Ayesha whispered something in her ear, and she looked back, and it was how he knew he was crazy about her way past the figurative sense. He searched her face for what he'd seen that night at the restaurant and again as he'd watched them in front of Theo's school before approaching.

Ayesha loved Adrián.

It wasn't how she loved Curtis, and it for sure wasn't how she loved him, but her feelings for Adrián went deeper than surface level. That knowledge was only one of two things holding him back from adding Adrián to the pile of bodies that would create a small hill in a moment. The other was that the insolent fucker had gone full Judas against his own team just to help Theo.

A second man held Sydney, and he started to tell himself that Sydney was more than capable of leveling a guy who looked below her weight class, but then he noticed her belly. Her very prominent belly.

Adrián spotted him.

Although Adrián never turned his head or made eye contact, he knew Adrián saw him.

He swung the axe and lodged it in the head of the man standing before him with the nerve to hold a fucking gun to his son's head.

Gage fired a shot through the window.

Joel tossed the axe, which landed perfectly in the center of one of these asshole's faces who'd watched a motherfucker put a gun to his son's head.

Ayesha dashed for Josiah.

Adrian took out the person behind Sydney.

All hell broke loose.

Slowly, a smile spread across Joel's face.

CHAPTER 28

It was hard to tell what was happening.

Shots seemed to appear out of nowhere, so precise they didn't shatter the glass. Joel maneuvered through the havoc as if there was no way in hell one of those bullets could hit him. It was either that or he didn't care.

Ayesha needed him to care.

Adrián moved just as precisely, sinking blades into throats and stomachs, at times trading off with Joel. As she watched them, she wondered what it was like inside their minds during times like this. What made them, when mayhem erupted, switch off. Adrián, she could explain using his upbringing. When it came to Joel, it was as if this was the side of him he was born with, and his playful side had been created out of necessity to balance the two.

As quickly as it started, it was over.

Bodies littered the floor, every last one motionless. Joel and Adrián stood in the middle, scanning them, no doubt searching for signs of life. At some point, Sydney had taken refuge behind the kitchen island.

“Ma?”

Ayesha released Josiah and examined his face and clothing. “Jojo? Baby, are you okay? Were you hit? Do you feel any pain?”

Josiah shook his head. “No, no pain.”

Joel headed toward them but stopped.

He looked like someone dumped a pail of blood onto his head. Like Mike, he would avoid touching them until he was clean.

“Are you okay, Josiah?” he asked, a keen edge to his voice.

Josiah nodded. “Yeah, Dad. I’m okay.”

Joel’s gaze landed on her, and she reassured him she was unharmed with a nod of her own.

“Josiah, why aren’t you at school?” he continued. “What if something happened to you? Son, don’t you know how much I love you? How important it is to all of us that you’re safe?”

Tears filled Josiah’s eyes, and he burst into tears, mumbling apologies.

Ayesha hugged him close.

Joel’s expression changed from fearful anger to guilt, but there was no need to feel guilty. Josiah shouldn’t have been here. Although these weren’t the consequences she wanted him to reap for his actions, they were consequences nonetheless.

“Eesh?” Sydney called. “We’ll take my car and head to you and Joel’s.”

Ayesha helped Josiah to his feet and covered his face as they made their way outside. Before they exited, she looked

back over her shoulder to find Joel watching her.

“I love you,” she mouthed.

He visibly relaxed.

* * *

Ayesha lay with Josiah in his room until he fell asleep.

When Joel came home, she heard as he walked up the stairs and entered their bedroom. It would take him a minute to piece himself back together, so she kissed Josiah’s cheek and went downstairs to try to find some semblance of balance. She wasn’t expecting to find Adrián standing in the middle of her living room.

“Olá, querida.” He waved. “How are you feeling?”

“Does Joel know you’re here?” she asked.

“He invited me.” He shrugged. “To torture and kill me, I presume.”

She tried to walk but ended up running over and crashing into him. His entire frame softened, and as he sighed, he set his cheek on top of her head and returned the embrace.

“Thank you, Adrián,” she said, her voice muffled by his shirt. “Thank you for helping us help Theo.”

“It’s Theo, Ayesha. Of course, I’ll help.”

“Are you staying?”

“I suppose it’s up to...Joel?”

Usually, it would be up to them both, but Joel didn’t trust her judgment when it came to Adrián. Sometimes, she

wondered whether he actually believed she could ever cheat on him.

She released him. “There’s an entire guest suite set up in the basement. It’ll probably cause a skirmish, but I also have unopened packages of men’s clothes that should be able to fit you. I’m just now realizing that you and Joel have a similar build.”

Adrián motioned to himself. “How bad is it? I’d like to know before I see myself in a mirror.”

“Not that bad.”

Joel had looked much worse.

Where Joel had drips and streaks, Adrián had specks and smears.

She reached up and squeezed a few strands of his hair. Blood stained her fingers. “You’ll need shampoo and conditioner, but it’s not that bad. How does it affect you when you look in the mirror after an...event like this?”

“I see someone else.” He took her hand and used the inside of his shirt to wipe the blood stains from her fingers. “Someone from my past. I thought I would find redemption by doing this kind of work, saving people instead of harming them. Sometimes, I do. Then there are the days where I have to avoid the mirror.”

“What did you do before this?”

“Before this? Anything I had to do to survive.”

It was easy to touch him.

Too easy.

Touching his ear at Theo's school made the memory of that day with the oily zucchini extra vivid. Now, touching his hair reminded her of pulling carpet fibers from the strands before returning to her office. Those memories, she needed to place in a coffin.

She heard footsteps.

Then a deep, "Come here," followed, and her feet left the floor as Joel picked her up with one arm around her waist. He deposited her on the kitchen island and stood between her knees.

"Stay right here," he said. "I'm gonna go lay down with Syd in Theo's room, play in her hair, and talk all sweet to her."

She kissed him. "Still leaving?"

"Yep."

She kissed him again. "How about now?"

"Maybe."

"You invited him. Why do that if you know he's my weakness?"

"Your 'weakness' is about to become plant food if you keep playing with me." He kissed her ear. "Don't push me. You know I'm crazy about you."

She hooked her fingers behind his head.

Sighing, he stepped closer and kissed her jaw before burying his nose in the crook of her neck. He held her, caressing and squeezing as if checking to ensure she was still in front of him. He couldn't get any closer, but she tried anyway, holding him so tight, it strained her shoulders.

"Joel, I think I'm shaking."

“I’ve got you. It’s the adrenaline. That was a lot of shit to go through, even without what happened at your old place. You won’t be okay right away, but I’ve got you, baby.”

“I was scared for Josiah, for Sydney, for myself. For you.”

“For me?”

“I was afraid you’d get hurt. Promise me you’ll never die?”

He kissed her collarbone. “I promise.”

“Thank you.” She curled his hair around her fingers and stared into the distance, replaying the events that had led up to this moment. “And I’m sorry about earlier. The anxiety, shutting you out, walking off.”

“The anxiety wasn’t the hard part,” he said. “Never apologize for that. The hard part was watching in pain, but you wouldn’t let me be there for you. I felt helpless. I’m a giver, a provider, and if I could’ve given you my heart to get yours to stop hurting, it would have been yours. Yeah, you’re an anxious person. You’ve been since we met. But that wasn’t the hard part.”

“The anxiety’s not excessive?”

“I mean, yeah.”

She punched his shoulder.

He chuckled. “But it’s part of you, and I love every single part of you.”

“The news about Theo was...difficult.”

“I know, baby. I know.” He squeezed tighter. “But it wasn’t your fault. It wasn’t anybody’s fault. We’re in this together, okay? And Theo will be all right. We’ll be there for him. If he

needs therapy, we'll get him therapy. If we need to love on him a little more, that's exactly what we'll do. Maybe we can get him that iguana—”

“Then his mother will need therapy.”

Joel, still laughing, kissed her shoulder. “Like I told you, you won't be doing any of this on your own anymore, Eesh. I didn't leave even when I was your platonic boyfriend. Try getting rid of me as your oversexed, more-than-satisfied, happy-as-hell husband.”

“But my thoughts weren't platonic,” she said. “Does that make a difference?”

He heaved an exaggerated sigh. “No.”

She planted a kiss on his neck.

She'd spent so much time alone that she forgot what it felt like to be held when she was at her worst. Joel's arms weren't a cure-all, but they definitely were a cure-a lot.

A cure-nearly everything.

“I swear to God, if you walk in here shirtless and wearing a towel, I will disembowel you.”

Adrian rounded the corner. “I haven't showered yet, so I haven't had an opportunity for shirtless towel seduction. I'm waiting for the clothes.”

Joel eased back, eyeing her face. “What clothes?”

“Some from the Joel-doesn't-know-these-exist collection,” she explained. “I got carried away, but you look so damn delicious in everything you wear, I keep buying you things.”

“You're giving him my gifts?”

“They're unopened.”

“And where are these clothes?”

“Downstairs in the storage room.”

“Eesh,” his brows dipped, “there’s no storage room in the basement.”

“Remember how there used to be an empty spare room?” she asked.

“*I’ll* get them.” He kissed her forehead. “You stay your beautiful ass right here, and Christ, dude, I can *feel* you staring at my wife.”

Adrián waved a hand in apology. “It’ll take time. I don’t mean any disrespect, but you invited me over knowing I’m in love with your wife.”

“Ayesha, let me kill him.”

She shook her head. “Honestly, baby, I don’t think you want to.”

“He does,” Adrián added.

“I do,” Joel echoed.

She looked from him to Adrián.

“Don’t even *think* it,” Joel said. “Keep it far the fuck away from your imagination. I’d kill him, you, and then myself because I can’t live without you.”

A laugh burst between her lips.

She fell against him. “Oh. Oh, baby. You’re really not right in the head.”

“And you’re fully aware of this.” He cupped the back of her head, gave her a kiss that left her wet, hoarse, and breathless, and then headed for the basement stairs. Adrián

continued to stare at her with a mischievous smile until Joel said something about a tactical knife.

Then she was alone.

Zero distractions for her mind.

Needing at least one, she tossed together a couple of burrito bowls and then went upstairs to shower. By the time she finished and made her way back to the first floor, Adrián and Joel had already eaten and were sitting in the living room. Dez, Gage, Mike, and Giorgio had joined them.

“And why should we trust you?” she heard Mike ask. “Your loyalty is to your team.”

Adrián raised his hands, his palms facing outward. “It never was. Trevor and Hyeok, I’m okay with. Wesley, I tolerated. Nick and Lavigne, it’s a miracle I didn’t kill them. But I know this proposition will work. Every other team knows of you, but you were kept in the dark about them.”

“So we start with Omega,” Dez said. “Then we approach the rest. Try to recruit them.”

Gage grunted. “This shit won’t be easy.”

Ayesha went to make herself a burrito bowl and saw one sitting on the kitchen counter with an attached note.

*You better not have thought your little boyfriend made
this for you.*

Even for a second.

Only I take care of my woman.

She waved the note. “Joel, did you write this?”

He narrowed his eyes.

Grinning, she grabbed the bowl and a fork and sat next to Giorgio on the couch.

“No, it won’t be easy,” Adrián echoed. “But we can get the other teams to align with our main objective. There’s no way they’re not equally tired of Central’s bullshit.”

“Betray us, and you’re dead,” Mike warned.

Ayesha looked up just as Adrián turned his head in her direction. “I won’t betray you,” he said. A heartbeat passed, and he looked away. “But first, before we deal with any of that, you want Lavigne. I don’t think he’ll head back to Trevor and Hyeok. It’ll be a waiting game.”

“Waiting for what, exactly?” Dez asked.

Adrián looked at her again, this time with less intensity. “His original target wasn’t Ayesha, but he’s a creature of habit. He’ll pivot to her because of the emotional component.”

Joel raised a hand. “Nobody ask him what the emotional component is.”

“What’s the emotional component?” Gage asked.

“My love for Ayesha,” Adrián replied. “Even if I’ve never confirmed it, it’s obvious. Lavigne knows. I kept it hidden for her safety, but if I had my way, I’d tell the whole world.”

Joel stretched the muscles in his neck.

Gage squeezed his shoulder.

Adrián continued. “Lavigne likes to go for the heart. Ayesha has mine, so I guarantee that’s where his focus will be. Plus, she’s easier to go after than you, Wolfe.”

Ayesha caught Joel’s eye and blew him a kiss. Although he sneered and his brows were practically in the basement, he

stuffed the kiss in his pocket, followed by two light taps.

Gage pointed to himself. “Me?”

“You’re every team’s primary objective,” Adrián informed them. “You, Gage Wolfe, were our main target.”

“What if Gage makes things easier, cuts out the middleman?” Mike asked. “We’ll go right up to that motherfucker’s doorstep.”

Adrián shook his head. “Doesn’t matter. Lavigne’s tasted blood. Under no circumstances can he get his hands on Ayesha. Because of Curtis, then me, and now...Joel, he’s curious about her. Too curious. He won’t kill her. He might keep her, which would be worse than death.”

Ayesha tried not to let her imagination wander, but with all the stress of the day, for a moment, she lost the fight. Her brain showed her fleeting images of what could happen to her at the hands of the bastard who’d harmed her son, and then she made the mistake of looking at Joel.

He saw the fear.

Then Gage told Dez to take him outside.

“We’ve tried, several times, to get him off the team,” Adrián went on. “But Central hurt Trevor’s wife and Lee’s sister in retaliation, and I didn’t want to risk them finding out who was important to me.”

Ayesha, no longer hungry, set her bowl on the coffee table and leaned against Giorgio’s arm. She saw him look down at her through the reflection on the coffee table’s glass top, and as he turned back to the conversation, he subtly adjusted, giving her head a better angle to rest.

“Does Lavigne have any living family?” Mike asked. “Because I have questionable morals when protecting the people I love. If he puts his hands on Eesh, I’ll wipe out every member of his fucking bloodline and then go get an ice cream cone.”

“None that I know of,” Adrián said. “Trust me. I’ve checked. But let me know if you find something. I’m partial to chocolate ice cream myself.”

The front door opened, and Thandie walked in ahead of Julien, who carried a sleeping Theo. Then Mo and Ari walked in with Ty and Aleks, followed by Larke, Monroe, Tayler, Grey, Xara, and Mikey. Tayler and Larke carried covered dishes that Mike and Gage went over to help with.

Dez and Joel reentered the house.

Joel took Theo and joined Ayesha on the sofa.

Ayesha pulled Theo onto her lap, kissed his cheek, and then looked over at Joel, knowing that having everyone come over was his doing. In Maui, she rarely had the chance to see everyone. Now, it was as simple as a phone call.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

He smiled, winked, and patted the pocket where he’d tucked her kiss.

CHAPTER 29

She knew he would show up here, in the kitchen, in the middle of the night, while she poured hot chocolate into a clear glass mug.

It was why, when he rounded the corner, his olive skin and dark hair illuminated by the dim lighting, she already had a mug extended in his direction. The T-shirt and shorts hung on him like she'd expected them to, and once Joel had seen her collection of delivery boxes, he'd forgotten all about Adrián "taking" his clothes.

"You do these things, and then everyone expects me to no longer love you," Adrián said, taking the mug. "Simple things like this, querida, they do so many things to my heart. I'm trying. I promise I'm trying, but you don't make it easy."

"That's not my intent," she said.

He'd always been kind to her, and today, he helped the man she loved. By helping Joel, Josiah was upstairs asleep in his room instead of—somewhere else. Somewhere she couldn't fathom so much as thinking about.

In addition, he gave Joel the information that led them to Siriano Lavigne, bringing them one step closer to helping Theo find peace. Hot chocolate was nowhere near an adequate repayment. To him, it was probably nothing or "just business."

To her, especially when it involved the three people she loved most in the world, it was everything.

“I know that it’s just who you are,” he said. “I hate to say this, but you remind me of my mother, kind even when the world’s been unfair to her.”

“Why do you ‘hate to say’ that?”

“Because of the things I’ve done with you. The places I’ve touched you, kissed you.” He held her gaze, working his bottom lip with his teeth. “Then there are my fantasies of returning to Maui and asking you to marry me.”

Her heart gave an unexpected tug. “You wanted to marry me?”

“I love you, querida. It’s not a joke. But loving you doesn’t mean I don’t wish I could make the thoughts stop. I don’t want you to be uncomfortable around me.”

“I’m not uncomfortable around you,” she reassured him. “I feel pretty safe with you. You tease Joel, but you respect my relationship.”

“I hate him, but I don’t. It’s strange. He’s good for you, perfect for you, and I’m glad you found him, but I hate that you did. I think, secretly, we get along, but if given the chance, we’d kill each other over you.”

She looked away, exhaling to cover a nervous laugh. “Whatever. And, by the way, I’m flattered about what you said earlier, but my situation and your mother’s do not compare.”

“Seeing your mother die is trauma.”

“I forgot I told you about that.”

“Funny how that works, hmm? My pain, you remember. Yours, you forget.” He took a sip. “*Meu Deus*. My god, this is

how they make it in Brazil.”

“So, truth time,” she said. “I put myself out to learn after you made it for me. Scoured the internet. It took months before I perfected it.”

But, by then, he’d already left.

Maybe she did stare down the hallway, hoping he forgot something and would show up, even if only for a short time. Maybe she did find herself making hot chocolate, hoping she’d one day be able to tell him she’d gotten it to taste close to as good as his did.

It was possible he’d wedged himself into the lonely gap Curtis’ death had created. While he was there, he softened her pain, and when he disappeared, she was starting to realize that she’d ached for him.

Adrián smiled. “I’m realizing now that I made you hot chocolate. In *Hawaii*.”

“It was a sweet gesture. I mean, you made me multiple things. *Brigadeiros*, fried bananas. That pumpkin stew.”

“*Quibebe*. We made that together.”

“I remember.”

At least, now she did.

“But it’s neither the most delicious nor beautiful thing we’ve ever made together,” he added.

She lowered her gaze.

He groaned. “I’m sorry, Ayesha. I swear I’m working on it, but it’s been so long since I’ve had you this close to me. You don’t know how badly I want to hold you again. Kiss you. Wipe your tears.”

She'd cried about Curtis while in Adrián's arms—several times. On more than one of those occasions, he'd wiped her tears and kissed the damp trails they left behind on her cheeks.

Theo had a onesie with a Brazilian flag on the chest he brought back after a "business trip." Despite never meeting her oldest son, Adrián bought Josiah's first soccer ball. Once, she fell asleep at his place, in his bed, and Curtis' hair tie slipped from her wrist. Unbeknownst to him, she'd woken up and watched as he slipped it back on before kissing each of her fingers.

How did she forget so much?

How could she forget any details about someone who'd treated her with such tenderness?

"It's okay, Ayesha," he said. "It's okay if you don't remember. I don't mind. Honestly. Grief is powerful. I grew up staunchly Catholic, and my grief was strong enough to kill God."

She looked up into his eyes.

He smiled, his expression softening.

"I never offered my heart until I met you," he continued. "And you treasured it. Respected it. Querida, I don't want it back. Please keep it. I know it'll be safe with you. But I'll stop there. I know your husband's listening in his sleep."

She smiled and glanced at the empty staircase. "Yeah, my honey's always listening where you're concerned."

"He can trust you."

"Because he knows how much I love him." She gestured to the patio. "Want to sit?"

He nodded and followed her to the warm outdoor living space. They were out in what would be considered “the boonies” back in the States, so stars winked at them through the glass panes, the sky a clear blue-black.

“Did you know I was coming?” Adrián asked, pointing at the patio heaters.

“I had an idea. Even if you didn’t, I’d planned to sit out here for a bit.”

Memories like the ones they’d created deserved special nooks with padlocks so they could safely situate themselves in the cracks of her heart. However, she’d treated everything they’d shared like it was nothing.

Once she was seated, he took the chair on the other side of the table.

“Joel trusts me,” she said. “But I think he’s starting to trust you too.”

Adrián’s brows popped up.

“Adrián, you’re in our house. At night. And we both know he knows we’re out here right now. The fact that he’s not out here with us? That’s huge.”

“Because of how much you love him.”

She sighed.

Not even Joel knew how much.

“And he’s good friends with a human weapon,” Adrián said. “He knows I’ll remain in line.”

“Giorgio’s harmless.”

“You’ve never lied to me, querida, not as far as I know... until this very moment.”

Laughing, she blew steam from the top of her mug. He traced the glass body of his with his thumbs, eyes on her, and she'd forgotten how intense he could be.

Joel strolled into her life, and her feelings for him grew so intense, she repressed all the time she and Adrián spent together. It had seemed unusual, Adrián falling for her, but the more she recalled, the more she understood.

The more she remembered feeling.

“Ayesha, I was looking for you for a reason.” He transferred his stare to the mug. “I was hoping you would be up. I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Is it about Curtis?”

He leaned his elbows on the tabletop and bent his head, his hair falling in heavy curls and waves in front of his face.

“Yes.”

“Did you kill him?”

“I’m...responsible.”

“Adrián? Please tell me what that means?”

He looked up.

A quiet gasp snuck from her throat.

There were tears in his eyes.

Tears that made hers spill over. “Just tell me,” she whispered. “Please.”

“We were new to the whole Omega thing.” He looked over her shoulder, through the windows. “All we knew was that we were supposed to go to a location to eliminate the threat there. There was even a local team who helped. Some black flag group.”

Her throat shrunk to a third of its size.

“Lavigne, I haven’t liked him from the beginning. He’s arrogant without the skill. There’s no purpose behind most of the shit he does and,” he held up a hand as though expecting her to protest, “I know that’s saying plenty coming from me, but it made no sense to me why they thought somebody like him could play well on a team.”

Her hand shook.

He reached across and wrapped his fingers around it. “It was an old, old building.” He closed his eyes. “I can still see it, stone I could break with my fingers. We were told civilians were being held hostage inside by a pseudo-militant group.”

“Curtis and Gage’s group.”

“Yes. I know now that it’s bullshit, but we followed orders. For many of us, it was what we were trained to do, how we were chosen. It was all about how well we executed what was laid out in front of us, and that was something I did well. And everything was fine right at the beginning. Trevor, Theo’s teacher’s husband, was First-in-Command.”

Her other hand, the one he couldn’t see, gripped the seat of her chair.

“We spotted one of the group members. Trevor did, anyhow. As he was about to give the order about how to approach, Lavigne—who was on sniper duty—fired a shot.”

“Who was it?”

“Wolfe.” Adrian tapped his shoulder. “The bullet hit his upper shoulder, a clean shot straight through, but it caused him to turn around. That’s when Trevor recognized him. After that, something didn’t feel right, so he gave the order to fall back. I

remember exactly what he said: *'If that's who I think it is, they got it wrong. I would bet my life on that. Something's wrong.'*”

“But Lavigne didn't listen,” she said.

“No. He pulled himself off sniper duty and headed into the building on the opposite side. Trevor sent me after Lavigne since I was the only one fast enough, and I got there just in time to stop him from firing into the group...but not in time to stop the grenade he unclipped and tossed.”

Every muscle in his body flexed, and she knew it was to stop himself from going to her. He knew what this felt like, losing a loved one to violence. Violence took his mother's life, so she knew he felt every ache she did. As if to compensate, he held her hand a bit more firmly and swept his thumb along her knuckles.

She picked up the story. “Curtis threw himself on top of it.”

“That part, I didn't know until later.”

“What happened after?”

“The explosion caused the black flags outside to fire into the building. Eventually, it came down. Virtually everybody inside was injured, but Curtis was the only man who lost his life that day. I...” He shook his head, and the tears finally fell. “I couldn't stop him. If I'd stopped Lavigne—”

“That's not your fault.”

“Ayesha, I've done many things I'm not proud of, but for once in my life, I felt like I had a chance to come close to righting my wrongs. I could help instead of harm, kill, and take. I would have dreams of my mother watching from Heaven, shaking her head in disappointment, and finally, I'd found something she could be proud of. It was the only thing

she wanted, for me to grow up and not let the world change me. I thought, once I started saving lives, I could honor her death with dignity. Then, I watched a man die.”

“But you didn’t, Adrián.” Each time her mind tried to create an image of what it had looked like, Curtis lifeless and ashen, she shook it away. “You ran to try to stop him.”

“Querida, I’m grateful to have met you, but I remember...I remember the first time we spoke about Curtis...*meu Deus*. I don’t know if I can even say it.”

“Adrián,” she switched chairs and moved to the one next to him, “you can’t blame yourself for this.”

“Ayesha, the first time we spoke about Curtis...I had you half-naked on my office floor. The *floor*, Ayesha. I’m a better man than that, and in that moment, I chose not to be, knowing what I owed you.”

“It wasn’t like you forced me there.”

Now that her memories of them were returning, after that, they’d started sleeping together at his estate.

“I remember asking myself what kind of man I was to be next to you, intimate with you,” he gripped his chest, “and in love with you when I was responsible for taking away the person you loved with everything inside you. I can’t come close to explaining the guilt I felt falling for you knowing...”

He didn’t have to finish.

She knew.

Knowing that he could have been the one to stop the pain from reaching her in the first place. Yes, if there’d been no explosion, there would have never been Adrián and Ayesha, but he could have lived with that.

She wrapped her arms around him, leaned against his side, rested her head on his arm, and cried with him. He'd been carrying the weight of guilt for years; one night wouldn't do much to change anything. All of a sudden, however, she needed Joel. She needed to be close to him and wrapped in him, his heartbeat against the pain in her chest.

Slowly, Adrián's agony abated.

She ran inside for tissues, set the box on the table in front of them, and held him again. It was a stretch, but she hoped he and the guys grew friendly enough for him to consider staying close to them. These guys, this *family*, could work miracles when it came to nurturing hurt this deep.

"Ah, querida." He sniffed. "I didn't mean for you to see me like this."

She brushed his sleeve with her lips. "I like you like this. Emotions humanize you guys, you know? One day, maybe I'll get something out of Giorgio."

"I can't even imagine that."

Giorgio had a significant amount of trauma, but he was making progress. Considering what he'd been before, it could be argued that he was making strides, blood gloves and all.

"Adrián Delgano..." she softly sang.

"Yes, Ayesha...what is your new last name?"

"Lattimore."

"Yes, Ayesha Lattimore?" he sang in return.

"I forgive you," she said. "I forgive you with everything in me. Lavigne, and only Lavigne, is responsible for what happened that day. Curtis knew that if he hadn't done what he did, none of the guys would have gone home, and that's just

the kind of man he was. That's the kind of courage he left in my sons. I'll always have a piece of him because I have them."

He turned to her. "You forgive me?"

"With my whole heart." She cemented the statement with a nod. "No matter what you've done in your past or why you did it, redemption isn't for people who've never fallen. And you've always treated me well. You treated my son well. You brought me food when I was hungry, oily as it was."

He softly laughed.

"You put yourself at risk to help my boys. You held me when I was lonely, and you were there when I needed closeness and comfort more than I knew at the time. Of course, I forgive you. Don't let this guilt continue to eat away at you. If you were truly responsible, there would be no tears, honey."

"Mrs. Lattimore?" Joel appeared in the patio doorway. "*I'm* honey."

She couldn't explain how it felt whenever she looked at him. There would be no leaving Maui to go "home" because home was right there with her. She wouldn't survive if he didn't walk through the door one day. Loving Joel was a magnification of what she felt for him and Curtis combined. Sometimes, looking at him was enough to take her breath away.

"Sorry, honey," she teased.

"Coming to bed anytime soon?"

Adrian stood and grabbed the mugs. "I think that's my cue."

“It doesn’t have to be.” Joel shrugged. “If you’re not done.”

Ayesha smiled.

“I think I’m good to go to bed tonight,” Adrián said. “Something tells me it’ll be the best sleep I’ve had in a while.”

“Because you got stuff off your chest?”

“No, because I got Ayesha to hold me.”

Joel glared at Adrián as he walked past him into the house, heading for the kitchen.

Ayesha sauntered over and took both his hands in hers. “Remember how you used to tease the guys?”

He frowned. “It’s not the same. You have *history* with him. Maybe I’m getting soft. Why’s he in my house?”

“Because he’s not a bad guy.”

“You in love with him or something?”

“Hmm,” she stepped closer, “you sound jealous. Maybe I am in love with him. Maybe me and Adrián are going to run off together.”

As they walked inside, they turned off the heaters and shut the patio doors. Then Joel kissed her as he lifted her off her feet, his lips brushing hers, a direct contrast to how firmly he gripped her ass.

“You’re leaving me?”

“Yes. How jealous are you?”

“Terribly.”

He walked them up the stairs to the bedroom, closed the door behind him, and set her on the bed.

The empty bed.

“Theo’s with Sydney,” he said, climbing over her. “He woke up and said he wanted to sleep with her to help keep the babies safe. Just when you thought you couldn’t love a kid more.”

“So we’re alone for a whole night?”

“Mm,” he dipped his head to kiss her collarbone, “hmm.”

“Before we get naked, I want to talk to you about something.”

“Me too.”

“You first.”

He climbed onto the bed and lay on his back.

She quickly slipped off her panties and straddled him.

“In the next few months, the weather’s going to be beautiful,” he said. “And we have a shit ton of land on this property. I would love to marry you during one of those months, and I was thinking an outdoor wedding might be nice. We could do a tent, fancy chairs, massive tables, bulb lights. We’re officially married, yeah, but I’m ready for our friends and family and everyone to know and be part of it. What do you think?”

She dropped a kiss on his mouth. “I love it. I’m already working out the guest list in my head.”

“Maybe Xar can start designing your wedding dress. She’s always wanted to.”

“Well...maybe. Let’s put a pin in that until after I tell you what I have to tell you.” Despite knowing how much he wanted this, she was still nervous to bring it up. “I...um...first

of all, I'm sorry I didn't talk to you before I did this, but I found out that my IUD tapped out."

He went motionless beneath her.

"I'm not pregnant," she quickly added, "but I told the gynecologist I didn't want to insert a new one until I talked to you. I'm ready, but I was wondering if you were ready for us to...start trying?"

His throat bobbed. "When?"

"Tonight."

His body answered before he did. "Eesh, are you sure?"

"One hundred percent."

"I mean," he tilted his hips, pressed into her, "really sure. I want this with you, but I don't want you to resent me. Our family, the way it is now, is more than enough. I really am happy the way things are."

"Joel," she took his hand and guided it between her legs, "yes. I'm sure."

"Were you downstairs with Adrián without panties?"

"Joel, I took them off right before I climbed on top of you. You saw me take them off."

"So no, you weren't downstairs with Adrián without panties?"

She unraveled the string on his pants, pulled them down, and nearly whimpered at how hard he was. "This thing is so beautiful."

"You're avoiding the question."

"The fact that you can even fake being jealous amazes me. You're sexy, beautiful, gorgeous, good-looking..." She licked

away the creamy droplet that spilled from his tip.

He dragged in a breath. “You only like me for my looks?”

“Yes.” She sucked on his head, and his hips lifted off the mattress. “Just your looks.”

He flipped her onto her back and brought his mouth down onto hers, and she loved the naturalness of it. The familiarity of his tongue, how hot it felt when it flicked hers, and the way he tasted. They undressed Between kisses, and then he stopped to stare at her body like he’d never before seen her naked.

“I love the way you look at me,” she said. “There’s just... *something* about it.”

He traced her belly button with the tip of his index finger. “Do you know why I look at you like I do?”

“No. Tell me.”

“I have a crush on you.”

She laughed, and her laugh transitioned into sighs as he planted kisses down the middle of her body. When his tongue touched her clit, she gasped. Quite possibly, she was the world’s luckiest woman. This man loved putting her through erotic torture with his tongue.

He licked.

She reached for a pillow and placed it over her face. They’d joked about a ball gag, but maybe she did need a ball gag.

He entered her with his fingers, and her legs fell open. The wider she opened them, the firmer his tongue became, and he treated each gasp, twitch, and shudder like a guide, flicking faster until she was riding his tongue.

“Ayesha,” he thrust his fingers harder, “move the pillow, sweetheart.”

She removed the pillow. “You know I’m a noisemaker.”

“It’s okay.” He slurped, and she saw stars. “The boys’ rooms are on the other side of the house. Now, play with your nipples for me. I want to watch.”

She massaged her breasts, cupping and squeezing, and he smiled. His fingers continued to move, but he didn’t bless her with any more flicks of his tongue.

“Want some help?” He eased back up her body, dipped his head, sucked on a nipple, and released. “How’s that?”

She squeezed the other firm bud, and he continued to suck and thrust until cries burst between her lips, no matter how hard she tried to keep them in.

“Keep going,” he said.

She massaged and pinched her nipples.

He settled his face between her legs and kept his eyes on hers as he engulfed her pussy, so deep that her lips obscured his. Like the sexy, arrogant beast he was, he winked and smiled before fucking her with his tongue.

Then he slurped, raised his head, licked his lips, and moaned, shaking his head, as he swallowed her again. She didn’t know what it was about that slurp and moan, but a climax blazed a trail straight down her middle, culminating inside her in spirals of heated pleasure.

He raised his head, sucking his lips like her orgasm had blessed him with honey. “I love that you shake,” he said. “And that was a good scream. I think it reached the basement.”

Laughing, she tossed the pillow at him.

He dodged it and entered her, so full and thick that she felt every inch of him with each strike of his hips. He was so hard, it was as if he pulsed inside her, and her body greedily sucked him in and released, only to suck him right back in again.

He moaned.

Then *she* felt *him* shake.

“It’s different when you’re trying to make a baby, isn’t it?” she asked. “As soon as you put it in, I wanted you to come. As soon as you put it in, you wanted to come.”

He dropped to his forearms, his face hovering inches from hers. “Yes. It’s exactly that.”

“Then come for me.”

He groaned but thrust harder, as if he had no choice but to follow the will of his body. She locked her legs around his waist and used her heels to pull him deeper.

“Ayesha, you know you feel damn good and still decide to play dirty?”

“Dirty how? I only said to come for me.”

“Dirty.”

“Fine, then.” She ran her hands over his arms in soothing strokes until he eased into her touch, eyes closed. Feeling extra seductive and sinister, she slipped her fingers into the soft strands at his nape, raised her head, and stuck her tongue inside his mouth.

“Mmm.” He drove deeper. “Mm-hmm.”

“Mm-hmm?” She sucked his tongue. “You like the way I kiss you?”

“I love how you kiss me.”

She kissed him again.

He gave it to her faster, harder.

“Fuck, Ayesha. One last time...are you sure? Because I’m about to come so hard, you’ll probably get pregnant tonight.”

“Joel, trust me. Trust me as your friend, your partner, and your wife. I watched you become a father to my boys and prayed I got the chance to call you my husband one day. I want that other life. I want to grow this family with you. Come for me, baby. Come hard for me. I’m ready to have your baby.”

He lodged himself deep inside her, and she took every drop his body had to offer. This was something they’d done numerous times, but tonight, knowing what end goal they’d planned made it transcendental.

Then he pressed his cheek to hers to hide his face and repeatedly cleared his throat as she hugged him tight. Despite making two grown men cry in one night, and despite how rough it started, she would always remember this day as one of the best in her life.

CHAPTER 30

Julien, whistling, dragged a rope behind him.

Giorgio walked alongside him.

Nicholas Spettro, aka “The Ghost,” gripped the rope around his neck, legs flailing as his back slid across the wooded terrain.

“Please,” Spettro choked out. “I’m sorry. Our team, it’s just like yours. We’re not bad guys. I swear.”

Julien looked behind him. “You expect me to believe someone who did what Lavigne did to Theo is ‘good’? You expect me to believe someone who took unauthorized videos of my daughter, *and who still has them on his fucking hard drive*, is good?”

Giorgio stopped.

Julien pulled the rope tighter and didn’t release it until Spettro turned a deep shade of purple. It became increasingly challenging to let go each time, but Giorgio said there was something at his hangar. Assuming it was some new, innovative blade he could use to pierce Spettro’s eyeball, he restrained himself.

“Video,” Giorgio asked. “This mean...”

Julien nearly bit through his lip. “Exactly what you think.”

“We change. No fish.”

“Fish?”

* * *

They dragged Spettro, still sputtering, into an empty, windowless room with a concrete floor. It was a room Julien had never seen at a location he'd never been to, and Giorgio drove right up to the building's exterior without needing to glance at a map.

Meat hooks hung from the ceiling.

Steel walls enclosed the interior.

It wasn't large, about the size of an average bedroom, but the meat hooks were out of place, considering nothing else suggested it had once been a butcher's shop.

He didn't know what made them believe Giorgio would only use his powers for good when Giorgio was the one who also decided what “good” meant. In the case of Nicholas Spettro, aka “The Ghost,” it was easy to play judge, jury, and executioner. However, the details got a little blurry in the case of anyone who Giorgio felt was a threat to Mo or Aleksi.

“How'd you find this place?” he asked.

“Accident.” Giorgio looked around. “Put in corner.”

Julien tossed Spettro in the corner and removed the rope. Spettro pressed his back against the wall, shaking, and he couldn't believe this coward was supposed to be his equivalent. For their last team, Central had scraped the barrel. He couldn't imagine working with people like this, but neither Spettro nor Lavigne would have lasted long.

Giorgio took a step back.

Julien pulled out his pistol, but Giorgio stopped him and retrieved an axe from a dark corner. He went to take the axe, and it took four tries for Giorgio to release it from his grip.

“Why’d you keep video of my daughter?” he asked.

Spettro shook his head. “It’s not what you think.”

Julien spun the axe.

Giorgio’s fingers clenched and released.

“Why do you have video of my daughter on your hard drive?” Julien repeated. “And why is that not all I found? Is that why you’re so loyal to Lavigne? He knows your secret?”

“I will face any jail time,” Spettro sputtered, his face and hair saturated with sweat. “I swear, I will.”

Giorgio angled his head. “Jail.”

“Look around, you piece of shit,” Julien hissed. “What fucking jail? You think we’re about to bring in twelve chairs and a judge for someone to decide your fate? Over my kid?”

Something scratched above them.

Julien looked up at the ceiling. “What’s up there?”

“Krysy,” Giorgio said.

“One more time in a language I understand?”

“Ratas.”

Now, it made sense.

Somewhat.

He still didn’t know how Giorgio had found the location or how he knew it was a place that had a rat infestation, but he at

least understood why Giorgio brought them there. He was more than familiar with what rats could do to a human body.

“Pozza.” Julien extended the axe. “Care to do the honors?”

Giorgio looked from him to Spettro, then back to the axe. “Little Thandie—”

“Is your niece.”

And Giorgio looked like he would have an aneurysm if he wasn't the one to swing the hatchet. Plus, they had more people to find. There would be more opportunities.

Julien's phone went off.

Giorgio took the axe and swung it as he stepped forward.

“Hey, babe,” Julien answered.

“I got that contact information,” Ari said. “It's only six in the group. We're lucky they kept it several levels below clandestine. Did you tell Giorgio yet?”

“Can you send it to me?”

“Already on its way.”

He ended the call and turned around, and Mo was the reason Ty and Thandie's clothes, no matter what they were stained with, came out of the laundry pristine. The fact that she could hack getting blood stains out of her and Giorgio's clothes meant Ty and Thandie's grass and baby food smears were child's play—literally.

“Thought you said you wanted to torture him?” He glanced at what used to be Spettro, and all the piece of shit needed was a horse to be an iconic character from a Washington Irving novel.

Giorgio nodded. “Da.”

“There’s something else.”

Julien extended his phone, and it was the first time in a long time he found himself looking at the Giorgio Pozza he’d first met all those years ago. The one with little to no humanization and whose name had been spoken as though “Giorgio Pozza” represented a dangerous, mythical figure.

“There are five more guys involved,” he said. “Ari and I found this on one of their systems. I don’t know how they got it, and if they have this, I’m not sure why Omega was still trying to figure out all who were part of Alpha.”

It was an image of Mo and Aleksi taken in California at her defense center when she’d offered a postpartum wellness class, considering she’d been going through the same period with Aleksi. In the photo, Mo held Aleksi braced against her forearms while she touched their foreheads together.

“This will be the most difficult part,” Julien prefaced. “We think it’s connected to Cent—”

Giorgio was already out the door.

“Pozza.” He followed. “Giorgio, we agreed to deal with Lavigne first. After Lavigne, we’ll handle this.”

“When?” Giorgio asked.

“When are we handling it, or when did I find out?”

Giorgio didn’t respond.

“I only recently found out. I haven’t told the rest of the team yet. Only me, Ari, and now you, know. It was like each guy was assigned to us. Spettro was even spying on his own guys. The only person they don’t have anything on is Joel, but they have stuff on Ayesha. Spettro knew who we were. He knew who we all were, but he never mentioned it to Omega.”

Giorgio gripped the axe tighter. Blood dripped from his hair strands onto the grass. Oddly, there was more blood on him than the weapon.

“Theo needs you,” Julien added. “Let’s get Lavigne first.”

Giorgio walked past the car.

Julien didn’t try to stop him, although he somehow knew Giorgio’s body language had given off some semblance of an “okay” or a “da.”

JULIEN

Babe? Call Gage.

I’ll contact Interpol.

CHAPTER 31

Trevor sat up in bed.

Someone had knocked.

No one knocked.

Not here.

“Love,” he kissed his wife’s neck, “cover up. I’ll be right back.”

She grumbled a response and haphazardly covered her naked breasts with the bedspread. They were still at the house in Sweden, but tonight, he’d been unable to go an entire night without her. On other assignments with her across the globe, he’d managed with cold showers and tight grips. With them in the same country, he would have gone feral if she’d had too much work to finish to join him.

Lee wouldn’t bother him this late.

Neither would Adrián.

Nick and Lavigne knew better.

He stepped into a pair of shorts and opened the bedroom door. Just outside the entryway, standing in a beam of moonlight, was the man he’d been combing the country, trying to find, for months.

“Let me guess.” He looked down the hallway, which was lined with four additional shadows. “I’m the last man standing?”

Wolfe folded his arms over his chest. “Only four of you are left, but you’re not the last man standing. There’s the one Pozza dealt with.”

“Pozza?” Trevor slowly nodded. “That makes a whole lot more sense now.”

“Then the computer one.”

“Nick. Where’s he?”

“Dead.”

Trevor exhaled, ran his fingers through his hair, and glanced behind him. “So you knocked. You wouldn’t knock if you came here intending to kill me.”

“First of all, you know me well enough, mate, that you know I’m not here to hurt your wife,” Gage said. “And no, we would knock even if we came to kill you, but we have a proposition to make instead. We’ve already talked to Gano. Now, we need you to relay the rest of the message.”

Trevor leaned against the door paneling. “And what’s the proposition?”

* * *

“Fuck, yeah.” Jeong’s eyes darted around the room, gauze taped to the wound in his shoulder. “I’m in.”

“Honestly, I think this is the best possible outcome,” Trevor said. “Central’s been fucking us all over. Who’s to say they’ll honestly let us out of our contracts? And that’s *if* we

were able to take out Alpha. Shit, only one of them was needed to take down Wesley.”

“What about Lavigne?” Jeong asked.

Adrian rubbed his palms together. “They want his head.”

Jeong looked back and forth between him and Trevor. “Since day one, I didn’t want him on our team. We were supposed to be out doing good in the world, and they gave us Siriano Lavigne like a damn hangnail. Is that all they want? I can throw in a third cousin twice removed.”

“They also want us to help them get the other teams on board,” Trevor said.

“And you trust them?”

Trevor tapped his chest. “I trust Gage Wolfe with my life, Lee, and it’s better to be on the same side as a guy like that.”

Adrian knew the answer, but he asked anyhow. “So, what about what happened to Wesley? We’re good with that?”

He was.

Still, he decided to ask.

“Fuck Wesley,” Jeong said.

Adrian rubbed his hands on his thighs. “Okay, then. So, we’re in.”

Trevor nodded. “All right, fellas. Let’s do this.”

CHAPTER 32

Ayesha, Tayler, Xara, and Mo entered the dark warehouse space, parting a crowd of hot, yelling, and gesturing bodies. In the middle of the room, underneath a strip of bright green lighting, sat a cage.

Two men circled each other inside.

From the way it felt like she was watching them fight on a high-definition TV, Ayesha figured it was where all the money was being spent on electricity. They might as well have lit the rest of the space with glitter.

Tonight was supposed to be an attempt at normalcy, but they should've known better than leaving it up to Mo.

“How'd you find this place again?” she asked.

Mo grinned. “Word of mouth. Isn't it awesome? With everything happening lately, I figured we needed a ladies' night.”

Ayesha cocked her head to the side. Awesome wasn't the word she would have chosen, and this wasn't what she thought of when “ladies' night” came to mind, but it was definitely *interesting*. Plus, watching the two men grapple with each other did make her heart pound.

It hadn't been as difficult as they'd anticipated, sneaking out to Stockholm to the fight club that Mo had, somehow, found. They played their usual dice game to see who would be the designated sitters for the evening, and Ari and Larke sat out this round.

Xara stared at the cage where one man had the other in a headlock. "Is this turning anyone else on?" she asked.

Both men were in peak physical condition, their bodies glistening. Each move made their muscles bulge, and every grab came with a groan or a grunt.

"A little," Ayesha confessed.

They walked close enough to nearly be flicked by the fighters' sweat through the fencing. There were seats, but no one used them; the air was too charged to stay in one place.

"I signed up to fight tonight," Mo announced.

Ayesha's eyes bulged. "Mo, Giorgio's been on edge. He's been more obsessed than usual with making sure you and Aleksi are all right."

"I know, but I don't know what else to do. Something's been off with me lately. Something's missing. I feel like this might be what I need to fill that void in my life. If it's not, then it's not, but I have to try."

"You've never told me about a void."

Mo shrugged. "I don't know how to explain it. I like being a wife, specifically Giorgio Pozza's wife, and I like being a mother, but I don't know if I'm okay with being *only* those things." Mo shot her a look. "And don't psychoanalyze me. You've got a lot to deal with."

“Believe it or not, being there for you guys *helps* me deal with it.”

“Because you get to run from your own problems.”

“Precisely.”

Mo nudged her side.

“Does Giorgio know about the void?” Ayesha asked.

Mo’s shoulders moved with a sigh. “I haven’t said anything to him, but I’m sure he senses something. That’s why this can’t get back to him. Just like you, he’s got enough to deal with. I want him as happy as I can make him, not always worried about me.”

Ayesha agreed to do whatever she could to ensure their little excursion didn’t make it back to Giorgio. It wasn’t only for Mo. The assumption was that Giorgio couldn’t be “hurt,” but his hurt simply looked different from everyone else’s.

A man bumped into her right side.

When she looked up, he smiled down at her. Even in the dark, she could tell he was handsome, with a headful of wavy blond hair, thick eyebrows, and dark-brown eyes. While he didn’t have a fighter’s physique, he was in otherwise excellent shape.

“Sorry about that,” he said. “I’m Josh, by the way.” He was about to say more, but then he looked up and spotted Mo. “Hey, it’s you.”

Mo turned her head. “Yes, it’s me. And you are?”

“We met, remember?”

Mo squinted up at him until her eyes lit up with recognition. “You were with Oskar. You’re originally from...

Oregon, right?”

“Yes! Wow. Great memory.”

A wave of panic curled up Ayesha’s spine as “Josh” left her side and went to stand next to Mo. They could only *assume* Giorgio wasn’t there, and it had always been safer to err on the side of caution when it came to him. They also assumed Giorgio understood that Mo didn’t want anyone else but him. Still, it didn’t make his response to people crowding her space a particularly sane one.

Josh tapped the side of Mo’s arm with an index finger. Ayesha stared at that finger, knowing that this could be the last time it remained attached to his body if Giorgio was within a mile of the underground facility.

Although he was quiet, when she sat with him while he worked on his cars, he would try to explain a vehicle part or concept. No matter how long it took her to understand, he never got cross with her. Eventually, he started asking questions and sharing things that didn’t have to do with engines, transmissions, or catalytic converters.

At first, he would only talk about Mo and Aleksi. Then one day, in that abrupt, mish-mash way of his she’d adored for years, he asked whether there was some switch inside him that would make him wind up treating Aleksi like his “vater” had treated him.

In imperceptible ways, Giorgio reminded her of Theo. They both had brains that could harness a wealth of information, though primarily only about things they found of interest. Where Theo had high distractibility, Giorgio had a switch.

On was for kill.

Off was for *standby*.

Due to his past, that switch would guide him for the rest of his life, but he was learning that there was more to him than what he was told he would ever be. Half of that knowledge came from life itself; the remainder was scaffolding erected by the people who loved him.

Back when they first met, when he was almost totally silent and had only been eight years free from his father's terror, she'd found herself alone with him. Considering the man stayed strapped to the teeth, her first instinct had been fear, but then she'd recalled how Curtis talked about him.

“Eesh, even wounded sharks deserve to be handled with care.”

So, she casually mentioned that she'd learned to love peanut butter and jelly sandwiches in foster care. Several minutes later, at a point where she believed a conversation might never happen, he asked her a loaded question, using only one word—*why*.

She'd assumed he wanted to know why she ended up in foster care, but when she tried to explain, she realized he wanted to know why she'd told him about her past.

“Because you seem like a trustworthy guy, Giorgio Pozza.”

Giorgio's gaze narrowed on her.

Ayesha hid her fright with a bite of her sandwich.
“Do you have any experience as an older brother, by any chance, Giorgio? Can I recruit you?”

He frowned. “Re...cruit.”

“Yeah. Like...hire.”

“Like job.”

“Exactly. So, what do you say? Will you be my older brother? I mean, if you don’t have any other sibling obligations. It would be nice to have a brother like you. Between you and me, some people deserve a blade every once in a while, and there’s this shithead who keeps messing with me just because I’m a college student with a baby.”

“Name.”

“So you’ll do it? You’re my brother now?”

He scanned her face. “Da. Name.”

Since that day, he wavered between calling her “Little Ayesha” and “Little sister.” Considering her size compared to his, she technically was closer to Theo’s height from his vantage point.

“Is there a reason you remembered me so well?” Josh asked, this time nudging Mo with his elbow.

“I’m usually pretty good with names,” Mo said, eyes on the fight.

“And you’re Mo, right?”

“Yessir.”

“Where are you from? An island or something? You’ve got that whole exotic thing going on. Beautiful.”

Mo held up her left hand. “I’m married, and my husband’s crazy.”

“Oh. I’m so sorry. I didn’t realize.”

He didn't leave or step away.

The panic settled in Ayesha's chest.

The crowd noise elevated, and one of the men, the smaller of the two, now stood over his opponent. The man on the floor stared up at the ceiling, hands at his sides. Each time he tried to turn over, he rolled right back onto his back.

"Eesh, did you see where that Josh guy went?" Mo asked, looking around.

He'd been standing right next to them, and based on the level of flirting he'd been putting down, it did seem strange for him to walk off without at least trying one last time. Then again, Mo had barely given him eye contact. Maybe he'd finally gotten the hint. However, Ayesha's thoughts told her something different.

"Hey, Xara," Tayler called, "you think Mike could take that dude?"

Xara flicked her wrist. "*Pfft*. Easily. My baby is amazing. I wish y'all had seen him and Dom. Don't get me started. Gets me going just thinking about it."

"Oatmeal gets you going," Ayesha quipped.

Xara giggled. "Try mixing it in a bowl sometime. Tell me what it sounds like."

Ayesha, Mo, and Tayler groaned.

The announcer called the fight.

The smaller man thrust his arms into the air and roared, dried bits of blood on his mouth and cheek. He could barely blink, his left eye swollen to the size of a fist, and one of his fingers stuck out in a different direction than the others.

“You sure you want to do this tonight, Mo?” Ayesha asked. “Even though he won, he’s pretty messed up. Plus, Giorgio’s not about to have you come home with a busted eye and broken finger and not kill every red-blooded individual in Stockholm.”

When she didn’t respond, they looked over to find her staring at her phone.

“Guys, my fight just got canceled,” she said. “My opponent didn’t show up.”

Xara patted Mo’s stomach, which was exposed in a black cropped tank top she’d paired with a gray hoodie and black leggings. “Maybe they saw you coming. Saw all these abs, girl.”

Mo laughed, her excitement visibly dampened. “Maybe.”

While a small team cleared and cleaned the cage for the next fight, “My Songs Know What You Did in the Dark” by Fall Out Boy blasted from the speakers. The crowd hopped, yelled, and screamed the lyrics.

Fists shot up in the air.

Heads rocked and spun.

Fingers tickled Ayesha’s palm. “Olá, querida. What are you doing here? This is the last place I expected to find you.”

She took in Adrián’s shorts and sleeveless T-shirt. “Are you fighting tonight?”

“Yes. I need to let off steam.” He placed his right hand over his heart. “The love of my life loves another.”

“Oh, stop.”

He stuck out an elbow, nudged her. “Will you stay for our fight? It’s number six.”

“Yeah, I’ll stay for...wait, did you say ‘our’?”

“Obrigado, querida. Thank you.”

He tickled her palm again and walked off.

“Adrián,” she rose onto her toes and peered through the crowd, “who’s ‘our’? Adrián?”

Tayler grabbed her wrist and gave her a firm shake. “Eesh. *Ayesha*. Who is that up there?”

All three of them looked.

Xara’s jaw dropped. “Oh, my...lanta. Is that Gage?”

The blond hair, those green eyes, which were more striking underneath the strip lights, and that tall, muscular physique could belong to no one else.

Ayesha squinted at the ring. “If Gage is up there, that means—”

“*I knew it.*” Mo, brows furrowed, examined the crowd. “The Murderer of Moscow is here. The Slasher of St. Petersburg. The Killer of Krasnodar.”

“Exactly how many of those do you have?” Ayesha asked.

Xara’s head whipped around as she searched the dark facility. “Do you think they’re *all* here? At least, except for Julien and Dez.”

“So, uh, my fight’s back on,” Mo announced. “Tell Aleks that his mother loved him, and she didn’t truly want to go out this way.”

All of them, except for Tayler, peered at her phone screen.

#5 - MoJay v Das Biest

“Don’t worry.” Ayesha wrapped an arm around Mo’s waist, her chest tense with suppressed laughter. “I will tell Aleksi that his mother was a warrior. We will make a statue in your honor. Your story will be told for centuries to come.”

Xara coughed through a giggle. “The history books will speak of your name.”

Mo glared at them, the side of her mouth tugging. “Are... you...two...*laughing*? I’m about to die tonight at the hands of the Assassin of Astrakhan, and you guys are just all *ah-giggling*.”

Fully laughing now, Ayesha shook her head. “Seriously, babe, how many of those do you have in your back pocket?”

“Only one more—Slayer of Samara.” Mo tossed her head back and covered her face with both hands. “Damn it! I can’t even forfeit. I’m not certain what’ll happen up in the ring isn’t better than what’ll happen if I try to escape now.”

Tayler turned to the conversation as if suddenly aware she was a human being living on planet Earth. “Eesh, that guy with the accent that just left, was that Adrián? Larke said she met him as Ryan Martin, but he hid his accent back then. And at your place, he didn’t do much talking. Still, that was him, right?”

Ayesha released Mo’s waist.

All three pairs of eyes were suddenly on her.

Xara’s brows shot up. “Wait, *Adrián* Adrián? Fuck-buddy Adrián? What’s he doing here?”

“No offense, Eesh,” Mo began, “but what in life did you do to that man that made him stalk you to Sweden? I’ve been

going to Xara, but maybe I've been going to the wrong person for love-life advice. You see how she's got Joel all strung out on puss—”

Ayesha lightly swatted the side of Mo's arm, her face burning to the tips of her ears. Adrián had been there for all of a minute, and he barely spoke two words that evening at her house. Plus, she didn't know how Tayler heard his accent above all the commotion surrounding them.

“Yes, that was Adrián,” she said. “We're friends.”

“But it started as a friends-with-benefits type of situation back when Theo was still a baby,” Xara chimed in. When they faced her, she added, “Y'all know Mike's a gossip. But go on, Ayesha.”

Ayesha tried to wait it out with silence, but they wouldn't give up. Her back grazed the corner they'd pushed her up against.

“Some years back, Adrián and I worked in the same building,” she explained. “We talked, had lunch, and I was vulnerable at the time, so we ended up sleeping together fairly quickly. The agreement was to keep things casual, but he told me he was falling in love with me, and I,” it would be her first time admitting it out loud, “*did* have strong feelings for him. It's not like how it was with Curtis and is with Joel, but... there's something.”

Something significant.

“Is?” Mo asked. “Or was?”

She couldn't form a response.

Xara picked up the story. “And that was the last time they saw each other until she and Adrián ran into each other on Joel and Eesh's first official date. Adrián's been popping up ever

since, and the guys thought they would have to medicate Joel to stop him from killing Adrián. Seeing how he was at the house, it appears things have cooled.”

“They’ve settled our differences,” Ayesha said. “Adrián’s not a bad guy.”

In addition, she’d asked Joel not to kill him.

Xara stroked her chin. “Obviously, if he’s been up in *them guts*, he’s more of a cat person. Wish I knew someone I could set him up with to save his life.”

Ayesha’s ears turned to fire. “Why do I get the feeling you just wanted to say ‘them guts’? I swear, the minute Val steps foot off that plane, you go all grits and cornbread on us.”

“Well, *is* he a cat person?” Xara prodded. “Is he good to kitties? Does he stroke them gently? Make them purr with contentment? Does he identify with kitties, lapping at a bowl of crea—”

“Why do you guys torture me like this?”

Mo and Xara burst out laughing.

Taylor’s focus returned to the octagon.

“Going back to the previous topic,” Ayesha redirected, “Adrián’s life doesn’t need saving, not from Joel. Joel won’t hurt him. They’re...friendly now.”

“You sure about that?” Mo asked.

She mulled it over.

No, she was not.

The announcer yelled that the fight was about to start. Gage walked to the edge of the cage, searched the crowd,

winked in their direction, and then turned back to his opponent.

Tayler caressed just beneath the hollow of her throat and slowly ran the tip of her tongue along her bottom lip.

“So, Gage at least knows we’re here,” Xara said. “That was for you, right, Tay?”

“Hmm?” Tayler looked over. “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe he has a side chick here or something.”

Mo looked at the list again, laughed, and turned the phone toward Tayler.

#2 - F. T. Full v Killer Z

Tayler rolled her eyes. “Is that supposed to be ‘faithful’? God, he’s such a clown.”

They checked the rest to see whether they recognized any more names.

#3 - Chandler v Mikki

#4 - Xaras v Skh-ro

#6 - Gano v K. Gristle

Xara clutched her chest. “Xaras? That’s gotta be Mike. Get it? Xaras? *Xara’s*? Like...he’s mine? Mike’s the sweetest. Isn’t my baby the sweetest, y’all?”

The three of them took two steps away.

Xara sneered, grinning. “Haters.”

Mo tucked away her phone, and they gave all their attention to the fight.

Gage stretched the muscles in his neck and angled his head from side to side. His opponent, a man who looked like he had

at least twenty pounds on Gage but was a head shorter, hopped on his toes. Both men moved constantly, warming up their muscles.

The bell rang.

The two men orbited each other.

It was a full thirty seconds before any of their body parts connected, and it was Killer Z's gloved fist smashing into Gage's left shoulder. The crowd reacted as though they were the ones who'd taken the hit, and Ayesha caught Tayler cringe out of the corner of her eye.

Killer Z locked Gage against the cage and swung twice, but neither swing connected. Gage retaliated with a left hook to Killer Z's jaw that swung his head around and sent the other man tumbling.

Tayler clapped. "Whoo! There you go, baby!"

Mo stuck two fingers in her mouth and whistled.

Killer Z fired two kicks at Gage, but Gage dodged them and ended up behind his opponent. Then he locked his arms around Killer Z's middle and upended the shorter man with a suplex move that landed Killer Z on the back of his neck.

Tayler didn't blink.

Ayesha found it hard to breathe.

The men continued to dance around each other, punching and kicking, slamming and grappling. At one point, Killer Z had Gage in a hold that Ayesha had no idea how he got himself out of. If she'd been wrapped up like that, regardless of everything she'd learned at Book Club, that would have been the end of her. Spines weren't supposed to bend that way.

Killer Z threw a punch at Gage's cheekbone.

Gage dodged it, brought his left hand around, and seconds after his fist connected with the side of Killer Z's face, Killer Z's knees buckled, and he dropped to the mat.

Three people from Killer Z's "entourage" had to help him stand, and Ayesha was pretty sure he had no idea they were in Europe. Instantly, her thoughts went to Josiah's bruise.

A bald man wearing all black announced Gage's victory, which was followed by an eruption of cheers, roars, whistles, screams, and applause from the crowd.

Gage left the cage, walked right over to where they stood, and leaned down to brush a kiss over Tayler's lips. "What are you troublemakers doing here?" he asked.

Mo aimed an index finger at him. "How do *you* know about this place?"

"A bloke named Oskar." He wiped sweat from his forehead with a small white towel. "We met him looking for rock-climbing gyms."

"I met him looking for judo classes."

Tayler asked him to bend and pressed her thumb against a cut over his right eye. He hissed and pulled away as if he hadn't taken body and headshots only a few minutes prior without complaint.

"That stings, love."

"Do they have any medical supplies down here?" Tayler rose onto her toes, searching despite being one of the shortest people in the facility. "Any water? I can at least flush that for now until we get home. It might need stitches."

"It's the first time I've taken any hits to the face," Gage pointed out. "You could say I was otherwise distracted. I saw

your ass before I saw you. It's how I knew it was you as soon as we walked in."

Mumbling under her breath, she headed toward the edge of the crowd, dragging Gage along. Despite her hold on his wrist, his hand swallowed hers, and his swollen fingers made it appear larger than usual.

"We'll be back for Mike's fight," she yelled over her shoulder.

Ayesha rubbed Mo's arm. "You still doing okay?"

"No." The corners of Mo's mouth dropped into her chin. "I'm nervous."

"Giorgio won't hit you."

"That man can take me down without landing a single blow, and he knows it. But don't mind me. I'm working out a strategy in my head."

Aleksi was going to have one hell of an interesting upbringing with these two as parents.

The next fight, they barely paid attention to.

Tayler and Gage returned, the cut above Gage's eye patched up. Xara was the only one not completely dwarfed by his size as he squirted water into his mouth from a blue bottle.

"Where's Mike?" Xara asked.

Gage pointed, using the bottle. "In the back. He likes to meditate before his fights, get in the zone. We started fighting down here a few months after we got back from Austria. Idle hands and all that."

Mo held her phone out toward Gage. "Does Gio really expect me to fight him? And why do I think he's responsible

for my original opponent dropping out?”

“Pozza’s here? He didn’t come with us. If he’s here, he came alone.”

Ayesha thought back to Josh’s sudden disappearance just as arms wrapped around her from behind.

“Having fun?”

She smiled. “Hey, honey.”

Joel kissed her cheek, and she turned around only to be hit, head-on, by her wet, shirtless husband. Water trickled down his chest toward the waistband of his sweatpants, which were low enough to expose a peek of his shorts underneath. His hair was also damp, strands stuck to his forehead, and the fact that his hands were wrapped made her warm all over.

“You’re looking at me like you want to eat me alive,” he said, a broad grin on his face.

“Well, to be fair,” she traced the outline of the muscles in his stomach, “there *are* parts of you I’d like in my mouth.”

“Oh, yeah? And what parts are those?”

She poked the tip of her tongue against the inside of her cheek. He gripped her chin, bent, and parted her lips with his tongue.

The kiss was hard and sloppy.

He gripped her ass with one hand and pinched her nipple through her shirt with the other. She wrapped her arms around him, her palms against his lower back and her fingertips sliding into his waistband.

A thud behind them, along with the realization that they *would* end up having sex in the middle of a crowd of people,

pulled them apart. She turned around, and Joel held her against him, his hand resting on her stomach.

Mike was on the floor in the cage with his legs wrapped around Skh-ro's neck. They hadn't even seen his fight begin, and it wasn't like she and Joel had been distracted for very long, but it looked near to ending—until Mike released the hold.

Skh-ro staggered to his feet.

Mike then spun a roundhouse kick that collided with the side of Skh-ro's face, and blood-tinged spittle flew through the air.

Skh-ro gasped, groaned, and fell to his knees, but Mike helped him back up. They embraced, and Skh-ro nodded incessantly at whatever Mike said in his ear.

After the fight was called, Mike did a quick back handspring, bowed with as much flair as Theo would, and left the cage. When he spotted their group, he jogged over, squatted to loop his arms around Xara's thighs, and raised her into the air.

"Mike!" She gave him a miniature round of applause. "You were so good."

"Really?" His eyebrows lifted. "I thought you'd say I was too cocky or something. Too much showmanship."

"Nah, I love cocky Mike."

He slid her down his body a couple of inches.

"You two stay your asses right here where I can see you," Gage warned. "I drove, and there will be no fucking in my vehicle."

Mike placed Xara on her feet. "Fine, *Dad.*"

Suddenly, the crowd went pin-drop silent.

Ayesha blew air between her lips to see if it turned white. Giorgio had entered the cage, and not a single drop of warm blood remained in the underground arena.

CHAPTER 33

Mo plastered herself to one side of the cage. Giorgio watched her from the other, sitting cross-legged on the mat. She'd been all for it when Oskar had told her that there were no height, gender, or weight restrictions when signing up for the fights.

It had sounded like the perfect scenario to test how far she'd come. There was no more assassin's circuit, but she would at least be able to feel the impact of her fist against someone's stomach, jaw, or collarbone. Unfortunately, sudden death by husband wasn't what she'd had in mind.

Giorgio wore his hair a little longer these days, and the dark, damp tresses cascaded in easy waves around the sharp lines of his face. His hair *should* have softened his features, but for the first time since the underground strip club in Moscow, she feared him for reasons that had nothing to do with his dick. In here, she was his opponent, not his wife.

The announcer shuffled to the middle of the cage, knees knocking like he was trying to pick up a family of cobras from behind while wearing a blindfold. When Giorgio stood, the announcer squirmed and stepped behind her.

Giorgio flicked a glance his way.

"S-sorry," the announcer squeaked. Releasing her, he did his spiel and hurried from the cage.

Mo adjusted her top and tights. She should have done cornrows. A ponytail, Giorgio could grab, and Giorgio was a ponytail grabber. Only, in this instance, she was eighty percent sure she wouldn't come right after.

The bell rang.

Neither one of them moved.

Not even the crowd appeared to be breathing, and it made her wonder what Giorgio had done in front of these people.

“Bez.” He tossed his hair out of his eyes. “Come.”

They crossed the mat toward each other.

She threw a kick.

He pushed her leg aside, picked her up, and dropped her onto her back. Grimacing through the sting, she hopped right back up.

He went to grab her for another takedown, but at the last moment, she spun around his body. After lodging her knee against his spine, she hooked her elbow around his neck, but he reached back and flipped her over his head, dropping her onto her back, again, on the mat.

She leaped back onto her feet.

“I watch you, my Bez,” he said.

She threw a punch that he slapped away. He did the same with her second attempt. She rushed him, wrapped him up around the middle, and when she felt his muscles flex to grab her, she swept his leg, and they both dropped to the mat, her on top of him. Somewhere in the middle of their descent, he grabbed her forearms and moved them to his chest so that his weight didn't fall on her hands or wrists.

A gasp cut through the silent room.

Anyone else, at this point, she would have hit.

Elbowed.

Struck in *some* way.

It was Gio, so she rolled away and stumbled to her feet. It felt like they were fighting alone with all the cheering and jeering gone. The way Giorgio's gaze pierced hers, it felt that way.

He sat with his forearms on bent knees. "Do you hate me, my Bez?"

"Never, Gio."

"You leave. You," he gestured to her body, "have bruise when you return."

Was this why he'd done this? Was this the only way he could get her to talk to him? It wasn't that she didn't want to; she had no idea what to say. Something was wrong, but she had zero explanations, neither for the *some* nor the *thing*.

He stood.

They circled each other.

When it came to Aleksi and the physical aspects of their relationship, things were terrific. Yet, it *had* been a while since they'd been Giorgio and Mo instead of *Mm-ma* and *Dada-Papa*.

She rushed him.

He shifted, looped one arm around her waist from behind, and she braced, but the impact stung every nerve cell in her body the minute her spine met the floor.

"Shit, Gio!"

“Does this hurt, my Bez? Do you feel pain, my Bez?”

It throbbed.

But he knew it didn't hurt.

This man couldn't be mind-controlled into hurting her. Therefore, what was wrong with her that she couldn't accept having a dangerously sexy, enigmatic husband and their adorably temperamental toddler and simply be happy?

He stepped back to give her space to get up and positioned himself in the fighter's stance.

She rolled her shoulders.

He came at her, swinging, and she narrowly dodged each blow, bobbing and slapping them away. Mike's opponent, she could have handled—easily. These guys of theirs? This team? They weren't normal, and her husband was the most *unique* of them all.

She fired a front roundhouse kick.

He used both hands to stop it, forcing her leg back, and she came close to losing her footing for what felt like the hundredth time since the fight began. According to the timer, five minutes hadn't passed when the fight felt longer than her pregnancy.

Giorgio came at her again, and she went to strike, but he stepped around her. She prepared for him to toss her down, but he wrapped his elbow around her neck and one of his legs around hers and fell backward, locking her in a submission hold.

“I'm sorry, Gio.” She took a second to breathe, the hold stealing her oxygen. “I'm sorry.”

“Tell me.”

“I...can’t.”

“Why.”

“I’m...ashamed.” Tears sprung in her eyes. “This...hold is...intense.”

“Tap.” Somehow, he took the hold even tighter. “Bez, you could not lift Aleksi.”

Which hadn’t been from Book Club, but she *had* snuck off to an elite boxing gym where she’d had her ass handed to her. The minute she’d stepped back inside the house, Aleksi had toddled over with his arms raised. She’d been so sore, she wasn’t able to pick him up until the next day and couldn’t carry him for over a week.

Stars moved like snowflakes in her line of vision. While he would never let her pass out, she screamed and slapped the mat. He released her, and she turned to the side and coughed until her chest rattled.

When she could finally breathe, she looked up to find Giorgio’s hand extended. She grabbed it, and he pulled her up against him, then kissed her forehead. To her surprise, the crowd cheered and whistled.

“Why are they cheering?” she asked. “I got my ass beat.”

“You are only to put me on mat, my love.”

He released her, and as he left the cage, in all the time they’d been together, it was the first time she could say she truly had no idea what to say to him.

It wasn’t him.

It wasn’t Aleksi.

But it wasn’t *nothing*.

CHAPTER 34

Joel kissed Ayesha against the side of her neck and started off, but she grabbed his hand.

“You haven’t fought yet?” she asked.

“I’m flattered you think I’d leave the cage this unscathed,” he gestured to his body, “but no. I’m next.”

“Number six?”

“Yes.”

She closed her eyes. “*You’re K. Grizzle.*”

Of course.

K. Grizzle was short for King Grizzle, a character from one of the *Trolls* movies. The number of times they’d watched the films, until Josiah had asked to hypnotize Theo out of liking them, it should have clicked right away. Only Joel could be cute and nerve-wracking at the same time.

“Do you know who you’re fighting?”

His hand slipped from hers. “Yep. I’ll see you in a minute. Love you.”

“Love you...too,” she whispered.

Mike draped an arm around her shoulders. “I spy, with my little eye, someone nervous.”

Amusement and worry blended together, resulting in the thick, puffy laugh that left her throat.

“Eesh, even though Joel might be more on the jokester, sarcastic side, he’s a hell of a good fighter.”

“I...” She squeezed the space between her brows, bunching the skin into one giant knot. “Okay.”

“You’ve seen him fight a little.”

“Still puts me on edge.”

She’d lost too many people she loved. An instant was sometimes all it took. With love came fear. Josiah and Theo were safe at home. Yet, she constantly worried about losing them and had already come close too many times.

Adrian, shirtless and wet from his hair to his waistband, stepped inside the cage and went to one corner, hopping on the balls of his feet and shaking out his arms. His stats were announced in English, Swedish, and what sounded like Portuguese.

Next, Joel entered the cage, and goosebumps covered her skin when she heard cheers and whistles, and they weren’t only coming from their group.

Had it not been so dark, she would have scoped out the room to see how many of his fans looked thirsty enough to where she believed they might approach him. Everything was hers, from the tiny flecks of gold in his cerulean irises to the half-moon lunula on his pinky nail.

“Hold up.” Xara held up a finger. “That’s fuck-buddy up there with Joel.”

“It sure is fuck-buddy,” Mo goaded. “Eesh, isn’t that fuck-buddy?”

Now, she understood what she put Josiah through.

“There, there.” Gage, intentionally awkwardly, patted the top of her head. “Come on, now. Don’t embarrass the ankle-biter. There, there, little ankle-biter.”

“I’ll turn into a hand biter,” she warned.

The air in the warehouse space changed. Adrián looked at Joel like he’d been awaiting this moment for ages, and a look crossed Joel’s face she’d only ever seen once before—in front of Theo’s school. It was like the night Adrián spent at their place never happened.

“By the way, Eesh, Adrián was never Queirós,” Mike informed her. “His real name’s Adrián Delgano.”

She’d figured as much.

Joel and Adrián’s fight started like the others, both men in planetary orbit. Their jabs and kicks began quicker than the previous matches, with Adrián extending his long, muscular leg toward Joel’s midsection and Joel slapping it out of the way.

“Still underestimating your husband?” Mike asked.

She attempted to chew a hole through her cheek. “We’re not married yet.”

“Ayesha, you’re wearing a different ring, and inside the ring says ‘To the love of my life, my wife.’”

“I didn’t know he had it inscribed.”

She removed the ring, and Mike aimed his phone flashlight to give her a better view. There was an inscription, but it didn’t say, “To the love of my life, my wife.” However, by then, it was too late. She and Joel’s secret marriage kink had come to a slippery end.

“Per sempre tua,” Mike read. “Hey, Tay, you know a little Spanish. This is Italian. Does it sound like anything familiar?”

Gage laughed.

Tayler rolled her eyes.

“Ares knows more Spanish than Tay does,” Gage said.

“For-always-you,” Giorgio translated. “For-ever-yours.”

Ayesha slipped the ring back onto her finger and returned her attention to the fight. One-half of her mind remained on Joel in the cage. The other half created images of Joel underneath her, holding her hips, a grimace of pleasure on his face as he filled her with enough semen that it didn’t matter that some spilled out of her. It was plenty for making a baby, and ever since they’d agreed to start trying, the challenge was going more than a few hours without having sex. When the boys were at school and they had prior engagements they could break, they got especially filthy.

“Forever yours?” she asked. “Why would he put that inside a ring for his girlfriend?”

Mo and Tayler snickered. Gage and Xara shook their heads. Mike bent, draped an arm over her shoulder, and tapped the side of his head against hers.

Every day she spent with them, she saw and experienced further evidence of how long she’d known them. She, Mo, and Ari were the same age, but they’d dubbed her the little sister long before Mo and Ari came into the picture. Back then, they’d spent most of their time playfully haranguing Curtis about her and Curtis’ eight-year age difference.

“So, you like older men, Ayesha?” Julien asked. “The girl I’m interested in is the same age as you are.”

Maybe the three of us can go together to a club or something. I can legally buy alcohol now.”

Mike coughed.

Gage squelched a laugh.

Dez completely failed.

Giorgio’s expression didn’t change.

Ayesha bit down on her bottom lip and twirled Curtis’ dark, curly hair around her index finger. “Don’t let them get to you, baby. Older guys make the best dads.”

Curtis shot her a playful sneer, then returned to looking at Josiah, nestled against him on the padded floor mat, the same awe on his face from when Josiah was born seven days ago.

“Late twenties isn’t old,” he argued. “Plus, Gage isn’t even a full year younger than I am.”

“That’s enough of a gap to make you the designated clownee,” Mike justified. “And Gage has a baby face.”

Gage turned his head to the side to give them a better view of his profile, his fingers tucked beneath his chin.

“Guys, he’s a good husband,” Ayesha defended. “He helped me...pick classes...for next semest—oh, God, I can’t even get through it.”

Although Curtis rolled his eyes, he wore a massive smile, and she knew right then that life was exactly how he wanted it to be.

“Don’t worry about Joel, Eesh,” Mike said. “Then the fact that it’s your boyfriend up there he’s fighting will only help Joel beat his ass a little quicker.”

She pinched him. “Call him my boyfriend one more time.”

“Ouch.” He grabbed his arm. “Gage, make her stop.”

Gage didn’t glance their way. “Don’t look at me, mate. You deserved that one.”

Adrián rushed Joel, toppled him to the floor on his back, and landed a couple of shots against Joel’s shoulder and neck. Joel maneuvered out of the hold and onto his feet, and he didn’t look the least bit out of breath. Yet, the longer the match went on, the less Ayesha breathed.

Next to her, Mike and Gage grinned.

Giorgio’s expression *did not change*.

A few times, she couldn’t tell who hit who or who had the upper hand. Adrián trapped Joel against the cage wall, and as he went to shove his knee into Joel’s middle, Joel pushed him off. Adrián then came back, virtually flying through the air, with his left knee.

Mike leaned near Ayesha’s ear. “The problem with that move is it puts Gano within grappling range, and you don’t want to be within grappling range with Joel.”

Joel evaded the knee, hooked Adrián’s leg, and took him to the mat. He locked the leg, and she saw Adrián trying to pull out of the hold, but it was too tight. His complexion, very quickly, went from olive to red all over.

“It’s done,” Mike said.

She forced herself to breathe. “How do you know?”

Just when she thought Adrián's head would pop from his neck, he tapped.

Joel released.

Adrián fell back to the mat, his chest heaving, and there was *no way in hell* she would encourage Josiah to do this.

Without waiting for a bell, an alarm, a chime—nothing—Joel tugged off his gloves, tossed them next to where Adrián lay, and left the octagon without looking back. “TKO Remix” started playing, and while Stockholm wasn't what she'd been expecting, she was all for it.

Mike whipped a finger through the air. “And that's the match, ladies and gentlemen.”

Joel walked over and scooped her up without breaking his stride, following the others to the exit. “Don't let me find out you were worried about me going up against your little boyfriend,” he warned.

“Um...”

“Don't let it happen again.”

She grinned. “Yes, Mr. Lattimore. Anything you say, Mr. Lattimore.”

CHAPTER 35

Joel used to tell himself that his first time here was a disaster, but looking back, he realized he didn't do *that* terrible of a job with Josiah and Theo. He'd compared how he did to how Ayesha would have handled an after-school evening at the park, but she'd had more experience with their mannerisms—their *authentic* mannerisms—rather than the ones they'd shown him up to that point.

A toddler who fell asleep without issue.

An eight-year-old who always listened.

Thinking about it now, he laughed to himself and took a seat on the same bench from that day. He didn't know exactly what he expected to happen as he couldn't wrap his mind around what had happened the first time.

The man, Nikora, looked like the pictures Ayesha had of Curtis. Ayesha even told him it was one of Curtis' names, which he'd passed down to Josiah. Yet, the entire thing continued to unsettle him, years later, though not for the reason most would assume.

He'd found himself trying to empathize and put himself in Curtis' shoes, now more convinced than ever that love could be as eternal as energy. He'd tried to imagine Curtis having to

accept that he would never again feel Ayesha's skin, lips, or her arms around him.

He tried to imagine but couldn't.

Most nights, it was Ayesha on one side and Theo on the other, but the last night it was just the two of them, he woke up first. He'd watched her, asleep with the covers pulled up over her naked breasts, bronze, brown, and breathtaking.

Then, when he'd thought about how much better things became when her eyes opened, it had been impossible not to pull her close. The icing on the cake was when she felt his body and snuggled further into it. No matter what, she sought him out. She appreciated him. She loved him in a way he never knew love could exist, never mind exist for him.

He made her happy.

And he didn't have to do a thing but breathe.

That morning, he'd known he wanted to wake up to her many more times. He wanted to be by her side when silver strands blended with her dark hair and gentle lines made paths of wisdom on her face.

Occasionally, it did feel unfair to Sydney how *different* he found life with Ayesha. He'd loved Sydney with everything in him, and they had a history that would never lose its place in the timeline of their lives.

When he and Sydney married, he saw tomorrows, next weeks, and next years. He saw a repeat of the relationship they'd already had but with a legal and spiritual commitment. However, that was like planting a seed and never considering what kind of tree it would one day make.

With Ayesha, he saw years and years down the road. He saw family trips and car rides with terrible singing, while Theo

and Josiah rolled their eyes and turned up the volume on their headphones. He saw quiet evenings, ordering takeout, pillow talk, and her eyes on his as she drew back on the bed while he climbed onto the mattress, her pretending the headboard represented an obstacle she hadn't quite seen coming.

It felt unfair that every heart wouldn't know love like this. That there were people who would search and pine but never find *this*, no matter how long they lived. Those hearts still imagined what it was like, still felt the comfort of someone *good* in their dreams. Those hearts still got a glimpse, a taste.

Yet, what he had with Ayesha, he could have never envisioned. And it was no less than a tragedy that not everyone would know love like this, even for a moment as brief as a kiss.

He leaned back on the bench and stared at the empty playground. It was closed for a holiday, but in his mind, he heard the screams, shouts, and giggles. All of them, every last one, belonged to Theo.

"I don't know if you're here." He leaned forward again, unsure of what position to take to tell a dead man how much he loved his widow. "And I'm not here to talk about permission or anything like that. I know that one of the things you worried about, should anything happen to you, was if Ayesha would ever be happy again, and let me tell you...I've never wanted to keep a smile on a woman's face more."

He'd told Ayesha that he was flying back to the U.S. to tie up loose ends, but he'd needed to come here before he returned to Sweden. He'd felt compelled to come here. Curtis was the catalyst that had resulted in Ayesha being close to the team. Curtis was the reason he had an amazing wife and two incredible sons.

“I love the boys, and when I say that, I mean that they’re my sons,” he said. “Not my stepsons, not ‘Ayesha’s sons.’ They’re ours—hers, mine, and yours. With their permission, I’d like to adopt them, but it’ll be up to them if they want to take my name. I won’t force anything on them, but I wanted you to know how much I love them. As their father, I’ll make sure they’re well taken care of, and I’ll be there every step of the way to give them unforgettable childhoods, a strong moral compass, and the courage to step out into the world on their own when the time comes.”

A strong gust of wind blew.

“I do have a question, though. The decision you made to save the guys’ lives knowing that you had someone like Ayesha to come home to...how did you do that? I mean, the kind of man you had to be to make a sacrifice like that, knowing the kind of heart that waited for you back home, beat for you...” He sighed. “Curtis, you’re a noble, peaceful soul that I’ll revere for a lifetime because I know, in my heart, I couldn’t so bravely make the decision to leave them. I’m barely okay on this trip, knowing I have to be away for a couple of weeks. All I want to do these days is be with them. Then, on top of that, I have the men who are now my brothers because of you. How do you thank a man you’ll never meet who’s given you everything you’ve ever wanted?”

The air around him went from crisp to earthy with the fresh scent of pending rain. Clouds collected above the shadowy outline of the West Maui mountains. His phone buzzed in his pocket, and he smiled as he stared at the screen.

AYESHA

You’d hate me so much right now.

JOEL

Impossible.

Why's that?

AYESHA

My behavior.

So childish.

I'm even pouting.

Come baaaack.

I miss you.

JOEL

I miss you too.

And if that's the reason you're pouting, I'll allow it.

AYESHA

Three more days, right?

JOEL

Yep. Then I'll be home, and you'll run into my arms like in the movies.

AYESHA

Highly unlikely.

I'd try, but the boys would knock me the eff out of the way.

He laughed.

That they would.

Even Josiah now ran to the door when he came home.

JOEL

Does it help to know I'm experiencing the same agony?

AYESHA

A little.

Your pain does give me energy.

JOEL

Freakin' vampire.

I love you.

AYESHA

I love you too.

He set his phone beside him and filled his lungs with Maui air as the blue sky darkened and gray clouds closed in on him. Thunder sounded from somewhere far off.

“If you’re listening,” he began, “thank you, Curtis. Thank you for your bravery, not only for what you did, but also because you found a way to approach Eesh—yeah, she told me about it. I promise I’ll take care of them. I’ll love them a little more every day, and I know I’ve got big shoes to fill, but I love her. I love her. Like,” he gripped his chest, “she’s just in here. Fuck, I love that woman.”

The roar of thunder grew closer.

Lightning streaked across the sky.

He stood. “You probably have shit to do, and I’m here taking up all your time. But Curtis, you know where to find me if I start fucking up. And...find me. Send down your trident and...chuck it in my spine. I’ll never hurt them, but keep me accountable. To have the life I have and the life I’ve lived, only to end up where I am? There’s no other word for that but ‘blessing.’ Thank you, Curtis, for this blessing.”

He bowed his head, said a quick prayer, and headed for the car. As he reached for the door handle, he patted his pocket.

“Shit, my phone.”

While petitioning the sky to hold off on the rain for a few more seconds, he returned to the bench and found his phone perched on the wood.

The rain came down anyway, and he snatched up his phone before it was doused. According to Julien, because of the level of security each phone possessed, it was a pain in the ass whenever they lost or ruined one.

He turned to walk away.

However, something caught his eye.

As the rain fell, the droplets created muddy outlines in the dirt. The indentations from his shoes became ridged, water-filled craters.

Four ridged, water-filled craters.

There appeared to be a second set of footprints next to his—a set he knew, without a doubt, hadn’t been there before. And the way they were positioned, it was as though, the entire

time he'd sat on the bench, someone had been sitting in the spot next to him.

CHAPTER 36

Ayesha took several deep breaths and pressed her hands against her stomach. Val leaned back, studied her face, and searched the living room.

“Tay, she’s about to blow.”

Tayler, wearing a blush-colored bridesmaid dress, hurried over.

“I’m not,” Ayesha reassured her. “At least, I don’t think. I’m just a ball of nerves. This day came kind of fast.”

Tayler told Val she could take a makeup break and pulled up a chair. “You’re nervous about getting married to your husband?”

Ayesha laughed, but the laugh was cut short when her stomach turned. “No, it’s not that. Joel and I made pre-wedding gifts for each other, and,” she glanced at the decorative clock on the wall, “this is about when he might be opening his.”

“You’re scared he won’t like it?”

“I don’t know what I’m scared of.”

Tayler looked around. “Where’s his? Do you think it would help if we opened his?”

The toiling in her stomach eased. “That’s a good idea.”

“Everyone?” Tayler clapped her hands to gather the room’s attention. “We’re getting ready to open Joel’s pre-wedding gift from Ayesha. Gather round. Wren, can you bring that white gift bag on your way over?”

Larke’s sister brought the bag, and everyone found a seat with a viewing angle that would allow them to see Joel’s gifts.

“You and Joel make me sick, by the way,” Xara said. “Pre-wedding gifts? Can y’all be any cuter?”

Ayesha reached inside, pulled out the first gift, and studied it, head cocked to the side. It was a jar filled with sand.

“There’s a note,” Mo said. “Can I read it?”

“Skim it first,” Ayesha warned.

Mo unfolded the note, skimmed it, and then her eyes watered. “Eesh,” she began in a deep, theatrical voice. “I know, at first glance, you’ll wonder what the hell I was thinking getting you a jar of sand, but this is sand from the beach in Malibu. After we went for our walk, something told me to go back and collect sand from the path we took. I know now it’s because I wanted something tangible to remember the night my heart first started to belong to you.”

A chorus of *awws* went around the room.

Ayesha hugged the jar to her chest, starting to get emotional herself, but eager requests made her set the jar aside and pull out the next gift—a dried flower encased in glass.

“I want to read this one,” Ari said.

They passed her the note.

Ari cleared her throat and added bass to her voice. “I remember coming down that escalator and seeing Josiah’s small feet, Theo’s tinier feet, and feeling like I was...” Ari paused, choking up a little. “Like I was coming home to my family. Then I saw your face, and I knew it, Ayesha. I knew you were my future, but we were still dealing with some things, so I never gave you the flower I received, upon special request, from the White House Rose Garden, just for you. In my mind, I saw myself hugging the boys, kissing you, and placing this rose in your hand. Still, I knew I would one day give it to you, and I look forward to many more days where I look into your eyes and see home.”

More *awws* rose.

Someone passed around a box of tissues.

The third gift, a packet of fern seeds, didn’t come with a note, but it didn’t have to. She immediately picked up on that one and barely held it together as she explained how Theo’s urine had killed two ferns at the Maui house.

Next came a petite Mason jar of bone broth, a package of their favorite coffee, a stuffed iguana that was a perfect replica of Carlton, and an envelope with *Fragile, Do Not Bend* printed on the side.

She raised the flap and pulled out a photo of her and Joel in Australia at brunch the morning after Gage and Tayler’s wedding. She was staring at his phone after he’d handed it to her to look at pictures of the boys with his parents. However, while she stared at the phone, he stared at the side of her face as though he never wanted to look away.

“Gage took that,” Tayler said.

Ayesha wiped her eyes before tears fell onto the photo. On the back, in Joel's handwriting, were three words:

"Our first date."

Sniffing, she peered inside the bag.

There were three additional gifts, two envelopes, and a jewelry box, but one envelope explicitly said to open it last. So, she reached for the other.

Inside was a DNA test.

Her jaw dropped.

"What is it?" Sydney, who'd had her boys a few weeks ago, switched chairs with Tayler.

The boys were born premature and still at the hospital, so they'd let her know she could skip the wedding. Yet, she and Dmitri insisted on attending and planned to fly out right after. In the meantime, their families were with the boys, Dominik and Makari.

Ayesha started laughing so much that Sydney had to take the folder before she dropped it. The tears finally spilled from her eyes, but nothing was sorrowful about them.

"It's...Curtis' DNA." Ayesha, gasping for a breath, steadied herself with a hand on Sydney's forearm. "His and his grandmother's."

Sydney scanned the paper. "I don't understand."

"So, I never told you guys this, but Curtis' family doesn't accept Theo."

"Then fuck them," Xara spat. "Why don't they accept Theo?"

“They claim he’s not Curtis’ son.”

Xara cocked her head to the side, brow raised. “Like I said...fuck them. Our puka’s got us. He’s good.”

Ayesha smiled. “But this DNA test proves that Curtis isn’t his grandmother’s biological grandson. Okay, so there was a rumor in his family that his grandmother, as beautiful as she was, had to beat suitors off with a stick. According to a few of his great aunts, she didn’t exactly beat them all off. They believed she lied about the paternity of some of her kids because, to quote Curtis, ‘They always said the timing was off.’ Here she is, claiming that my *husband* isn’t the father of our child when she’s been keeping secrets of her own.”

Sydney flipped the paper over and laughed. “There’s a note on this one too. It says, ‘I sent them a copy, and I let them know not to fuck with you anymore, or I can do worse.’”

Ayesha wrapped her arms around her body and squeezed. She was married to Joel. She’d been married to Joel for months. Yet, she couldn’t wait to walk down the aisle to him.

Larke and Sydney switched.

While Larke opened the gift box, Ayesha laid her head on Larke’s shoulder. Inside were a pair of gold and diamond stud earrings in the shape of olive branches.

Larke handed her the box, retrieved the note that had been folded inside, parted her lips, but then snapped her mouth shut.

“Eesh?”

Larke held the note where she could see it.

Olá, querida.

I was allowed one gift.

As I write this, your husband is looking over my shoulder. I think he's making sure I don't propose.

These are the olive branches I've extended, a promise that I will never do anything to disrespect your union.

It's also a promise that, no matter what happens in my life, should love once again come my way, it will not change the fact that I will forever protect you, Josiah, and Theo.

Maybe, one day, your husband too.

I'm not there yet.

I still hate him.

Kind of.

It's strange.

I love you, querida, okay?

(He's reading)

Thank you for opening my heart.

Yours truly,

- Adrian C. Delgano

P.S. If you have any more boys, keep the name Adr

The writing cut off.

Ayesha laughed. "Yeah, let's not read that one out loud."

Larke tucked it away.

"Want me to open this last one?" Larke asked.

She nodded.

“You okay?” Larke tugged at the envelope’s seam. “All this love’s wiped you out?”

She wasn’t wiped out.

She was content.

“It’s a note,” Larke said. “It says, ‘Tayler and Xara are bringing it.’”

They all looked up.

Ayesha felt her stomach lurch.

Xara and Tayler wheeled in a painting. An incredibly realistic painting. She’d known Xara was a beast when it came to artwork, but this was probably one of the most beautiful things her gorgeous best friend had ever created.

It was a replica of a picture she owned of Curtis seated on the floor, looking up at the camera with Josiah draped over his shoulders. But, in the painting, Xara had added baby Theo securely tucked inside the cradle his father’s arms created.

No words formed.

She didn’t realize how hard she was crying until Larke pulled her close. She heard herself apologizing to Val that she would have to get her whole face redone, but Val, sniffing herself, reassured her that it didn’t matter.

Joel had made this moment perfect. Nothing could have made it more perfect. He knew her, knew them, and knew exactly what she’d needed to see, hear, and touch to make their commitment bloom in the eyes of their loved ones. Also, no matter what it was, he never excluded Curtis.

Ayesha wiped her eyes, laughing through her tears. “I freakin’ love that man.”

The room cheered.

Then they went around giving her hugs.

As she kept her composure for Larke and Val to redo her makeup, she prayed Joel loved his gifts as much as she loved hers.

* * *

“I think that’s everything.” Joel straightened his bowtie. “And I gave the rings to Giorgio this time. Cut out the middleman.”

“All set, mate?” Gage asked. “Ready to go marry your wife?”

Joel laughed. “Yeah, I’m ready.”

Eight of them headed for the tent exit, including Val’s husband, Ant, and Giorgio’s brother, Thanasis, but Giorgio stopped them.

“Lattimore,” Giorgio called, his thumb aimed at a white gift bag.

“Shit.” Joel rushed back over. “I’ve been trying so hard to concentrate on not being nervous that I can’t believe I forgot to open my pre-wedding gift.”

“Pre-wedding gift?” Mike asked. “Who here’s grateful that they’re already married so Lattimore can’t show them up at their own wedding?”

They all raised their hands.

“Whatever.”

Joel took a seat on the nearest chair, suddenly so anxious he could taste his lunch. He reached inside the bag and pulled

out a long, shiny gift box; Ayesha had numbered them in the order he was supposed to open them.

When he raised the lid, his heart gave a squeeze. Inside lay a sterling silver pen. On it, in English, were the words: “Number One Dad.”

“Shit.” He cleared his throat. “I’m not sure I’ll make it through these in one piece.”

“That’s fine,” Dez said. “We’ll put you back together in time to get you to the altar.”

Chuckling, Joel reached for the next gift. As he pulled it out, a T-shirt unfolded. The front faced the guys, and the room went pin-drop silent.

“What?” He turned it around. “What does it sa...”

Dad Mode

Loading—please wait...

Underneath was an image of a battery.

His heart stopped in his chest.

He peered into the bag and removed the last gift, another long, shiny box. When he raised the lid, a pregnancy test stared back at him.

A positive pregnancy test.

He looked from the test to the shirt and back.

“Fuck.” One warm tear fell, then another. “Fuck, man. We’re...she’s...”

He didn’t know who the first was to hug him, but all he did was put his head down. They’d talked about it. She’d assured him she wanted it. But the fact that she’d given him the test as a gift spoke volumes.

The guys squeezed words of reassurance between their congratulations. He nodded and swiped at his eyes with the side of his palm. He and Ayesha had agreed that they wouldn't call or text each other, so the first time they saw one another after opening the gifts would be as she walked down the aisle. However, it was difficult not to jog across the open green space, find her where she was, and hold her until the end of time.

He cleared his throat. "Ah. Shit. Okay. I'm...*fuck*, I'm ready. I'm ready."

Gage squeezed his shoulder. "You've come a long way, Lattimore. First, you started as the biggest pain in the ass the earth had ever seen."

Joel laughed, still wiping his eyes.

"Now, you're family, and I'm proud to call you my brother, mate."

The other guys chimed in, even Giorgio, and he nearly broke down a second time.

Ant raised a finger. "Can I ask something? I've been wanting to ask this for a while, but I didn't know how to approach the subject. Have y'all, uh, ever noticed who your wives are?"

"What do you mean?" Julien asked.

"All of you married sistahs."

Joel raised an eyebrow. "Huh?"

"Yeah. Like...*all* of you." Ant pointed to Thanasis. "Well, except you, T, but hey, you never know. You and that girl in Greece broke up a while ago, right?"

Dez, grinning, coughed into a fist. “Uh, distance turned out to be the issue there, right, T? Or was it that she wasn’t your type? I don’t remember. You’re not the one who has a thing for Black girls with ginger hair and freckles with ‘bird-sounding’ names, are you? Was that you?”

Thanasis shot him a look.

“But you see what I mean?” Ant asked.

Gage cocked his head to the side. “You’re right, mate.”

“Damn.” Mike, smiling, stroked his chin. “Well, shit.”

“You mean, none of you ever noticed before?” Ant asked. “It’s the first thing I picked up on. I mean, I’m for damn sure not knocking it. Y’all see what I’m working with.”

“Well, me and Giorgio married twins,” Julien said.

“But you didn’t meet Ari and Mo together,” Dez pointed out.

“Actually, you could argue that Eesh and I met because me and Gage used to have a sort of feud,” Joel said. “Then Giorgio ran into Mo at Gage’s place. And wasn’t it through Gage that Julien reconnected with Ari? *Damn*, Cupid.”

Gage laughed, shaking his head.

Mike’s phone went off. “That’s Mo. She said that if we’re late, she’ll tell Giorgio we hurt her feelings.”

Giorgio looked up.

They helped Joel secure the gifts and then headed to the tent opening. On the way out, and despite Joel being the slightly older one out of the two of them, Giorgio reached over and lightly ruffled his hair.

CHAPTER 37

Ayesha, elbow tucked with Gage's, waited for her cue. This wasn't her first time doing this, and she technically was already married to Joel, but neither fact made the bugs in her stomach any less active.

Some of it, she figured, was probably due to her and Joel's addition that would arrive sometime early next year. However, even though they'd already done the legal part, the *wedding* made it feel complete.

They were raising two boys together. They had a baby on the way. They lived together and had basically lived together for years. Still, after today, the world would finally, officially, see her as Joel's wife.

"Ready?" Gage asked.

She looked up at him. "I'm ready."

The curtains in front of them parted. They stepped onto a white runner, and she took several more stomach-settling breaths before looking up.

Even from the far end of the room, she saw the redness of Joel's eyes. He wiped them with the back of his hand and repeatedly raised a fist to his mouth, shifting from one foot to the other.

“He’s not staying there,” Gage whispered.

She glanced up at him. “Hmm? What do you mean?”

“Watch.”

They made it halfway down the aisle before Joel left the altar, walked up to her, cradled the back of her head, and dropped a kiss on her lips. Gage released her elbow so she could wrap her arms around Joel’s neck.

At first, their guests chuckled.

Next, they clapped.

Then the claps became applause, as if they knew what neither she nor Joel had told anyone outside of their tight-knit group.

Reluctantly, they parted.

“Wanna take it from here, mate?” Gage asked.

Without looking away from her face, Joel took both her hands into his. Rather than finish their walk down the altar, he walked backward, pulling her along. When they reached the altar, he kissed her again, each peck longer than the one before it. Just as he went to slide his tongue between her lips, the officiant cleared his throat.

They faced forward, hands joined, and didn’t let go for the entire ceremony.

Once they were announced as husband and wife, their lips met again. Their family’s and friends’ applause rose like thunder. Joel picked her up off her feet until her head was above his, and she laughed between kisses, her fingers slipping through the dark strands of his hair.

“Did you like your gifts?” he asked.

“I loved them.” She kissed his cheekbone. “What about you? Did you like yours?”

“Is this really happening?”

“Yes, and there’s one more, but the boys have that for you later.”

Joel set her on her feet, took her hand, and they headed for the exit.

“So, I was thinking about names,” he began. “And, if it’s a girl...Joelita.”

“And if it’s a boy, what, Joelito?”

“This is why we’re married. Most people would have thought Joel Jr., but no. You knew I would go with Joelito.”

She laughed as they stepped out into the sunshine. A few “congratulations” were tossed their way, but Mo had solicited Giorgio’s and Dez’s help to corral guests so they could have these few moments to themselves. Once the pictures started, it would be nonstop smiling, hugs, handshakes, and meet and greets until nighttime.

“Does it feel different?” Joel asked. “This time and your first time?”

“Ironically enough, I was pregnant both times.” She snorted. “And yes, but not in a better or worse type of way. I feel more confident going into this marriage, and,” she patted her stomach, “with a third baby on the way.”

Joel’s face flushed.

“I feel more hopeful, too,” she added. “And there’s a sort of peace. I think I took some things for granted the first time around. I didn’t fully squeeze the enjoyment out of each day with Curtis. I won’t make the same mistake with you.”

“Is that why, when I was being a little petty bitch that one time after the museum, you said what you did?” he asked. “About going to bed upset?”

“Yes. Me and Curtis didn’t fight a lot, but when we did have disagreements, we let them fall by the wayside. We’d have a verbal spat, and then he’d buy me food, and that was that. We’d also apologize, but we never *worked through* the issues. After he was gone, every single stupid argument came back, and I wish I’d told him I loved him even when we were at odds.”

They headed to the edge of the green and stood overlooking the lake.

“Eesh, Curtis knew,” he said. “The way you love isn’t subtle or subliminal. You could never again say, ‘I love you, Joel’ from today on, and I’d never feel like you didn’t...but don’t do that.”

She smiled.

Over his shoulder, she noticed his sister running toward them. Once Audrey was close enough, she screamed, jumped onto his back, and planted a loud kiss on the side of his face.

“Ugh.” Joel, trying to tamp down a grin, wiped his cheek. “Please don’t do that again.”

She gave him another kiss. “I’m so happy for you!”

“You don’t say.”

Audrey slithered from his back.

Ayesha braced herself.

Still, Joel had to reach out to steady them both when Audrey crashed into her.

“Audrey, be careful,” he warned. “And there’s no alcohol here. Who gave you tequila?”

“I haven’t been drinking. I’m just happy. This little cutie pie right here,” Audrey gave Ayesha another squeeze, “is what’s got me so happy.”

“Audrey, careful,” Joel warned again. “Eesh is precious cargo.”

Audrey released and stood next to her, and for as big as Joel’s sister’s personality could be, they were close in height, with Audrey coming up roughly a half-inch shorter.

“That was a,” Audrey bent forward, half-breathing, half-laughing, “full-on sprint I did to get over here.”

Joel’s lips twitched. “On knees that are pushing forty.”

Audrey straightened, mouth open.

“Can you wait until after we take pictures to kill him?” Ayesha asked. “The bloody tux might stand out.”

“She won’t hurt me,” Joel said. “I have you.”

“You do not,” Ayesha countered.

Audrey narrowed her gaze at him. “I’ll let you have that one because it’s your wedding day, but one is all you’ll get, little brother.”

Audrey returned to the reception, turning around at the last minute to give Joel the finger.

“She might spare me if you tell her I have a kid on the way,” he suggested.

Ayesha spotted the group and the photographer and headed toward them.

“Eesh? Maybe you didn’t hear me. She might spare me if you tell her I have a kid on the way.”

She picked up her pace.

“Eesh? Ayesha, get back here.”

They took pictures, both as a couple and with the entire team and their families. The photographer snapped poses, and Ayesha caught him snapping several candid photos. There was one she reminded herself to specifically request, of Joel and the guys standing near a thicket of trees, laughing and complaining that they didn’t know how Giorgio always ended up looking the best in his tux.

“Olà, querida.”

“Adrián! You came!” As she pulled him into a hug, she felt him sigh. Hopefully, one day, he met someone who deserved a soul as beautiful as his.

She released him.

He looked terrific in a white dress shirt, vest, slacks, and tie, all in a bluish-gray, perfectly complementing his complexion. His tattoos rose above his collar like vines, and his hair fell in thick, shiny waves and curls.

“I was invited. Of course, I came.” He looked at the group and then turned back to her, his voice low. “*A propósito, você está linda, minha querida.* You look lovely.”

“What was that?” Joel yelled across the lawn. “Eesh, what’d he just say? Not the English part.”

“Is he reading my lips? From that far?”

She shook her head and told Joel to focus on taking his photos. “Thank you, Adrián,” she said. “And I appreciate you being here.”

“It’s a perfect day for a wedding. Even the heavens are as happy for you as I am.”

“You are?”

“Definitely. Your...Joel, he’s a good guy.”

“I saw my name,” Joel yelled again.

“If any of these pictures come out bad because of you, you’ll have me to deal with,” Ayesha warned him.

Mike *oohed* and nudged Joel’s shoulder.

“A very good guy.” She studied Joel in his tux and had to tear her gaze away. “The best guy.”

“I will confess that if he were someone else, someone who I didn’t think deserved you, I would have fought harder,” Adrián said. “He might have even gone missing.”

She faked a gasp. “And ruin my happiness?”

“The way you look right now, querida,” he nibbled on his bottom lip, “if I’d seen anything less than what I see when you look at your husband, I would have gladly ruined your happiness.”

“And selfishly wormed your way back into my heart? Sounds like something Joel would say.”

He angled his head, searching her eyes.

“What?”

He shook his head. “Nothing.”

A thought popped into her head, one Joel wouldn’t like, but the photographer was wrapping up with the guys, so the timing was perfect.

“Joel, honey?” She ran over to him, hiking up her dress. “Don’t be mad.”

“I’m already mad.” He pulled her against him. “Holy fuck, you’re gorgeous. Then the way the light’s hitting you in this dress...”

The photographer snapped a photo.

“Think we’ll make cute kids?” she asked.

“For saying that, I’m taking you somewhere and ruining this dress. But first, why would I be mad?”

“Because I want to take a picture with Adrián.”

“No.”

“For him.”

“Then it’ll be the three of us.”

“You took a picture with Sydney.”

“So, you admit it was a relationship.”

“Considering everything he’s done to help us, Joel?”

“Eesh, you take a picture with him wearing a suit while you’re wearing a wedding dress, and it’ll look like a wedding picture,” he said. “And do you know what he’ll be doing with that picture? Of my wife? Fuck, no.”

She clasped her hands. “Please?”

“So you *want* him staring at your picture with his dick in his hand?”

She tugged on his tuxedo jacket. “Did you get worse? How’d you get worse? You were possessive before, but it’s getting more aggressive as the day wears on.”

“You’re wearing a wedding dress.” He locked his hands behind her back. “You married me in front of our loved ones. You’re the mother of my children. You have my third inside you right now. I’m not opposed to killing him.”

“Please?”

“Why?”

“Because I know he’d appreciate it.”

“And that’s important...why?”

“Lavigne, Joel. Then he’s been carrying around the weight of thinking he was responsible for Curtis’ death. Before I knew his team had me in their sights, he looked out for me. I want to do this for him because I know he’ll appreciate it... even if he might wind up looking at it with his dick in his hand.”

His eyes narrowed. “You’re not funny.”

“You brought it up. I never even considered it.”

“It’s what I would do.”

She laughed. “I love you, Joel Lattimore.”

“You better.” He swatted her on the butt. “One picture. If he sneezes or blinks or some shit, no do-overs.”

“Got it. No do-overs.”

She kissed him, reluctantly let him go, and headed toward Adrián. Adrián looked around as if he didn’t see her coming, but when his gaze settled on her, it didn’t shake.

“Hey, come take a picture with me,” she said.

He followed her to the trees.

Had she still been a student, she would have written her dissertation on manifestations of love for people like the guys—the importance of having a symbol of “home” outside of a physical place. In many ways, it could be argued that they loved quickly, and they definitely loved hard, but they didn’t love indiscriminately. No one easily won their hearts, yet it was a free fall into love when they found someone who made them see a clearer reason why the world was worth their blood.

With the right blueprint, she was sure even a dickhead like Lavigne could be manipulated.

Adrián snaked an arm around her waist.

She leaned against his side.

The photographer snapped.

“Obrigado, Ayesha,” Adrián whispered. “I will treasure it.”

* * *

She and Joel ate, danced, and went around receiving hugs and congratulations. Halfway through the reception, every step Ayesha took felt like she was walking on knives, so Tayler fetched her a pair of yellow Converse sneakers.

Hours later, even the Converse were beginning to tap out, so she found a quiet corner, plopped down on a folding chair, and exhaled. Joel was still chatting and laughing with guests, but she could tell even his Lithium ion social battery was nearly empty.

Jemma and Archie had Theo.

Josiah and Malia were the epitome of adolescent awkwardness at a giant Connect Four game board as part of a

series of lawn games they'd installed for the guests. Malia's crush was as palpable as Josiah's, but they were both probably confused as to how they'd gone from friends to seeing each other in a different light. A light they stared at when the other wasn't looking.

Malia's parents and grandparents moved to Maui from Papua New Guinea when Malia was younger, although her grandparents, on both sides, didn't permanently relocate until after the accident. Mo and Ari knew her family, which they'd learned when Josiah introduced her to everyone the day she and her father flew in.

No one teased him in front of his crush.

Malia was a good kid from a good family. Yet, Ayesha was in no way ready for Josiah to experience feelings outside of loving books, skateboards, and video games. Books and video games could break hearts, though only temporarily, but she had no control over who he would eventually choose to love or when it would happen.

If he did get his heart broken at some point, it was part of life. Still, it was a part she would try, like hell, to shield him from for as long as possible, especially after losing his father the way he had. Unfortunately, one day, she'd be forced to accept that she couldn't spend her life blinding him to the world and then expect to send him out into it.

She rubbed her stomach.

Now, she had a third little one to worry over.

When she first got pregnant with Josiah, she'd been more afraid than excited. She'd worried about odd things, like whether there was enough room in her slender frame for the baby to grow; whether the sip of wine she'd had at a friend's

party months before she met Curtis could still harm the baby, and whether she could physically push when the time came.

With Theo, grief cloaked most of her worries.

With this baby, she found more peace than anxiousness.

The photographer appeared in front of her. “Hi. I’m sorry. I know you’re tired, but the way you’re sitting here with the white dress and the yellow shoes gives me an amazing idea for a black and white photo. Do you mind? I just have to grab another memory card.”

Ayesha shook her head. “No, I don’t mind. Sounds like a beautiful idea.”

The photographer hurried off.

She yawned.

Joel searched the venue. When he spotted her, his gaze lingered a moment before he returned to the conversation an old family friend had roped him into.

In the middle of another yawn, something stung her in the neck. At first, she thought it was a mosquito, but the sting was too deep to belong to something that small.

This felt like a bee or a wasp.

A shadow moved over her.

Then she felt herself being lifted and placed on something cold, like a metal cart. A curtain fell on both sides, obscuring her body, and as she drifted off, she realized who this was.

CHAPTER 38

Mo peered into the tent the guys had used to prepare for the wedding and found Giorgio inside. Aleksi was asleep with his cheek pressed against his father's chest, and she didn't know how Giorgio had found a matching tux that small for their son.

"Hey, boo. I was looking for you."

He didn't look up.

"Gio?" She grabbed a folding chair and sat down in front of him. "Hey, did something happen? Why are you in here? What's wrong?"

Still, he didn't answer.

"Baby? Talk to me. Please."

"This what you want," he said. "This what you tell me."

"What do you mean?"

He gestured to her ring. "You want ring. You want Aleksi. Bez, you tell me this, from your mouth, this what you want."

"I don't understand."

"At night, when you leave, it is to fight?"

She rested a hand on his knee. "For the most part. Sometimes, I walk around the property or stand by the lake."

“Only this?”

“Yeah. Why, what...” Finally, she picked up on what he didn’t say. “Giorgio, no. No, no, no. If that’s what you...I can’t even fathom...baby, no. None of this involves another man, alien, microorganism, piece of lint...nothing.”

Not only did she not want anyone else or could see herself with anyone else, but the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons hadn’t been signed yet. Giorgio, on the loose, with the *inkling* that there might be someone else, could be classified as a nuclear weapon.

“Gio, baby, that’s not what’s wrong with me. It has nothing to do with you or Aleksi.”

He looked into her eyes. “What is wrong? You will not tell me.”

“I don’t...” Her voice trailed off. “Gio, I don’t know how.”

“Bez, say anything.”

“I mean, I don’t know what to tell you. Honestly, I just feel...empty. I think I might have had the baby blues right after Aleksi, and I’m not entirely certain they’re gone.”

“What is blue baby?”

She managed a weak smile. “Baby blues. It’s a gentler way of saying postpartum depression.”

“Depression.” He frowned. “Like...sick?”

“Yeah. I knew something was off right after I had him, but I figured it would disappear once time passed, and my hormones resettled.”

“And now?”

“Gio, I don’t know. It’s not you or Aleksi, I swear, but something’s off. I’m...not happy. I don’t remember the last time I was.”

“You want to go home?”

“Back to California? No, that’s not it. This has been going on since Cali. Moving here helped some, but...” She toyed with one of Aleksi’s unnaturally perfect barrel curls. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I have a beautiful, amazing husband and a beautiful, amazing son, and this wonderful family...and I’m not happy.”

He studied her, silent for what, in the past, would have been an awkwardly long moment, but she was married to him. This was who he was and one of the many reasons she adored him.

“Prosti, Bez,” he said.

“Sweetheart, don’t be sorry. You couldn’t have known. It’s not like I talked to you about it, and I regret that, but I didn’t want you to think it had to do with you.” She reached for his hand. “I wanted to fight because I feel hollow, and the way I saw it, I didn’t feel hollow back when I was working the circuit. But when I couldn’t even pick up my baby...”

“Bez—”

“It’s not you, Gio, and I’m sorry that I put up walls and blocked you out to the point that you had to fight me to get me to talk to you. I’m so sorry.”

Anyone else in her position would be on cloud nine, yet she couldn’t get her shit together.

“My love. If I take Aleksi, and it is only me and him for one day, what you will do?”

“If you and Aleksi were to spend the whole day together, what would I end up doing?” She thought for a moment. “Work out.”

“After.”

“If any of the girls are free, probably spend time with them.”

“They are not.”

“Maybe sit at the house and wait for you to come back, I guess?”

“Before you fight, what most do you love?”

“Other than Ari, Gage, and my folks?” She took another moment. “I don’t remember.”

“Bez,” he pressed the tip of his finger to her heart, “you are my love, you are mama, you are best friend, you are sister. Who is Bez if not these things? I have knife. I have car. I have fish—”

“What fish?”

“—these things, they are Giorgio Pozza. I am brother, I am husband, I am scary uncle, I am papa. But, my love, I am Giorgio Pozza. Forever, I will be.”

She smiled through unshed tears. “Do you have a middle name, by the way? Can’t believe I’ve never asked.”

“Da. Antonio.”

Her eyes opened wide. “Giorgio *Antonio* Pozza? And I’m only *just* learning about this? Your name’s almost as gorgeous as you are.”

“Do you understand, Moana?” he asked. “Next time, you will talk to your husband? If there is other man, not even

Wolfe and his gun will stop me.”

She kissed his palm. “I promise I’ll talk to you. And you’re like this because you know I love you. If something like that were to go down, me with another man, it’s because I’m brainwashed or something.”

He graced her with the faintest of smiles.

“I’m sorry I made you worry.”

He shrugged. “You are forgiven, always. You are my Bez. My trouble.”

Her life revolved around Giorgio and Aleksi, and after she joined the circuit, fighting was all she knew. If she were to shed each identity, the woman staring back at her would be unrecognizable.

“Want to give Aleksi to your brother and run off for a quickie?”

He frowned. “What is quickie.”

“A term you’re unfamiliar with,” she said. “Come on. Let’s go.”

They stood.

The photographer entered the tent. “Excuse me? By any chance, did you see where the bride went? I ran off to get an SD card, and when I got back, she wasn’t where I left her.”

Josiah entered behind the photographer, Malia at his side. Later, she would gush over the fact that Malia had his jacket strewn over her shoulders. They’d already teased him until he went berry red about his pink pocket square being the same color as Malia’s dress. Little by little, they witnessed Curtis and Joel’s influence on how he carried himself. How he treated others was all Ayesha.

It would make for a cute middle school story: a boy who lost his father and a girl who lost her mother *and* her leg developing a stronger friendship where the most intimate thing they would ever do was hold hands.

“Auntie Mo, have you seen Ma?” Josiah asked, and his tone made her shift gears. “Me, Malia, Dad, and Grandpa Archie are looking for her, but,” his voice shook, “nobody can find her.”

Mo told the photographer they would look for Ayesha and walked Josiah and Malia out of the tent, Giorgio behind her. They handed Aleksi off to Thanasis just as Joel walked up.

“Nobody’s seen Eesh,” he said. “I saw her. I looked right at her. But when I checked for her again, she was gone. How?”

“And someone checked the bathrooms?”

He gripped a handful of his hair. “Larke and Ari. She’s not there. She wouldn’t just go off and not tell me.”

Someone screamed.

A blood-curdling scream.

They turned toward where one of the event staff stumbled away from a car, finger shaking as they pointed. Mo raced ahead, sprinting to get to the car before Joel.

When she saw the blood smeared on the back driver’s side window, she extended a hand behind her. “Joel, let me go first.”

He shook his head, his chest moving so fast that she silently asked Giorgio to keep an eye on him.

She walked up to the window, peered inside, and gasped.

CHAPTER 39

“Josiah, go find Grandpa,” Joel said.

“But Dad—”

“Siah, I need you to listen to me right now.”

Josiah and Malia walked off.

Joel felt his chest start to cave in. “Mo, is it her? Is it her? Mo.”

Adrián appeared on his right. “I didn’t find her. I checked the perim...is that blood?”

“It’s not her,” Mo choked out. “But it’s bad. Gruesome. I don’t think she’s okay, Joel. If this guy’s like this, I don’t think she’s okay.”

He, Adrián, and Giorgio went ahead.

The face, at least what was left of it, wasn’t recognizable, but it was a male roughly seventy to eighty pounds heavier than Ayesha and a good six inches taller. The man had been stripped down to his underwear and socks, and it didn’t look as though rigor had set in yet, which meant whoever did this had only done so recently.

“Lattimore,” Adrián called. “I’ve seen this.”

“It’s him?”

“Yes, but,” Adrián looked around, “how’d he get in? Everything was locked up tight, and I would have fucking noticed him.”

Joel searched until he found the staff who’d discovered the body. She sat in the grass a few yards away, holding herself and rocking.

He kneeled in front of her. “Hey, you okay?”

“Who would do that?” She frantically shook her head and mumbled something in Swedish. “It’s evil.”

“Do you know who the guy is so we can alert his family?”

“*Ja*. We’ve worked together for ten years. Tonight, he wasn’t supposed to be here.” She shook her head again, harder. “But he showed up to help when one of our other staff had food poisoning. Lars. Lars is his name.”

“Is that Lars’ car?”

“*Ja*. The rest of the staff came together, but he was last minute, so he drove.”

Joel, doing his best to keep his composure, patted her shoulder. “Thank you. That really helps.”

“The bride is missing?”

He swallowed. “Yes.”

“Oh, goodness.”

He stood and returned to where the other guys had collected, plus Adrián. While he gave Adrián a hard time and didn’t like Ayesha treating him any kinder than a speck of dirt, it amazed him how easy it was to tell he wasn’t involved. Everything—warning them about Lavigne, looking out for Ayesha, being there today—was genuine.

“We can’t avoid the police for this one,” Julien said, keeping his voice low. “This guy has a family.”

Joel nodded. “I know.”

“From what I can tell, it’s all knife wounds, which makes sense. We would’ve picked up on a firearm. Pozza said all the wounds look like they were done with a dinner knife.”

Joel scrubbed his face. “But we can find her, right? She’s wearing her ring. That thing is tech’d the fuck out.”

“Joel—”

“But you know that. Julien, you know that. So there’s a reason we’re standing here and not headed somewhere to get her. There’s a reason. Fuck, there’s a reason.”

“The guy in the car’s missing a pinky. The tracker in Ayesha’s ring puts her on the premises.”

“But she’s not here,” Joel finished. “She’s not here, is she?”

“Gage found the finger...”

He walked off.

He would be back, but right now, he needed to walk away.

Sweden wasn’t a small country, and that was if Lavigne hadn’t already gotten far enough to be hours ahead of them. One train ride, and he could be days ahead of them.

His phone rang.

Larke’s name flashed across the screen.

“Did you find her?” he asked.

“No, but one of the guests, a Fred-something, said his rental’s missing. It has a tracking device, and he located it. It’s

still on the property.”

“Thank you, Larke.”

He ran toward the parked cars, repeating everything Larke told him. In under four minutes, they were headed toward the coordinates the man, Fred Tanner, a family friend, shared with them. According to Fred, the car wasn't moving, but that didn't mean they couldn't find Lavigne in the middle of trying to make an escape.

In the seat next to him, Gage assembled a rifle. He, Gage, Julien, and Adrián had headed for the location while Giorgio, Dez, Mike, and Mo remained behind in the event Lavigne thought about making a reappearance.

“I see it,” Julien said.

He'd barely stopped before they jumped out.

They found the green Opel Mokka SUV parked near the lakeshore, so close to their house he could run home in under a minute.

Adrián crouched and examined marks in the silt. “He dragged her into the water.”

“Because it would've been too risky to leave through the property exit,” Julien said. “Security would have had to let him through.”

“Has Lavigne ever done anything like this?” Joel asked.

Adrián looked out at the expanse of the massive lake. “Close to it. A retrieval mission we had in Burkina Faso. We had to rescue a journalist, so we used the water. Lee got the journalist out.”

“Think he'd help Lavigne?”

“Lee?” Adrián shook his head. “No, not at all. We’re not like your team, but me, Lee, and Trevor at least have a shared hatred for Lavigne. It’s Lee’s technique, but Lavigne’s copied it.”

A boat motor sounded from far off.

Gage raised the rifle and peered through the scope. “It’s him. It’s far. Can’t get a shot. He’s got Eesh in the way.”

“How does she look?” Joel asked.

“Slumped. Lifeless.”

Joel felt like his head would explode.

Adrián dragged his fingers through his hair.

“He needs her alive,” Julien said. “She might have been drugged, but he needs her alive.”

The rationale gave him little solace. Ayesha was on the shorter side, and she didn’t weigh much. Plus, she had less body fat due to Book Club, and babies changed body physiology. Lavigne could have tried to drug her, miscalculated, and killed her.

Gage lowered the rifle. “Thanasis and Mo are here. Those two are more than enough to stay behind. We should have everyone convene in one location, at least for Josiah and Theo’s sake. How long are your folks staying?”

“They’ll stay as long as they need to,” Joel said.

“Then the whole team goes. Tay knows where my weapon stash is. Have them stay at your place, Lattimore, so it’s familiar for the boys.” Gage pointed his chin at Adrián. “I take it you’re coming along?”

“Yes, I’m coming, but I talked to Trevor. He and Lee said they can find a place nearby. Watch the road. That’s two more.”

Gage and Julien exchanged a look.

“They can take Eesh’s old place if they want,” Gage said. “It’s clean. Trevor can bring his wife. Maybe having Theo’s teacher here will help. I don’t know Lee, but I know Trevor. I’m counting on him to keep Lee in line.”

Adrian shook his head. “Trust me. Lee’s trustworthy. We did the same work as you. We were all trying to do good. The only reason we targeted you is that one, we were lied to, and two, we wanted out and thought that was the only solution.”

“They’re still on the water,” Julien said. “Let’s head back, say our goodbyes, and see if we can get to the other side before Lavigne.”

“And we removed the fucking tracker,” Joel mumbled. “Why the fuck did we remove the damn tracker?”

Adrian patted his shoulder. “It was for a good reason. I shouldn’t have done what I did, plus you were counting on the ring. She would have never willingly taken it off.”

Joel, nodding, went to take a step toward the car, but he was suddenly rooted in place when something dawned on him.

Josiah and Theo.

What the hell would he tell Josiah and Theo?

* * *

Joel held Josiah against him, rubbing his back. Malia watched, her expression solemn, from the living room sofa.

“Are you okay?” Joel asked her.

She shook her head, mouth trembling.

He called her over and hugged them both.

His mother was also on the sofa, Theo asleep as she gently rocked him. It was a blessing and a curse that Theo was asleep because, in all likelihood, he wouldn't be there when Theo woke up. Neither parent would be there to explain the situation in a way his four-year-old brain could understand and reassure him they would be back. They wouldn't leave him like the baby bird who'd searched all over for its mother.

“I promise I'll get her back,” he whispered.

The words did nothing for Josiah's anguish.

“I'm sorry.” He kissed the side of Josiah's head. “I'm sorry. I'll fix this. I promise I will.”

Malia wiped her eyes and patted Josiah's back. “Your mom's strong, Josiah. So is your stepdad. And your uncles are scary. They'll get her back. She's probably kicking butt as we speak.”

Josiah wiped uselessly at his face as he lifted his head. “Joel's not my stepdad. He's my dad. My second dad.”

“Malia's right,” Joel said. “Remember, your mom's been going to Book Club multiple times a week, and we've yet to see a book.”

A weak smile pulled at his mouth. “It's a fight club.”

“Shh. We can't talk about fight club.”

“Why not?”

He mussed Josiah's hair. “Guess I just aged myself a bit. That's a reference for when you're older.”

“You come back too,” Josiah said. “Be safe, Dad. Please don’t die, okay? Come back. I love you.”

“I love you too, son.”

“Ma said to wait, but I have to show you something before you go.”

Josiah ran off.

Joel gave Malia one last squeeze and joined his mother on the couch. He kissed her cheek and then stared at Theo, wondering if it was worth it to tell him what was going on. But Theo was a smart kid. If Ayesha didn’t show up, he’d know something was wrong.

“I’ll explain it to him, honey,” his mother said. “Oh, *caro mio*.” She kissed his temple and fixed his hair. “Be safe. I won’t ask you to explain because I know you can’t, but be safe. Come back and bring my new daughter home. I love you, *mio angelo*. I love you.”

“I love you too, Mom.”

Josiah came racing back, pulling something from an envelope. “This is me and Theo’s gift to you, Dad.”

He took the papers.

The adoption papers.

“We want your name, too,” Josiah said. “Me and Theo already talked about it. Well, mostly me. He just ran around the room, screaming his head off in excitement. He’ll be Theodore Iokua Savea Lattimore, and I’ll be Josiah Nikora Savea Lattimore. That way, we’ll have both our dad’s names.”

Joel smiled. “I’ve gotten all the best gifts ever today. I don’t know how you guys will top this at Christmas.”

“Ma said we just won’t get you anything for Christmas.”

“That is something she would say.”

Mike entered the front room.

Joel dished out another round of hugs, kisses, and promises and whispered in Theo’s ear that he would be back before he knew it. Then he left, hopped inside the SUV, and didn’t look back.

He couldn’t.

Instead, he put his head down and squeezed the strands of his hair until it felt like his scalp would bleed. He let everything pour from him, from the fear when he first realized he couldn’t find Ayesha to having to look at Josiah and make him a promise he could only hope to keep.

Then he raised his head.

Shut everything off.

He no longer cared what would remain of him after he was done with Lavigne. It was a killer Lavigne was looking for, so that was precisely what he would get.

CHAPTER 40

Lavigne returned with a bucket and doused Ayesha's naked body with another shock of ice-cold water. The first three times, she'd screamed, but her mind had acclimated after the first frigid bath.

He didn't say anything.

Didn't ask any questions.

When she woke up, it was in this room with its gaudy, peeling wallpaper that didn't match the checkered carpet on the floor. There were no windows, and she didn't know where guys like this always found rooms with no windows.

Her prison housed a queen bed with two pillows and a door that led to a dingy bathroom. The only adequate thing in the room was the lighting.

As the water saturated her hair and skin, he stared at her. To her, he looked tired, like he'd been awake for the better part of a year. He also looked older than she'd expected, his sinew mixed with the evidence of aging muscle tissue. His head looked recently shaved, and more white hairs than dark peppered his mustache and beard. Dark spots created a freckled pattern on his face, and his skin looked as though it had once upon a time been pale and smooth. Sun exposure,

along with what was probably decades of iniquity, had turned it into rawhide.

“I don’t know what you’re waiting for,” she said. “Or why you even took me.”

He left, leaving the door wide open, but he’d created a human leash out of rope and leather attached to a metal rail to stop her from getting further than the strip separating her prison from what looked like a tiny living area.

She heard running water.

Machinery whirred.

Crackling noises followed, and as his footsteps returned, she clamped her jaw shut and closed her eyes.

He overturned the bucket.

Frigid water shocked her system, and ice pelted her hypothermic skin. Reflex made her reach toward her stomach, but she withdrew her hands. If he discovered any further vulnerabilities about her, the torture would increase.

This time, when he left, he shut the door.

Fear kept her in place.

Shivering, she unfolded her limbs, used the metal rail to pull herself to her feet, and took her first good look around the room. By now, they knew she was gone. She wouldn’t disappear, especially on her wedding day. Still, it was possible that Joel’s determination, Julien’s brain, Dez and Gage’s instinct, Mike’s stealth, and Giorgio’s crazy could, very well, not be enough to find her.

But the reason they’d had Book Club wasn’t for her to end up in a situation like this, twiddle her thumbs, and pray that

someone came to her rescue. This was the best-case scenario. Lavigne could have killed her *at* the wedding.

Except for her feet, her nudity was a non-issue. There was no telling where they were or what terrain surrounded them. If she were to get out, bare feet could eventually lead to her recapture.

However, the most crucial task at the moment was the rope around her neck. Not only would she have to find a way to loosen it, but if she was able to, it could come in handy as a tool. Lavigne was probably expecting a damsel in distress, and if she did try to fight back, he was probably expecting an easy takedown. But she wanted to see her boys, her husband. She wanted to see who this baby would become. That meant she would fight her ass off.

The door opened.

Lavigne stood in the doorway, and his expression clearly said he'd been expecting a blubbering lump in the corner. Once she was safe, she'd blubber.

“Intéressante.”

“What’s interesting?” she asked.

“Tu comprends?”

“Yes, I understand.”

He leaned against the door trim, arms folded. “You, your husband, your boyfriend...you three must have wild sex, hmm? Like a sandwich.”

Some men are enough to satisfy a woman without needing help, though I don't think that's a concept you're familiar with.

It was what she wanted to say, but she had to be smart. She had to strategize. Her strength was getting into people's heads.

No rules stated that just because Lavigne was skilled at slaughter, he didn't possess a human brain capable of being warped if he encountered the right person—and she would be the right one today.

He reached for his zipper.

She didn't twitch.

All those years of staring down a toddler without flinching to avoid having the toddler assert his dominance had finally done some good.

“You haven't explained why I'm here,” she said. “Or what you want. If it's the team, you took the long way when you didn't. They would have come to you.”

He flicked his fingers. “Central is bullshit. Had we eradicated all the other teams, we would still be enslaved to them. But you haven't figured it out, Mrs. Savea? Or maybe I should call you Mrs. Savea-Delgano-Lattimore. Lattimore is your new husband's name, right? What they announced at the wedding?”

She pressed her lips together.

“Would you not want to take you?” he asked. “Three of the world's most dangerous men have come inside you.”

On account of their casual relationship, Adrian never came inside her without the benefit of a barrier, but she didn't feel like having a conversation about sexual health.

“And all three fell in love. Would you not take you out of sheer curiosity?”

She motioned around. “So why the ice torture? Why the creepy room and rope around my neck?”

“Because I have never abducted a woman before. I am experimenting.”

He stalked toward her, yanking down his zipper. She swallowed but remained firm. If he thought she would beg, he could go fuck himself.

“You want to know a secret, Ayesha Savea Delgano Lattimore? Your boyfriend? He was once an enforcer for the largest cartel in South America. The same cartel that left his mother dead in the streets with her skirt over her face. Did he tell you this?”

“To an extent.” He’d left out the enforcer bit, but he’d told her the rest, and she now realized it was as close to telling her the truth as he could have come. Adrián had beat himself up, saddled himself with guilt, but he’d tried to tell her the truth.

“Finding her like that changed him,” Lavigne went on. “Hardened him.”

“That makes perfect sense. Finding your mother dead? It’ll change you for life.”

“You are not understanding. In his mind, trust did not exist. Sex was a weapon. No one could get close to him. Mrs. Savea, you are the first lover Gano has ever had.”

She froze. “What?”

He was thirty when they met. Very few humans, least of all males, went that long without having sex outside of religious reasons. For them, orgasms were almost guaranteed, whereas she’d made the mistake of losing her virginity to *Curtis Savea* and believed her roommate when she’d said it would “only pinch a little.” Maybe with an average dick.

“Did you know, in French, *virgin* uses a female pronoun?” Lavigne asked. “*La vierge*. So, tell me, how does this man go

from not trusting a soul close enough to destroy his body like his mother's was destroyed to making love to you? To his head buried between your legs?"

There'd been no apparent hesitancy on Adrián's part. That first time at the hotel, he'd undressed her without any evidence he didn't know what he was doing. She couldn't remember any nervousness, any lack of finesse, and he'd wielded his tongue like an expert. Now, it felt like she'd forced him to break his convictions. Then she turned around and broke his heart.

Lavigne took her hand and placed it on his cock. "Maybe you can tame me. We will fall in love and run off into the sunset. Would be nice, yes?"

She forced herself to shut out the sensation of his penis against her palm, his shaft covered in what felt like scar tissue. "You can't possibly think that's true," she said.

"That you have a magical pussy? A taming pussy? There's no harm in testing my theory." He pointed at the bed with his chin. "Get on the bed and spread your legs. Maybe I will fall in love."

She didn't move.

"Mrs. Savea, get on the bed and spread your legs, or I'll kill you and place you in your toddler's bedroom."

Four-year-olds weren't toddlers anymore, but she kept her thoughts to herself, unfolded her legs, and stood.

He watched as she went to the bed, climbed onto the mattress, and sat in the middle on crossed legs. Everything trembled inside her, but she funneled all her energy into shutting off her brain and numbing her body—willful dissociation.

“Lie down.”

She lay on her back and stared at the ceiling, so she didn't see his face, only his shadow when he moved to the edge of the bed.

“Spread your legs.”

They fell open.

“Look at me.”

She turned her head, wanting to cry, scream, and curl into a ball, but he wanted her body. That didn't mean she would let him take her power.

“You are pretty,” he said. “I will give you that.”

“Why do this?”

“Look at who your pussy has conquered. I would watch you with him, with Gano.” His cock slowly grew erect. “I would watch the way he fucked you, the way he ate your pussy. He wouldn't lift his head until you came, and then it was like I tasted you. Even a man like me once feared the legend of the infamous Gano from Brazil. If you knew anything about The Enforcer, you would know the power of what you did to him.”

“It won't be the same,” she pointed out. “That was lovemaking, not what you're about to do.”

“You would never make love to a man like me.”

Not even for everlasting health or wealth, but to her, that sounded like an opening.

“Is that what you think?” she asked.

“You like dangerous men.” He shifted his gaze between her legs. “You have fucked three—at least.”

In addition to the scar tissue on his penis, he had scarring on his lower abdomen, and she shuddered to think what could have caused injuries in such an intimate place.

Frantic fingernails.

Desperate teeth.

Evidence of all those who'd tried to fight what they didn't want him to do to them.

“Lavigne,” she inched closer to him, trying not to gag as she took him back into her hand, “think this through. Women are emotional creatures.” Bitterness swelled on her tongue. “You want my body to be pleasurable for you, but you're dumping ice all over me. When I was with Adrián, I was warm, wet. I wanted him. Do you think that just *happened*? No. He made it happen. He didn't start out the way you think. He wasn't anything close to pleasant.”

It was bullshit.

Adrián was kind since day one.

A man like Lavigne knew only how to respond to antagonism. He fed on the expectation that he would be challenged. Also, if what he'd said was true and he'd never abducted a woman before her, she would use that to her advantage.

She sat up and shifted on the bed until she was in front of him, looking up into his eyes. Her biggest mistake would have been treating this man like a demon and expecting to win a battle against his years of experience as the devil.

He was physically stronger. That wouldn't change in the next day, month, or year. So, she would aim for his mind.

“Siriano,” she looped her hands around his waist, “let me show you how good it can be. I don’t want you to hurt me, and you want it to be good.”

He searched her eyes.

Her gaze dropped to his mouth, and she paced her breathing to prevent spewing up the vomit knocking on the walls of her stomach.

“Have you ever been kissed?” she asked.

He snorted. “I’m not your virgin lover.”

“That’s not what I…” She slid her hand beneath the pillow at her side and then rose onto her knees, dropping her voice to a whisper. “Can I kiss you? Can I try that, at least?”

He didn’t answer.

“I swear, if you don’t hurt me, I’ll behave.”

“You think I’m an idiot?” he spat.

“I don’t want any more pain or ice water, Siriano. I fucking hate it.”

His eyes flashed.

“I’ll do whatever you ask to make it stop.” She brushed his lips with hers and pulled back. “How’s that?”

His gaze fell to her mouth. “You must really like dangerous men.”

“I think it’s because I spent so much of my life feeling unsafe.” She leaned in again, kissing him a little harder. “Better?”

Again, he looked down at her mouth.

“Oh.” She smiled. “I know what I’m doing wrong. You’re French.” She moved her hand to the back of his head, flicked his lips with her tongue, and stopped. “Hmm. This is... interesting.”

“What is?”

“Nothing. It’s stupid.”

He gripped her waist. “Bitch, answer the fucking question.”

“I don’t know how. I think...did it feel good for you, or am I crazy?” She flicked again. “I should probably stop. What the fuck is wrong with me? Why would I...”

She probed at his sealed lips until he groaned, tightening his hold on her.

“What would make it better?” She probed again. “Your lips are soft. Did you do something to me?”

“Like what?” he asked.

“I don’t know, but...I think I might be crazy. This isn’t how I saw this going.” She kissed the corner of his mouth, and he started to close his eyes but flung them open. “Siriano, I don’t want any more ice. I hate the ice, but this isn’t what I thought it would be.”

She reached between them and stroked his weird cock.

His lips parted.

She snaked her tongue inside, and it took everything inside her not to gag. He tasted like nicotine and something sour, something bitter. Then there was something acrid, like sulfur, if left to fester for several days. It was as if the last time he brushed his teeth, a parent did it for him.

His breathing increased, and although she told herself his bodily fluids wouldn't be enough to break her, she blinked away tears at the last moment. Agony ripped holes the size of bullet wounds in her chest, but this was no time for shame. To have the freedom to experience shame, she first needed to survive.

This couldn't be it. There was no way she'd last see her children at eleven and four and have her last image of Joel be in his wedding tux.

“Does it feel good yet?” She bit Lavigne's top lip. “Talk to me, Siriano. Are you close?”

She aimed his cock inside his shirt.

He jerked and grunted, his mouth still on hers. He'd even closed his eyes, and when he came to, the whites had turned glassy.

The next thing she knew, the room shook.

Pain exploded along her cheekbone.

He staggered until he was pressed back against the wall, his cock shriveled and retreating. She tasted and smelled blood, but she'd rattled him. At the moment, he had the upper hand, but the power differential was no longer a solid line.

“Fucking witch!” Pulling up his pants, he stumbled from the room, using the wall for support.

“Siriano, wait! I'm sorry! I'm—” She flipped a middle finger at the empty doorway. “Fuck you.”

Once it was clear he wasn't returning, she wiped her hand on the side of the bed, though there wasn't much to wipe. Then she reached underneath the pillow.

Every person on each Black Ops team had a specialty. Giorgio's was bladed weaponry, and Lavigne was supposed to be Giorgio's equivalent.

Mo was a sleight-of-hand expert.

Sleight-of-hand was part of Book Club.

Her fingers landed on the knife's handle, and she squeezed. Lavigne had no idea what she was capable of. There was no way he could have planned for her, and she intended to reduce him to a simpering block of nothingness before cutting out his heart.

* * *

He returned, tossed an ice pack on the bed, and left the room. When he reappeared, it was with food containers, and if she wasn't mistaken, he checked to see whether she'd placed the pack against her face.

There was nowhere to see her reflection, though she could imagine what she looked like. Her face was swollen and tender, and for her sanity and survival, she prayed her method worked.

There was a ton of research on Stockholm Syndrome. Lima Syndrome was less known, but it could be an effective weapon for someone in her situation, especially when used with pillars of manipulation—gaslighting, misdirection, inception, emotional manipulation, and good old-fashioned brainwashing.

She raised the ice pack to her face, lightly pressed it against the swelling, and hissed. Tears welled in her eyes, but

instead of hanging her head in a display of weakness that would only piss someone like him off, she tried again.

Again, she hissed.

Clenched her teeth.

Grunted her frustration.

Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw him pause in the middle of setting the food containers on the bed. So, she tried again, hissed again.

He started for her.

She raised a hand. "I'm competent, Siriano." Each time she said his name, he flinched. "I'm not weak."

"I never said you were."

"Look at my circumstances." She motioned to herself. "You probably think I'm some useless idiot."

He dragged the ice pack from her hand, grabbed her chin, and held it against the side of her face. "You are a useless idiot," he said. "I hit you, and you are now letting me hold ice against your face."

"If you'd meant it, you wouldn't be holding the ice."

"I tried to rape you."

She subdued her first reaction.

"We want the same things, Siriano." He flinched. "You want it to be good. I want it not to hurt. I don't want to be violated. You holding ice against my face? Cupping my chin? What do you think that does to me?"

He grunted and stepped away, ice pack in hand. "Whatever it is you're doing, stop it."

“I don’t understand.”

He marched toward the door.

“Siriano, please.”

“Stop fucking calling me that!” He was in her face in seconds. “I fucking choked your child, you stupid bitch. I killed your husband. This shit you are doing, it is not real, and you are a fucking idiot if you think I can’t see through it.”

She looked down, playing with her fingers. “I can’t forgive you for what you did to my son, but I won’t let you lie to me.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Adrián.” She raised her head. “Adrián already told me the truth, how he killed Curtis, how you tried to stop him. He told me everything.”

“He told you *he* killed Curtis Savea?”

She nodded.

Please lie.

Please, please lie.

If he lied, she had him.

“Why would he tell you that?”

“Why would you lie?” she countered. “Why are you so obsessed with making me believe you’re all bad? Like everyone else, you were, at one time, a child. You probably had dreams, wishes, and hopes that somebody stole from you. Now, you want me to look at you like you were born this way?”

He pressed his thumbs against his temples, eyes closed.
“Stop.”

“Stop what?”

“Whatever the fuck it is you’re doing!”

She raised her voice. “They said the same thing about me! My mother fucked a married man, so that made me demon spawn. I’m more than what they fucking gave me credit for. You must think I want to care about you.”

“Stop it.”

“I can’t stop it, Siriano! Don’t you think I’m trying? You terrorized my child. Don’t you think I’m trying!” She brought tears to her eyes, made her lips tremble. “Did you...did you give me something? Whatever you injected into my neck...is that what’s doing this?”

His chest moved like he’d run six miles in ten seconds. “Doing what?”

She wrapped her arms around his neck, and it took every ounce of her willpower not to choke him. “Making me want to touch you. Why would I want to touch you? I fucking hate it. You’ve done awful things.”

“Stop.”

“Do you know Curtis never apologized for anything in our relationship? Not even with gestures?”

Curtis, if you can hear me, I’m sorry.

I don’t mean it.

I love you.

“The ice for your face is not an apology.”

“Then what is it?”

“You said, if I treated you well, it would be good,” he spat. “Better. That is all I want—a hot, wet pussy.”

She stroked his cheekbone with the pad of her thumb and swallowed bile. “Ugh. Why can’t I stop touching you? What the fuck is it about you? Answer me.”

“Stop.”

“It’s your fault. Whatever you gave me—”

“I did not give you anything. It was a sedative. Sedatives do not fill women’s heads with any more stupidity than they already possess.”

“Then what’s wrong with me?” she asked.

He opened his eyes.

She wrenched a smile from a cold, dark place she hadn’t tapped into since her mother died. “Adrián told me everything. You don’t have to cover for him.”

The bulb in his throat quivered.

Please, please lie.

“I did not know he told you,” he said.

She swallowed what would have been a primal scream of triumph. “Can I ask you something? And you can be honest. I know you said I was pretty, but,” she bit her bottom lip, still smiling, “am I your type?”

“Why is that important?”

“It isn’t.”

He nearly smiled.

She held in another scream.

Then he snorted, barked, “You are everyone’s type,” shoved her until her head nearly hit the wall, and left the room.

She waited.

It didn't take long for him to return, and he walked directly to the metal rail. She watched as he unfastened the rope, and she started to make her way to the bathroom, but he stopped her.

"It is not for that."

As he dragged her through the door, she tried not to think about the implications of someone who looked like him handling her the way he did.

This was about survival. This was about seeing her family again. Nothing else could matter, or she would break.

The place was tiny. The only bedroom and full bathroom appeared to be her prison. The main area housed a well-worn couch draped with a thin sheet and an older-model television, and one corner belonged to the kitchen, but all it possessed was a sink and microwave.

He sat her on the couch and tied the other end of the rope to something she couldn't see. Then he retrieved the food containers, handed one to her, took the cushion beside her, and turned on the TV to a soccer match in progress.

She kissed his cheek, opened the container, and removed a French fry.

"Hey," she whispered.

"What?"

She held up the fry.

He looked from her to the fry and pulled it into his mouth right from her hand. "I did not put anything in the food," he said. "I would not kill you that way. Only cowards use poison."

She hid her relief. “That’s not why I did that. I wanted to feed you. God, you’re cute when you’re grumpy.”

He clenched his fists.

She moved closer until their arms touched.

“It was good,” he said, after a long silence.

She regarded him with wide, disgustingly innocent eyes. “What was?”

He didn’t answer.

“Oh. Well, you, uh, did come a...a lot.” She could sneeze more semen than he’d released. Maybe, instead of spying on her and Adrián, he should have spied on her and Joel to see what a real man was capable of producing at climax.

“Shut up,” he spat.

“Did I do it okay?”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“Want another one later?”

“I said eat your food and shut the fuck up.”

She kissed his cheek again. “Yes, Daddy.”

“Stop.”

“Siriano, it’s not love. It’s compromise. It’s survival. Surely, you understand. Play along. You’ve never role-played?”

He remained silent.

She forced herself to eat.

While he was gone, she’d worked on loosening one of the baseboards next to the bed. Behind it, the wall had chipped away some, which gave her the perfect hiding spot for the

knife. He would have likely returned and caught her if she'd worked on the rope. As long as she had the knife, she had time.

Compassion could exist in some of the vilest creatures. Had they been lab rats in a glass cage, she could see there being prying eyes who would see him soften, see him grow enamored, and feel as though they'd switched roles—her as the villain, him as the victim. But this man would pay for what he'd done to her children, especially her baby boy. For her children, she would stab a *saint* in the heart.

Fuck an ice pack.

CHAPTER 41

Joel tried to hide his frustration as best as he could; however, none of this was anyone's fault but his own. Had he not looked away, he would have seen the moment Lavigne took Ayesha. Then, after finding the abandoned boat along the shore, followed by footprints that simply disappeared, they'd met nothing but dead ends.

"Daddy? Are you there? It's Theo."

Joel scrubbed a hand down his face and brought the phone back to his ear. "Hi, baby boy. Grandma said you were sleeping."

Their trail had picked back up, heading north, but it went cold again south of Stockholm. Their best estimate was that she could be as far west as Flen and as far east as Dalarö, but at best, that was a 138-kilometer, 85-mile perimeter.

"I waked up," Theo said. "Are you and Mama coming home soon? Grandma said you and Mama took honey to the moon."

"Yeah, and it's a long trip. We'll...be home soon."

"Daddy?"

"Yes, Theo?"

"Is this a true or a lie?"

“What do you mean?”

Theo sniffled. “Daddy, did something happen to Mama? Did Mr. Veeny hurt Mama? Because you and Grandma Jemma and Grandpa Archie won’t let me talk to her, and I want my mama.”

Joel stared out at the rising sun. He couldn’t remember the last time he slept. Sleep deprivation now made being a parent even more of a challenge because he didn’t want to lie to Theo, but Theo was four years old. His brain couldn’t process all that was going on. Josiah’s barely could. However, if he lied and something happened to Ayesha, the truth would be like blindsiding him.

“Um...Mr. Veeny...” He took a moment to gather his composure. “Mr. Veeny...took your mama.”

Tears filled Theo’s voice. “Did Mr. Veeny kill Mama and make her dead?”

“No. No, he didn’t. I’ll find her. I swear, I will.”

He knew he’d fucked up when Theo started crying harder. Then he heard his mother’s voice as Theo screamed that he wanted “Mama” and “Daddy.” Finally, his father’s voice sounded through the phone speaker.

“Hi, son.”

“Dad.”

“How’s it going?”

“Not good.” Joel hung his head and stared at the wooden deck of the most recent place the team, plus Adrián, had found to hunker down in. “I messed up. I shouldn’t have told Theo ___”

“I heard him ask, son,” Archie said. “If he’s smart enough to ask, he’s smart enough to know.”

“Yeah, but too young to handle it.”

The screaming intensified, and Theo’s screams yanked agony from his chest in long links of rope. He couldn’t keep his wife safe, and now he was miles away when his children were in pain.

What if Ayesha was already?

Their future was supposed to be those car rides, that bad singing. Cruises wearing matching outfits that included Hawaiian shirts, socks, and velcro sandals. He loved Ayesha with every fiber that made up the man he was.

“Son, this was bound to happen one way or the other,” Archie said. “We couldn’t keep up the ruse forever, but it’s not like me and your mother can’t handle a screaming four-year-old. Kid Lattimore was no walk in the park.”

He forced a laugh. “So you’ve told me.”

“You’ll find her, son.”

“Dad, what if I don’t?”

“Giving up starts up top, Joel. Keep your head on straight. The boys need that. Ayesha does too. So do you.”

“You’re right.” He nodded. “You’re right.”

He couldn’t give up on her when she never gave up on him. When she’d been there every step of the way, sometimes in the middle of the night. She’d done it all without a complaint and with a tenderness he didn’t always deserve.

“The sun’s coming up, so we’re getting ready to head out,” he said. “I love you, Dad. Let Theo know I love him, and I’ll

be back.”

“Will do, Joel. And I love you too, son. Stay positive.”

They hung up.

As he stood, he felt Adrián walk up behind him. Sunrise meant another day to search. He'd even put his ego aside and allowed Adrián's feelings for Ayesha to power his determination.

“You will need this,” Adrián said.

He turned to find Adrián extending a glass of orange juice toward him. “Dude, you brought me juice?”

“You won't eat, and to search, you need glucose. It's basic human biology.”

“I can't believe this.” He took the glass and took a large swig. “Taking drinks from my wife's ex-lover.”

“Why do I bother you so much when what Ayesha and I had is in the past?”

“Your feelings aren't.”

It didn't bother him that Ayesha loved Adrián. It bothered him that he wasn't the only man walking around who would sell his soul for her happiness.

Adrián's feelings were real and nearly as potent as his own, and that made him feel inadequate somehow. Like, had he loved Ayesha enough, he never would have lost her. Like she was disappointed that he was taking so long to find her. Like maybe Adrián did love her more, while he was more focused on missing her than finding her.

But it had been a long time since his day hadn't started with Ayesha. It was all he could do not to lose his mind.

“My feelings won’t die overnight,” Adrián said. “And should I fall in love tomorrow, I’ll never stop caring for Ayesha. How can you be mad at me? You’re married to her. She loves you more than there are words to describe. You, my friend, have the life I want.”

Joel finished the glass. “We’re not friends. The guys inside? Those are my friends. You and I, we’re not enemies. That’s a start.”

“Those guys aren’t your friends. They’re your brothers... Joel.”

Joel frowned. “Why the fuck do you do that little pause before you say my name?”

“Because I’ve never heard it before. I keep almost saying *Joe*.”

“There are no Joels in Brazil?”

“If they are, we’ve never met.”

“Well, ‘Adrián’ is a girl’s name.”

Adrián held up a finger. “*Adrienne* is a girl’s name. Where I’m from, my name is manly. It belongs to axe throwers and lumberjacks. It’s the name men give their beards.”

As much as he tried to fight it, he chuckled. It appeared that Ayesha had a thing for stupid men. Based on the stories the guys told, Curtis was just as ridiculous.

Suddenly, he saw Ayesha’s face and that last smile she gave him at the wedding.

The laugh dried up.

“She’s pregnant. Everyone else knows. Figured I should tell you.”

Adrián ran a hand over his face. “Christ.”

“I have to find her.”

“That’s why I’m still here, friend.”

They went inside.

Gage stood in front of a map of the area projected onto a makeshift screen on a bare wall. Joel started to join the rest of the team, but Gage pointed to the kitchen.

“If you won’t sleep, you at least need to eat something, Lattimore,” he said. “If all you can manage is a bar, then swallow a bar, get some calories, and come back.”

Knowing it was futile to argue, he grabbed whatever nutrition bar he could find, scarfed it down, and returned to the map.

“Adrián told us earlier that Lavigne doesn’t know Sweden well,” Gage explained. “Not ‘back roads’ well. Our best guess is that he’s driving and took 73, going north.”

Joel studied the road. “You think he’s headed to Stockholm?”

“When we were cooped up here, he couldn’t take it,” Adrián said. “He would always leave and head over to Gothenburg or up to Stockholm.”

Joel stared at the map as though he could psychically will himself to find Ayesha’s location. “So, what you’re saying is he likes the draw of the larger cities. Bigger city, more places to hide.”

“More like more to do. Lavigne’s not a house mouse. If he’s cooped up for too long, he’ll start to lose it. It’s happened many times on assignment.”

“‘Lose it’ meaning, what?” He needed to know whether it was behavior that would increase the likelihood of Ayesha’s death. If it was, they would have to alter their timeline.

Adrian tapped the side of his head. “It’s not a state that necessarily makes him more dangerous. There’s a rumor that he was locked up as a child and had to spend years in his bedroom.”

“Eesh can use that.”

They all looked at him.

“How?” Mike asked.

“She’s smart.” For the first time in days, he didn’t have to fake his optimism. “The brain, the mind? Who knows them better than my girl? Without Lavigne going all ‘traumatic childhood,’ she could still break him apart like Legos. If he buckles, and she gets a chance...she’ll take it.”

A renewed vigor went around the room, so potent he felt the change ripple over his skin. They were so worried about finding her that they forgot how strong she was. Ayesha could buy them the time they needed, but she couldn’t do that if he lost faith in her ability to take care of herself.

As much as he wanted her back in his arms, she wanted to be back in his arms. She wanted to come home for him, Josiah, Theo, and the little one they hadn’t yet met.

She would fight.

He knew she would.

Julien looked at the ceiling, eyes darting from left to right. “Based on the boat’s trajectory, and if we’re assuming he’s traveling by car headed north, with the average speed on 73, there’s a thirty-five percent chance he’s already made it to

Stockholm. But he wouldn't keep Ayesha in the city. Not in the city, but not far from it."

Dez drew a line from one location to another. "Far as in Nykvarn? That would take us a couple of days to cover, at least, and that's with SÄPO and Interpol's help. Then Interpol's more focused on finding Lavigne than Ayesha. If they grab him before we do..."

"He might never talk," Joel finished.

Adrian stepped closer to the map. "Nykvarn's too far. Lavigne doesn't cook. He'll need a shorter ride to restaurants. That's his thing—restaurants. The fancier, the better. The kind of establishments most of us only dreamed we could step inside as children. If you ever see him eating fast food, it's his last days."

"I'll pick up a burger for him on the way, then," Joel said.

Mike looked at Giorgio. "Familiar with any high-end restaurants in Stockholm, big guy?"

Giorgio didn't respond.

Giorgio had barely said two words since Ayesha was taken, so they'd been relegated to reading his body language and the changes in the air to get a feel for his mood.

"So we'll start with a five-kilometer perimeter around the city center," Gage instructed. "We'll pair off. Gano, I'm sending you with Joel and Giorgio."

Adrian nodded. "Got it."

* * *

Every day, they searched a new area. Every day, they failed to find any sign of Ayesha or Lavigne.

Slowly, Joel's renewed optimism dissolved.

Promising Josiah he would find her only went so far before even Josiah started breaking down as severely as Theo. Then, after searching until his body tapped out, sleep never came. All he saw was Ayesha sitting in that chair and the smile she gave him, his memory holding onto the image as though it would be his last.

None of the people they spoke to saw anyone fitting Lavigne's description in the area. Julien hacked into street cameras, public Wi-Fi networks, cell phones. Their team, SÄPO, Interpol—all of them searching and nothing.

Their latest search brought them to a park where people swam and relaxed on the shore of a large lake. Without having to say the words out loud, he knew they'd stopped in the area to check for a body in the water.

The guys were getting tired. They had families with small children. He could search until he bled into his lungs—they couldn't. Still, he knew they would look at him like he was out of his mind if he asked them to go home.

He nearly was.

But had it been Tayler, Xara, Larke, Ari, or Mo, he wouldn't go home, so he didn't ask. Even Ant could rest assured they would do everything they could for Val.

His parents called daily, but Josiah and Theo stopped coming to the phone. Eventually, he switched to video chats so his parents could turn the camera in the boys' direction. They didn't want to talk, but that didn't mean he didn't want to see

them. Seeing them helped dry his dampened spirits. Seeing them stopped him from bursting open.

“Mår du bra?”

Joel looked down into a round face, blond hair, and dark brown eyes. The boy couldn't have been more than seven, although Theo's size often threw off his accuracy. Adrián and Giorgio were nearby, but they gave him space after he started walking toward the shore.

“I'm okay,” he said.

The boy's eyes lit up. “Oh! You speak English!”

He quickly scanned the nearby area and verified someone was watching the boy. They waved, and he waved back.

“Mister, you look sad.”

He crouched. “I am sad. I miss my friend.”

The boy extended a toy boat. “Want to play with my boat?”

“That is an awesome boat, but I'm getting ready to leave soon.”

“You can show it to your friend when you find them. I will be able to find it. It has a GPS tracker.”

Joel looked from the boat to the boy. “Kid, thank you. You're a genius. I'll come back with my son someday and his boat. I'm sure he'd love to play with you.”

He jogged through the park until he found Giorgio and Adrián seated across from each other, a chessboard between them.

“What if he didn't drive?” he asked.

They looked his way.

“What if he went by boat? The trail went cold at the shore. He could have switched and gotten onto another boat. There are waterways all up and through the search area.”

Giorgio studied a sailboat passing through on the other side of the lake. “To track boat is simple.”

“But we’re assuming he knows that,” Adrian said. “Lavigne’s a killer, not a genius. He knows brute strength, but I’m fairly certain he wouldn’t know kindergarten math.”

Giorgio snorted. “Killer.”

“We’ve been going about this all wrong,” Joel continued. “We’re assuming he knows what the fuck he’s doing. We’re treating him like the fuckers we’re used to dealing with. If Ayesha’s alive,” and he needed her to be, “everything after taking her could be him winging it.”

Giorgio and Adrian left the chess table.

He retrieved his phone and relayed the information to Julien. While they waited, they combed the rest of the area.

Julien called back in less than ten minutes. “We’re too far north,” he said. “I searched police reports for stolen boats. There weren’t many, and I found two that were stolen recently and close to the ‘commune.’ I tracked both boats further south than where we’ve been looking.”

“How?” Joel asked.

“I called the owners. Sometimes, even hacking is as simple as a phone call. The owners had the tracking numbers and were more than willing to help. One of the boats is the one we found. The one he first transported Eesh in. The other docks regularly near Borensberg.”

Joel’s heart knocked against his ribcage. “*Docks?*”

“As in, it leaves the area and comes back.”

“Where is it now?”

“It departed from Stockholm about an hour ago. And, get this. There are camping grounds nearby. I’ll notify Interpol and the police. The fastest route for us will be if we take E4. *That’s* our search area.”

CHAPTER 42

Biology didn't wait.

One morning, she woke up with sweat dotting her skin and nauseous in a way she hadn't missed. This pregnancy's symptoms differed from Theo and Josiah's, but this particular symptom remained the same.

She called for Siriano.

Surprisingly, he came right away, saw the condition she was in, and she made it to the bathroom just in time. As she threw up, her mind raced. Under no circumstances could he know about the baby.

Once the episode passed, she cried. The reason for her tears would be a lie, but the tears were real. With each day that passed, her capacity for strength diminished.

"You said you wouldn't do this," she whispered.

His voice sounded from a location too close behind her. "Do what?"

"Poison my food."

"I didn't."

"Then why am I sick?" She looked back at him, over her shoulder. "You had that chicken with the red sauce, too, right?"

Did you feel even a little sick after you ate it? I noticed you looked a little green later that night.”

He looked off to the side. Then he set a hand on his stomach. “A little. I think.”

She groaned.

“You can stand?”

She pretended to struggle to her feet until he had to help her the rest of the way. He brought her a cup, and she washed her mouth. Once finished, she fell against him. He didn’t move away, but he didn’t hold her.

“I need to lie down,” she said.

He led her back to the bed and retied her to the metal rail, but he didn’t leave immediately. She shut her eyes, praying he didn’t put two and two together.

After grumbling something she didn’t make out, he left the room and returned with a shirt. He helped her into the shirt, stood around for a moment, and left again.

Two days later, he bathed her.

Two more days after that, he hit her after she made him orgasm so hard he fell to the ground. He then returned with more ice and tissue for the blood on her split lip.

Lately, as she watched Lavigne transform, she wondered whether this was the reason some men despised their attraction to women. Inside, those men were aware that they harbored something so fragile, the right woman, or simply a clever one, could bend it to her will. If the woman had bad intentions, they would be left embarrassed, emasculated, or worse—the woman would laugh at them.

So, as a form of protection, they stood on soapboxes, denigrating all women, praying that if they barked loudly enough, it would cover the gaping vulnerability that could otherwise easily be infected, effectively destroying the host.

Lavigne's soapbox was his fists.

If he didn't use his fists, he would have to admit that he was falling for her and she was in control of the descent. Unfortunately for him, she'd already slipped her way inside, and when she was done with him, she would bear little difference from a brain-eating amoeba.

* * *

Ayesha lay in bed, pretending to toss and turn in her sleep. With each turn, she fought an invisible captor. When she heard Lavigne enter the room, the fight increased.

So, she called his name.

"Siriano, help." She gripped the sheets. "Siriano, don't let him take me."

He touched her foot.

She sprang up, breathing hard, and searched the dark room. When she made out his outline, she scrambled toward him and tossed her arms around his midsection, squeezing tight.

He squeezed back. "You said my name."

As the days passed, he became more malleable, his brain like her personal piece of clay.

"Why did you say my name?"

She shrugged. "I don't know."

“Don’t lie to me.”

“It was just a bad dream, Siriano.”

“What about?”

She remained silent.

“What did you dream about?” he repeated with more urgency than harshness.

She dropped her voice. “Adrián. He found me. He tried to take me.”

“And what happened?”

“I...nothing.”

He grabbed her by the shoulders, peeled her off him, and positioned her where he could see her face in the dim light. “What happened? Why did you say my name?”

“I...I didn’t want him to take me.”

“So you said my name.”

“I, uh, called for you.” She tried to hug him again, and he didn’t stop her. “I know, I know. Why would I call for you, right? But it was just a dream. It means nothing.”

She released him and looked up to find him staring at her, his eyes wild and slightly unfocused. She caressed the side of his face, and his eyes closed.

Then he left.

For the next couple of weeks, he returned only long enough to bring her food. She nearly gave up and used the knife on herself, but not with this baby inside her. Not with her three favorite guys waiting for her.

So, she had another “dream.”

Again, she called out for Lavigne, and he came much quicker than before, which made her realize that when he left, he wasn't leaving her alone. He only left the room. He stayed behind, waiting for something—maybe waiting for her to call for him again.

She wrapped her arms around him.

He peeled her off to remove the rope, and as he lightly fingered the markings on her neck, she returned to holding him.

“What did you dream about this time?” he asked.

She swallowed fake tears. “The same thing.”

“Gano?”

“Yes.”

“Are you afraid of him?”

“No.”

“So, why do you call for me?”

“I...I don't know. I don't understand it. In the dream, I'm here. I'm sleeping. When I open my eyes, he's standing over me. I tell him I'll go with him, but the minute I start to leave, I get scared. I start looking for you. I don't even dream about my husband, Siriano. I don't understand.” She swallowed more faux tears. “Then Adrián's face changes. He tries to pull me through the door, but I realize something's wrong. That something's been wrong the entire time. I don't want to go with him. So, I call out for you...but you don't come.”

“Why don't I come?”

“Because...because you left, and then I feel,” she squeezed him tighter, “a weird feeling. Like pain. And when I open my

eyes, you're here, and I, stupidly, need to hold you."

"Why is that stupid?"

"Because of the things you've done." She looked up into his eyes. "To my little boy."

"It was only a little scare. I never put my hands on him."

Fucking liar.

"You nev..." She opened her eyes wide. "That's what Adrián said. Did he tell me that because...because *he* hurt my baby?"

"Yes."

"God, I feel so stupid."

"You can't help it. You're pretty. God doesn't give pretty women much," he tapped his head, "up here. You don't need it. You will be pretty for ages. What use do you have for a brain when men exist?"

She laid her head on his chest. "What does that mean? Will you take care of me or something? Keep me safe?"

"Fucking witch," he whispered, stroking her hair. "How have you done this?"

"Done what?"

He offered no response.

A part of her, minuscule as it was, felt sorry for him. To be the way he'd turned out meant he, in all likelihood, had a similar backstory to one or more of the guys. This life, in order to be successful, often had to be lived with an iron heart. It was why a fresh sprig of tenderness worked so well on an animal like Lavigne.

Despite murdering, raping, and harming innocent children, he still believed life could send him someone who truly wanted to caress his face. To call out for him during a bad dream. He believed life would send him someone he'd hurt and threatened to violate to be his salvation.

But he'd forgotten Curtis.

He forgot Theo.

He forgot sending those men to her house, one who'd put a gun to Josiah's head. He forgot the abduction from her wedding, the ice baths, the rope around her neck, and the numerous blows she'd received from his fists.

Emptiness pulled so hard at his heart that he genuinely believed she could forgive him for killing the love of her life and abusing her three-year-old. He'd threatened her three-year-old's life, forcing Theo to repress the memories to survive. Once the repression dissolved, he'd forced Theo into regression. Into screaming and fits and nearly drowning because he accidentally ran into the ocean to avoid a man created by his imagination.

Theo.

Her *child*.

She shed the rope, took his hand, and drew back on the bed. He climbed onto the mattress, eyes locked with hers.

"See what I mean?" She lay on her back and placed his hand on her hip. "See how it's different?"

He kissed her stomach through the shirt.

She reached along the side of the bed toward the baseboard. "This is the best way to do it," she said. "When I'm

warm and ready and calling out for you in my sleep. Please don't leave me again. Not when I'm calling for you."

"Fucking witch." He raised the shirt. "Fucking, fucking witch. I am trembling. I have never wanted someone like this. I feel as if I will stick my cock in you, and I will be done."

"Stick it in deep, Siriano."

As if he could.

He bit at the skin on her stomach. "Fucking Gano. I understand. You did this to him. This is how you seduced him."

"I did nothing."

"I am not like this. I do not shake. I do not," he kissed her thigh, "make love."

"Siriano."

He looked up at her.

"Let me be the first woman you make love to." She parted her legs. "Let me be the first woman who you make love to as you come inside her. You kept your promise. You took care of me. Let my pussy take care of you."

He shook his head and gripped his hair.

She froze.

Not now.

Not now.

"Fucking witch!"

He kissed her, his tongue frantic like it was searching for hers while nervous and blindfolded.

She grabbed the knife.

Grunting, he fumbled with his pants, shoved them down, pulled away, and planted himself between her legs.

“Siriano, now *I’m* shaking.”

“You fucking witch.” He groped at her inner thighs, opening them wider. “How did you do this? How did you make me want you so much, I’m about to come on myself before I am inside you?”

She tightened her grip around the knife.

As he positioned himself to enter her, she raised it and jammed it into the side of his neck.

Mo’s words came back to her:

“If you can pull it out, stab again. If you can’t stab again, take it with you.”

The knife slid like butter from his flesh.

She stabbed again, shoving hard, catching him in the side, up near his underarm. “My fucking baby, you piece of shit!” she screamed. “My husband? You think I would want you after what you did to my family? After you hurt my child?”

He slumped.

She pushed him off her body and dashed to the next room, directly to the door she’d seen him use multiple times. A staircase lay on the other side. Fueled by pure adrenaline, she climbed the stairs and pushed through a door at the top, which deposited her inside a modern one-story cabin.

The decor was minimal, and the Scandinavian architecture gave her a surge of hope they hadn’t left Sweden.

She exited through an all-glass front door. It was dark out, but the sun was breaking the horizon. With no time to strategize, she ran toward it, ran east.

Fallen branches scraped her ankles and calves.

Twigs poked at the bottom of her foot.

If they were still in Sweden, she didn't know how far north or south, but the forests of Sweden harbored everything from moose to wolves to bears. Hopefully, her fright scared them or showed she was not a threat and could be left alone.

Whenever she felt her adrenaline wearing off, she pumped more energy into her legs. At this point, anything would help—a house, a road, a hiker. She only looked back a few times, and although she never saw Lavigne, she felt, in her gut, that he was still alive. The man would follow her half-dead with limbs dangling by their tissue. She'd defied him, embarrassed him, and emasculated him. If he got his hands on her, he'd immediately snap her neck.

Then she heard a sweet sound—a car engine.

A road.

Something sharp caught her heel, and she felt the skin split open, but she ignored it. The treeline thinned, giving her a view of the paved roadway. Tears fell from her eyes.

Faster.

She needed to move faster.

Lungs burning, she pushed herself until she reached the roadway—just in time to see the back of the car as it sped by.

“Hey!” She screamed, waving her arms. “Help! Help!”

The car's brake lights came on.

A bullet grazed her arm from the wooded area behind her.

“Fuck!”

She sprinted to the other side of the woods and prayed the person had seen enough to at least alert authorities.

CHAPTER 43

“We’re only about thirty minutes out,” Adrián said.

Joel’s leg bounced.

Come on, Eesh.

Stay alive for me.

Fight, baby.

“We’ll fan out when we get there,” Adrián continued. “There might be something abandoned near the campgrounds. Something people wouldn’t willingly check.”

As they sped by the forest, Joel scanned the trees, unsure what he was hoping to find. His brain tried to conjure an image of a lifeless body along the side of the road, but he sent it away with a tap of his temple. When that didn’t work, he put his head down.

Not his girl.

Not his woman.

Not his wife.

She was the love of his life. The love of his *entire* life. He needed more of her arms, of her scent, her lips. More of her sense of humor and her brain-twisting ways to get him to share things he’d been sure he didn’t know how to communicate.

“Stop,” Giorgio said.

Adrian immediately hit the brake, sending them all pitching forward, the tires screeching on the paved surface. Joel turned to Giorgio in the backseat, but his eye caught something through the rear windshield.

Giorgio got out.

He popped off his seatbelt and did the same. “I saw a woman. You saw her right, Giorgio?”

“Da.” Giorgio brandished a pair of knives as long as his arms. “East.”

Something else caught his eye.

Movement.

“Somebody help! Please!”

Joel took off into the woods. It was her—he would know her shape with his eyes closed and her voice even if he couldn’t hear.

He spotted the outline of her body through the trees. If she was running *away* from the road, Lavigne was somewhere nearby.

He could tell she was at the end of her rope; he was closing in too fast, and she fell and got right back up on wobbly, exhausted legs.

“Eesh!”

She came to an abrupt stop. “Joel?”

“Ayesha!”

She turned.

Their eyes met.

Then she started running toward him.

Bullets whizzed by, penetrating the tree trunks and kicking up dust and leaves from the ground. Joel mentally mapped which direction they were coming from and placed himself between Ayesha and each shot. It didn't matter where on him the shot landed, even if it was fatal. As long as she didn't get it.

They collided.

Ayesha grabbed his head and dragged it down.

Something exploded in a trunk behind her.

He faced where the shot had come from, making sure his entire body covered hers, and spotted Lavigne, bloodied and unsteady, aiming a gun in his direction.

A shot hit Lavigne in the shoulder from Adrián's gun. Lavigne jerked slightly, his arm fell, but then he regained his balance.

He raised the gun again.

Joel walked toward him. "Stay here, Eesh. Okay, babe?"

Lavigne's trigger finger twitched.

Joel caught the axe Giorgio tossed right before Giorgio sliced the gun-wielding hand clean off Lavigne's wrist.

Joel spun the axe and kept his gaze locked with Lavigne's. He wanted to be the last thing the motherfucker saw. The motherfucker who killed Curtis, putting Ayesha through pain she never should have had to endure. And, if not for Curtis, the motherfucker would have killed the whole team. Gage, Dez, Julien, Giorgio, Mike—all of them, gone.

Then, the motherfucker *hurt his child*.

His children.

His wife.

On the last spin, Joel gripped the axe and swung, swiping it across Lavigne's neck. After a few stunned seconds, Lavigne's body went one way, and his head went the other, rolling before it came to a standstill.

"Lattimore." Giorgio looked over, a smile on his face that showed up less frequently than Halley's comet. "Beautiful."

Adrian walked up. "I haven't known you long, but this is about the third or fourth decapitation I've seen you do. Maybe I should stop teasing you about Ayesha."

Joel faced Ayesha and finally allowed himself to take in her appearance. How bruised she was, how swollen.

The axe fell from his hand.

"Eesh," he walked toward her, "I'm so sorry."

She started for him, but then he spotted the hole in the trunk and came to an abrupt stop.

"Eesh, wait." The bullet that made the hole couldn't have belonged to Lavigne's gun. Both the size and the trajectory were off. "Mike, someone else is out here. Lavigne's not the original shooter."

"On it," Mike said.

"Me and Gage are headed to you with medkits," Dez said. "EMS is en route. How's Eesh?"

"She'll...she'll need a medkit."

"Joel," Ayesha called. "Can I come now, baby?"

Mike's voice sounded in his ear.

“I’ve got eyes on the shooter.”

He nodded. “Yeah, you can—”

“Get down, get down!”

The second the command left Mike’s mouth, he heard the shots—four. The world blurred for a moment as he took Ayesha in from head to toe. If it was a head shot, she wouldn’t survive, and already, he felt air seeping from his lungs. She’d continued living for the boys after Curtis was killed, but he couldn’t for sure say he’d ever find the will to live without her.

“I’m not hurt,” she said. “I didn’t get hit, baby.”

Behind him, he heard a wet, straining cough, and his face went ice cold. “You piece of shit. You fucking piece of...” He turned around, caught Adrián before he fell, and eased him down to the ground. “Adrián, you son of a bitch. You son of a fucking bitch.”

“You...are okay?” Adrián asked.

“Shut up.” He retrieved a knife and sliced through Adrián’s shirt. “What the fuck were you thinking?”

“That...you would...be shot. I saw him. It’s Wesley. He... was not...dead. Lavigne...lied.”

“Shooter’s down.”

Joel rolled Adrián onto his side. “Two entry wounds. Upper chest. Right side. Two exit wounds.”

“That’s good, no?” Adrián asked. “Exit...wounds. This... is good.”

“I said shut the fuck up, Delgano. Dez—”

“I’m here.”

Dez kneeled beside them.

Ayesha kneeled on Adrián's other side and pressed her lips to Adrián's forehead, teardrops falling onto his skin. Adrián smiled and cradled the back of her head with a bloody hand.

“Olá, querida. Did you kiss me? Am I already in heaven?”

“Was that your motive all along?” Joel asked. “Take a couple of bullets for me so I'd let my wife kiss you?”

“This is...what it...would have taken...no?”

“You better not die.”

Adrián forced out a weak laugh. “See? We...are...friends.”

“No, I'm supposed to kill you. We had an agreement.”

“Lattimore.” He felt Giorgio's hand on his shoulder. “Lattimore, do not sleep.”

“What?” he asked. “What do you m—”

Pain hit him.

Severe pain.

He felt it everywhere, but it was concentrated in his back. There'd been four shots. Adrián took two. That meant there were two unaccounted for.

“Gage,” he called. “Gage, I'm hit.”

He knew why it was Gage.

Why it would have always been Gage.

“Hit?” Gage asked. “What's hit?”

Then he heard Ayesha scream his name, the echo carrying through the entire forest.

“What's hit?” Gage asked, appearing above him.

Joel shook his head, tears building at the corners of his eyes. “This one might be bad, big guy.”

“One to ten?”

“Fifteen approaching one hundred.”

It had to be bad.

Even Gage’s voice shook.

“Mate, don’t do this to me.” Gage cut through his shirt. “Fuck, fuck, fuck. One two. One...shit. There’s no second exit wound.”

“Where’s Eesh?” Joel asked.

“I’m here, baby,” she screamed. “Mike, let me go.”

“Eesh, you can’t.”

Sirens sounded.

“Mike, let me go.”

“Eesh, Gage needs the space. We need to let him work.”

“Mike, let me the fuck go. Please.” Her voice changed, grew weaker. “Please, please, please. Joel, you promised me. You promised me. Baby, don’t do this.”

Less air surrounded him. Suddenly, he was underwater—blood was in his lungs.

Dozens of footsteps surrounded him.

“Be careful with him,” he heard Ayesha scream. “If he dies, Giorgio, I want you to kill every last fucking one of them.”

“Da.”

“Ayesha? Babe?” The tears came faster, hotter, dripping down the sides of his face. “Mike, let her come.”

The next second, he felt her hands on his face, her lips on his forehead. She shook so much, it felt like the earth moved.

“Eesh, you have to...you have to make sure. Make sure the boys know.”

He couldn't make out her words, and it felt like hands were all over him, people chattering and moving swiftly, with Ayesha's cries woven between the commotion.

“Make sure...the baby knows, Ayesha. I love them. I... love them. With everything...in me...I love...them.”

“Joel, don't do this.”

“Doesn't seem...like I have...much of...a choice.”

Her touch disappeared.

Her screams resumed.

Then he felt himself being hoisted.

“Ay...esha,” he called. “I...love...you. I...love...you. And, baby...I'm...so...sorry.”

CHAPTER 44

Ayesha braced herself before she entered the hospital room.

Nothing changed.

Day after day, they expected her to take solace in the word “stable,” but it was like they didn’t understand. The other half of her heart lay in their I.C.U. hospital bed, so stable wouldn’t fucking cut it.

She opened the door, her head down.

After bolstering herself with a breath, she looked up, and it never got easier. There were so many machines, so many tubes. It was hard to see him like this, to know that if she talked to him, he couldn’t respond. If she squeezed his hand, he couldn’t squeeze back. It was a more favorable scenario than what had happened to Curtis, but it was so damn hard to see him like this.

“In the little houses, the tenant people sifted their belongings and the belongings of their fathers and of their grandfathers. Picked over their possessions for the journey to the west.”

Adrián, who’d only left the I.C.U. a week ago, sat in a chair at Joel’s bedside, his IV pole beside him.

“Adrián?”

He looked up and smiled, a book in one hand. “Olá, querida.”

She entered the room, and he started to fetch a chair for her, but she told him to stay seated. She’d only spent a week in the hospital; most of her recovery was mental, assisted by twice-per-week intensive therapy sessions. Luckily, despite Lavigne’s blows, she never fractured any bones in her face.

In the meantime, she and the boys were staying in a nearby hotel, and the boys only slept if she was in bed with them. Even then, they slept in fits and starts, sometimes waking up in the middle of searching for Joel in their dreams. She couldn’t be strong for them, so she was grateful that Joel’s parents had accompanied her.

The rest of the team visited often.

She’d urged them to go home and take care of their families, but they checked in every day. However, she knew they would all come back if Joel wasn’t awake in the next couple of days, even though it was only a short train ride to the hospital.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, setting her chair next to Adrián’s.

He raised the book. “Reading. We’re on *The Grapes of Wrath*. When we were both in I.C.U., I read to him once I was able, so I didn’t want to break the tradition. I think he would prefer Tom Clancy or something, but I couldn’t find any here.”

“He’s going to be pissed you’re taking such good care of him.”

Adrián grinned. “Oh, I know. But how are you, querida?”

“Doing really well, to be honest. Therapy has been more than helpful. What about you?”

“I’m on hospital-grade pain medication.”

“Good, so you can’t feel this.” She swatted his arm with the force of a cotton ball. “I know I should be grateful, and I am. I promise you, I am. But me being in love with Joel doesn’t mean Adrián Delgano’s okay to die.”

He set the book down. “About that...can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“At your wedding, when I told you that had it been anyone other than Joel, I would have fought for you, you said, ‘and selfishly wormed your way *back* into my heart.’ Can you...elaborate? Specifically on the ‘back’ part.”

It wouldn’t mean the same thing, and Joel already knew, but it would still be hard to say, especially since it would feel like she was betraying him somehow.

“Adrián, because of when we met, I think I might have misjudged my feelings for you,” she said. “I...I think I do love you.”

His chest stopped moving. “I can’t tell if this is happening or I’m hallucinating from the painkillers.”

“Obviously, it’s a different kind of love.”

“I know, but it doesn’t matter.”

“Adrián, when I say I love you, it means I care about you. More than a little bit. I care about what happens to you. You’re important to me. When you got hurt, I freaked out, though,” she glanced at Joel, “not as much as Joel did.”

“Because we’re best friends.”

It was funny how things came full circle. Joel had gone from Gage’s tormentor to the one being tormented. The fact that he and Adrián seemed to get along, regardless of what Joel said, meant Adrián was precisely the kind of man she’d hoped he would be.

“So,” he circled a finger, “go back to you telling me you love me.”

“I didn’t think it was right, loving you before my husband had been in the ground not even two years,” she explained. “I thought it would devalue what me and Curtis had, but I’ve had some time to think about it. Looking at Joel, and after spending these last few years with him in my life, I know exactly why I feel the way about him I do. Why I feel the way about you that I do. You and Joel are people Curtis would have been proud to call his brothers. That’s how you both got into my heart. Joel, though...with him, it’s different. It’s like part of Curtis’ soul lives inside him somehow. Joel’s my soulmate. My everything.”

Adrián took her hand. “Say you love me one more time. Maybe he’ll wake up.”

She smiled. “I love you, Adrián.”

They looked over at Joel.

“Adrián, there’s something else,” she added, clearing a knot of emotion from her throat. “Lavigne told me something about you. Something I don’t think is true.”

“About my lack of sexual experience before you?”

“Something like that.”

“Querida, where I grew up, sex was never about pleasure or intimacy. Sex didn’t exist. Intercourse was always about power, control, and violence. My mother was the only buffer I had, and she was defiled in public and then killed. After that, I grew cold. Before I joined my team, I wasn’t good. I wasn’t good at all.”

“You might have done less-than-stellar things, but I don’t think you were bad,” she said. “You did what you had to do to survive, but someone ‘bad’ wouldn’t do what you did for me, my children, and the man I love.”

“Which is me, right?”

She swatted his hand.

“So, to you, Ayesha,” he swallowed, “I’m still good?”

“To me, Adrián, you’re wonderful.”

“Christ, querida. I’m trying to fall out of love with you.”

“Sorry.”

He sighed. “Ayesha, the mere *thought* of people was enough to make me pull away. Still, no matter how far I fell, in my mind, there was a ladder or stairs back to the version of me my mother had tried to raise. But whenever I tried to be intimate, I saw what those men did to her.”

“What made you choose me?”

“My heart did,” he said. “My mother wasn’t the most beautiful woman in Brazil, which is how these stories often start. She was plain and overlooked with nine brothers and sisters. My grandparents kicked her out at fifteen after she became pregnant with me because a man much too old for her wielded the word ‘beautiful’ like a magic key. Yet, to me, she was the most lovely sight, an angel. And she was the kindest

person I knew. Before you, I'd never met someone else like that. Someone who makes you reconsider the way you look at the world. The first time we met," the corner of his mouth tugged, "you smiled at me. You looked up at me with those eyes, holding Theo, and said, 'Oh, hi. Come on in, suite neighbor.'"

The memory slowly returned, of him standing outside her office door wearing gray dress pants, a matching vest, a white dress shirt, and a navy blue tie. Looking back, knowing what she now knew, she realized he never looked at her like a stranger would have.

"Do you remember it?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yes."

"Do you remember when Theo spit up on me?"

"Oh my gosh, and then I asked you how much the shirt cost and you said, 'Only fifteen hundred.' I almost died right there. My son had just covered your fifteen hundred dollar shirt in breastmilk and baby-grade stomach acid."

He laughed. "You tried to dab it off."

"And made it worse."

"Then when I told you it was getting worse, you said, 'Oh, crap. I'm so sorry.' Do you remember what you did after?"

She smiled. "I hugged you."

"Like it was nothing." He released a quiet laugh. "Like your mind had already made up that I was worth hugging, so it came naturally. Ayesha, you saw *worth* inside me, and as I got to know you, I decided that if you would have me, I would make love to you. I knew from then that I was never going to hurt you. I didn't expect to fall in love, but I did, and loving

you after loving no one for so long has been extraordinary. So, you see, I didn't choose you, my querida. You found your way into my heart."

She fiddled with her thumbnails, head down.

"I gave you a flutter?" he asked.

"A little bit."

"Don't worry about it. I'm from Brazil. We're known for giving flutters."

"How can I allow that to happen, though? What kind of a wife does that make me?"

"Ayesha, would you ever leave Joel for me?"

"No offense, but never."

"Then why look so worried?"

"I don't want Joel to feel like I betrayed him by caring about you the way I do," she said. "Like I'm *betraying* him. He means so much, Adrián. So much that I feel like I'm dying whenever I look at him in that bed. We have children, and yet, in my mind, I feel like if he doesn't make it, I won't either."

He tapped his chest. "Ayesha, you look at me like a person. You look at him like he was Montezuma's treasure all along."

"You'll have to explain that one to me sometime."

She looked over at Joel.

Please, baby.

Fight.

Come home.

I need you.

I love you.

“Is the baby okay?” Adrián asked. At the surprise on her face, he added, “Joel told me. And, apparently, he asked one of the paramedics if his ‘wife’s boyfriend’ made it, but I think he was in too much pain for the sarcasm to shine through. So they told *me* that the baby didn’t seem to be in any distress.”

“The baby’s okay,” she said, laughing a little. “Only Joel would crack a joke like that while fighting for his life.”

The corners of her mouth momentarily drooped. Neither of the boys had seen Joel yet. She’d promised to bring them once he was moved from I.C.U., but she didn’t want them to see him like this.

Adrián wrapped an arm around her shoulders, and she leaned against him. “Ayesha, he’ll pull through. There’s no way he’ll die knowing I’d propose to you at his funeral.”

She managed another weak laugh.

“Maybe I’ll buy you an engagement ring, just in case. Speed up the process.”

“An engagement ring? He’d jackknife awake.” She wiped at her eyes. “Can you keep reading to him?”

“Of course.” He released her, grabbed the book, opened it, and cleared his throat. “*“The men were ruthless because the past had been spoiled, but the women knew how the past would cry to them in the coming days...”*”

* * *

“Querida? Querida, wake up.”

She opened her eyes.

Adrián stood over her, a food tray in his hand.

“What time is it?” she asked.

“Time for you to eat.”

“How’s Joel?”

“We’re actually down in my room.”

“How’d I get here?” She yawned. “You didn’t carry me, did you?”

“I wish, but I’m currently a feeble man. Pozza stopped by. Here, you can eat on the bed.” Adrian patted the thin mattress. “I’ve already eaten. I’ll sit in the chair.”

She climbed onto the bed, raised the lid on the food container, and laughed at the section of oil-free zucchini.

He grinned. “I made sure to check this time.”

Right after her first bite, her phone buzzed.

When she saw Gage’s number, she dropped her fork. Her heart rammed against her ribcage. It was hard to breathe. She’d listed Gage as Joel’s first emergency contact in the event they called with news she wouldn’t be able to handle.

She accepted the call and tapped the speaker button. “Gage?” she answered. “Please don’t tell me it’s bad news.”

“He’s up, Eesh,” Gage said. “They just called me like three minutes ago, and the first words he said were, ‘If my wife married her boyfriend, somebody bring me an axe.’”

CHAPTER 45

“Hi, baby.” Warm lips touched Joel’s forehead. “Hi, honey. Are you feeling okay? Do you need anything?”

Joel opened his eyes.

Ayesha was halfway on the bed next to him, smoothing his hair and kissing his forehead, her heart beating against the side of his arm through her elegant, flower-patterned dress. He wiggled his fingers, and she slid hers between them. Although she came every day, it was always like seeing her for the first time.

“Hi, sweetheart,” he said. “Feeling okay today?”

“I’m with you. I’m excellent.”

“How are the boys?”

“They miss you.”

“How’s the baby?”

“Joel, you’ve been out of intensive care for quite some time now.” Her eyes opened wide. “I had her three months ago.”

“What?” He tried to sit up in bed, but weariness shoved him back down onto the thin mattress.

“I named her Leojoelita Lattimore.”

She giggled.

“Ayesha,” he groaned. “Babe, don’t do that to me while I’m helpless and vulnerable. It’s so hard to keep track of time in this place.”

“It was Gage’s idea to make you think you’ve been here for months because you always wake up disoriented.”

“Of course, it would be Gage. But our baby’s still baking?”

“And doing well.” She raised her shirt. “I’m even showing a little bit already.”

He set his hand on her stomach, eyes welling up with tears. Part of him still couldn’t believe it and that it would take holding their slippery, screaming newborn before he accepted she’d taken this step with him.

“We’re calling it Darth Baby,” she said. “Theo has discovered Star Wars.”

“Darth Baby? I like that.”

“I have an O.B. appointment tomorrow. I’ll bring you the ultrasounds, as usual.”

“I want to come with you.”

“Sir, you are bedridden.”

“I want to hear Darth Baby’s heartbeat.”

She kissed him, and he wished the hospital had the ability to bottle and pump the effect she had on him into his IV.

“Are the boys here or back at home?” he asked.

“They’re at the hotel with your parents. Josiah’s doing virtual school, and I caught Theo wiping a booger on one of the machines, so they might only let me bring him one more time.”

He laughed despite the dull ache it caused in his chest. “And where’s Adrián? Has he been discharged yet?”

“No, he’s down at the cafeteria. Why? You sound awfully concerned about your ‘wife’s boyfriend.’”

“The medics didn’t get the joke.”

“Your sense of humor is an acquired taste. Lucky for you, it’s one I consume very liberally.”

“Do you know what he’s doing when he’s discharged?”

“No, he hasn’t said. Why?”

“We’ll probably have to do PT for recovery. He should probably stay near the one friend he has.”

She wiggled a finger at him. “You?”

“Ha-ha.”

“Joel, you freaked out when he got shot.”

“I was worried for *you*,” he said. “By the way, did you finally tell him you still love him while I was unconscious?”

She froze. “It’s not the same—”

“I know.” He squeezed her ass, and the sensation of touching her was another thing he wished he could harvest and inject. “You love Big Daddy so much more.”

She nudged him, bent as if getting ready to kiss him, and nipped his bottom lip. Apparently, near-death experiences, pain, and painkillers didn’t hinder his erections.

“It’s fine, Ayesha,” he continued. “So, you care about him. Then there’s the L word you might have used, but what you and I have isn’t shaky. It’s not breakable. As long as the baby doesn’t come out looking like Adrián, we’ll be fine.”

She tried to hold in her laughter and failed, and he loved seeing her like this. Having her in his life was a blessing in so many ways, but there were days he couldn't believe he was the one she chose to marry. The one she trusted to be the father of her children. She saw him as someone worthy of being taken into her once-shattered heart, and he would never be able to explain precisely how much that had changed him.

“How are you feeling, really?” He stroked her hip, bunching and releasing the fabric of the dress. “How’s therapy?”

“Effective.”

“And the nightmares?”

“Few and far between.”

“Are you lying to me?”

She gave him a real kiss, and although it was a light brush of her lips, his blood stirred. “I’m not lying to you,” she reassured him. “I’m feeling like myself again. I don’t look over my shoulder or see him in my dreams as much as I used to. I’m healing, Joel. I’ve even started thinking about...you know...again.”

“What’s ‘you know’?”

“Apparently, ‘Big Daddy.’” She snickered. “You know what’s funny? Curtis used to make that ‘Big Daddy’ joke. I think I have a type.”

“Swarthy? Handsome? Hilarious?”

“Curtis was all those things.”

“I didn’t mean him.”

“Adrián, then?”

He reached for his chest. “I think I feel the exit wound opening up.”

“Joel, your heart could fall out, and you’d wake up and put it back in the minute you hear anything close to Adrián or Delgano.”

“Hell, yes. I can hear him now. ‘Querida, I’m so sorry for your loss. Come, let me hold you. I’m here for you. Put your head on my shoulder.’ Then he’d toss in some Portuguese, lowering onto one knee as they lower my casket into the ground.”

She laughed. “Oh? That’s all he’d need to woo me? A little Portuguese?”

“Ayesha, *mi sono innamorato di te. Sono pazzo di te. Sei la cosa più bella che mi sia mai capitata. Resta con me per sempre.*”

Her blinks slowed.

Her breaths lengthened.

“See?” He motioned to her. “Even my Italian, which would make my mother cringe, can make you swoon.”

“That’s not fair. Those words are coming from your mouth.” She passed her fingers through his hair. “Do you know how special you are to me? God, Joel. I’m surprised I ever stop smiling. What did I ever do to deserve you?”

“Loved me the right way,” he said.

Their lips brushed.

Then his body picked up on how warm she felt against him, the curve of her figure and her breasts pressed into his side. He thought about how her sitting in that chair at their wedding wouldn’t be the last image he had of her. He thought

about how she looked on the beach in Malibu, that night in Maui when Theo was sick, at Gage and Tayler's wedding, in Fiji, and right now, in front of him.

"Eesh?"

"No."

"What was I going to say?"

"You were going to tell me to take off my panties."

"I was going to ask if you knew what I said earlier in Italian," he lied. *"I'm in love with you. I'm crazy about you. You're the best thing that's ever happened to me. Stay with me forever. Take off your panties."*

"How'd four Italian phrases get translated into five English ones?"

"It's Italian. It would take too long to explain."

"Ah."

"Are you wearing panties?"

"Yes."

"Take them off."

"No."

"Eesh, we're in Europe. They expect us to fuck in the hospital bed."

"You-just-had-surgery."

"Not-on-my-dick."

She slid off the bed. "Are you hungry? I'll bring you something to eat. And maybe some cold water."

"Eesh, quick. It's *growing*."

Laughing so hard she started coughing, she searched the cabinets and grabbed an extra sheet. After folding it several times, she did her best to use it to try to cover him.

“Please let me have a girl,” she said. “I can’t deal with the boys, you, and another one.”

“What if it’s a girl like me?”

“God wouldn’t be so cruel.”

He grinned. “Have you thought of names? Real names. Our kid wouldn’t learn to spell Leo-joe-oh-lita until their college applications, and they’d still leave out an e.”

She mirrored his grin. “I was thinking we should go with a T name. You know, because of Josiah, Joel. That way, Theo feels included. Then, if we have another one, we can do an A name.”

“It was starting to go back down until you mentioned ‘another one.’”

“I have to be realistic. You give me a lot of...*batter*.”

“Making it worse.”

“I’ve been trying to figure out how to swallow half and let you finish coming inside me, but I don’t think you’d make it. You’d just keep coming and coming down my throat.”

He groaned.

“I’m surprised I don’t choke.”

“Ayesha, *take off your panties*.”

Adrian knocked on the doorjamb. “Ahem. The nurses wanted me to let you know that it’s okay if you want to close the door.”

Ayesha shook her head. “We’re not closing the door.”

“Close the door,” Joel said.

She graced him with another kiss, and he pinched her nipple through the dress. It almost worked—she trembled and moaned quietly against his lips but then pulled away.

“I’m getting you something to eat,” she said.

Adrián held up a plate. “Oh, I brought something.”

“Delgano, did you bring that for me or Ayesha?” Joel asked.

Adrián handed her the covered plate. “You?”

“I’m asking Julien to make some kind of device that shocks you whenever you’re within a certain number of yards of my wife.”

Adrián went to his side of the room and sat on the bed. “I’d risk anything for love.”

Joel started to reach for the folded sheet draped over him to toss it at Adrián’s head but quickly realized that he would need it as long as Ayesha was there.

First, she helped him sit up.

Then she pulled up a chair and removed the cover from a plate of Swedish meatballs, mashed potatoes, carrots, and some kind of fruit crumble.

She tested the food, and he started to tease her that he wasn’t Theo, but he couldn’t. Not when she was so concerned and determined. He was recovering from what wasn’t his first gunshot wound. Steamy potatoes burning his tongue was far from a threat.

She raised the fork. “Mission Control, this is Airline Potato Mash. Are we cleared for landing?”

“Ayesha,” he chuckled, “really?”

“Are we cleared for landing?” she repeated, firmer.

He glanced at Adrián. “Don’t say a word to the Manly Men Association of the Globe.”

“You mean the Em-ma-te-guh?” Adrián raised a hand. “Hand to God. Not a word.”

Ayesha burst out laughing.

He eyed her. “That’s a big laugh for someone who’s not your husband.”

She cleared her throat, mouth twitching. “Mission Control?”

He sighed. “You’re cleared for landing.”

CHAPTER 46

“Good morning, my love.” Ayesha lifted the half-awake infant from the crib and set her on the changing station. “How’d my little girl sleep? You know, once your brothers get up, you won’t have a moment of peace.”

Her two-month-old daughter yawned.

“That was a big yawn!”

It hadn’t been that long since a baby was in the house, but it felt like eons ago. That first year with Theo went by in a blur, so she’d promised herself to be more present and live in each moment. One day, there would be no more coos, no more adorable mistaken words, and no more, “Ma, have you seen my...?”

She unzipped the onesie. “Today’s also your brother’s birthday party, which he’s been waiting on for months, so get ready to hear all about his excitement. Which reminds me, your daddy should be finishing up soon.”

“We just did.”

She looked up to find Joel standing in the doorway watching them, visibly exhausted with a wrench in one hand. He stared at her for a long moment, then his gaze fell to their daughter, Tiare Raven Lattimore.

Since Tiare's birth, he'd stared at her that way, as though waiting for someone to wake him up and tell him none of it was real. That he was, in fact, still alone and living in the penthouse condo in D.C., reeling over his divorce.

"Yeah, we just finished getting everything set up," he said. "We've got game booths and bounce houses, a limbo station, the pinata he vehemently requested, and a gigantic-ass ball pit. The works."

"Baby, did you get any sleep last night?"

He made a non-committal noise.

She pointed to the wrench. "You know you could have left that downstairs, right?"

"If I did, how would you know how hard I worked?"

She laughed. "You could have hired a crew."

"Next time." He yawned, tousling his hair. "It's Theo's first birthday party with me as his father—legally. I wanted to do it this time. Plus, he's been waiting for it to warm up. He learned how to read a calendar and everything. Told me he'll turn six by the time this birthday party rolls around."

"For a five-year-old, waiting months after your birthday to celebrate it with your friends is cruel and unusual punishment." She leaned over and kissed Tiare's belly. "Tiare, how about if Daddy picks out your outfit for today?"

Joel set aside the wrench, pumped sanitizer into his hands, and went to their daughter's overstuffed chest of drawers. "Daddy's always down to pick out his baby girl's outfits. Let's see...Ti, what are you feeling like? The weather's nice, and since it's spring, are you feeling like some flowers?"

Tiare cooed.

“Yeah, you wore flowers yesterday.” He continued to rummage. “Okay, how about this? Before the party, you’ll kill it in this pink dress. Once the party starts, you’ll do a wardrobe change into this three-piece set Mama and Daddy bought you a few days ago because,” he glanced at the full closet, “you clearly needed more clothes.”

Ayesha snickered, and the smile Joel gave her melted her heart. The man was so lovely, so beautiful and supportive. Parenting would never be easy, in any form; however, when she compared it to the days when it was just her with an infant and a small child as opposed to now with Joel and the whole family nearby?

It was pure joy.

Raising children, she realized, should never be done in isolation. Often, it took more than a couple of parents. The adage “it takes a village” made the most sense it ever had now that everyone was no longer oceans away.

“Sound good, princess?” Joel asked.

Tiare sneezed.

“Oh, thanks for reminding me. For you, it might be a little nippy. We’ll add a cardigan. The one with the ears because Josiah thinks it’s the most adorable thing ever, and Theo loves that you have a sweater with ears like he does.”

She stepped aside.

While Joel changed their daughter, he told Tiare about all the things they’d set up for Theo’s party. Even after two months, he still choked up whenever Tiare was near. As he picked her up, he kissed her forehead and cradled her in one arm.

“I’ve had literal dreams about this,” Ayesha said. “Told you it would happen.”

“So, what? You seduced me for the sole purpose of proving me wrong?”

“Yes.”

He gave Tiare another kiss. “If I’m being honest, I’ll never truly understand how you could have dreamed about having a baby with *me*. Raising a child with *me*.”

“Joel, I’ve always wanted to be a mother.” She wrapped her arms around him from behind. “Although it wasn’t as long as I would have loved for it to be, I had a great relationship with my mother. I wanted to be with my children the way she was with me. Then, I met Curtis. I met you. You both care about your families, your friends. You care about me. Joel, we parent together. We work *together* to raise decent human beings. You accept the humanness inside me, so as someone who knew she wanted kids, I feel very fortunate to have found not only one but two husbands I knew I wanted as role models for my children.”

The entire time she spoke, he barely blinked. Tiare had fallen back to sleep, which she always did whenever Joel held her, tucked in like a football and close to his heartbeat.

He grimaced.

“What was that?” she asked.

“Me thinking about how close I came to missing out on you.”

“We’re both to blame, avoiding each other.”

“Like fools.”

She smiled, releasing him. “I’ll get the boys up. I’m surprised—”

“Mama!” Theo raced into the room, crashed into her legs, and bounced on the balls of his feet. “Today’s my birthday party!”

“It is!” She kissed the top of his head. “Are you excited?”

“I’m so excited.” He turned to Joel. “Good morning, Daddy!”

“Good morning, Theo-potamus. Everything’s all set up for your party, baby boy.”

“Do you think my friends will come?”

Theo had made a few friends at school, and they were expecting a good deal of his classmates to attend based on their RSVPs. His entire soccer team was also supposed to be attending, and they’d invited friends of Thandie’s and Josiah’s, including Malia.

“They’ll come,” Joel said.

Joel’s parents entered the nursery.

Ayesha released Theo to give him a clear path to rush-hug his grandparents.

Jemma picked him up and squeezed, planting kisses all over his face that Theo ate up like candy. Next, they graced her with hugs and kisses on the cheek and forehead that made her skin flush with warmth.

She’d forgotten about this aspect of becoming part of another family. Archie and Jemma helped to provide a Band-Aid for the wound losing her parents had created, as well as Curtis’ family’s detachment. For Josiah’s sake, she recently

started letting him talk to them via video chat, and the last time they spoke, she heard them ask if she was doing well.

“Grandma Jemma, Grandpa Archie, I missed you!”

Archie and Jemma had been there for nearly a week.

Jemma rubbed her cheek against his. “We missed you too, sweetheart.”

Theo, in full baby mode, set his head on Jemma’s shoulder. “I have a daddy and a grandma and a grandpa. I never had a daddy or a grandma or a grandpa.”

Archie tugged Theo’s cheek. “And we’ve never had a Theo. Might I add, you are the best Theo I have ever met.”

“Have you met a lot of Theos?” Theo asked, eyes wide.

“Dozens,” Archie said. “At least one hundred.”

“And *I’m* the best one?”

“The very best one.”

“Daddy,” Theo raised his head and turned to Joel, “I might be the best Theo in the world.”

“You’re certainly the best Theo in my world.”

Jemma kissed his cheek. “Come on, best Theo. We have a breakfast suitable for a birthday boy downstairs.”

“And son, if you don’t mind, I’ll just...” Archie scooped Tiare out of Joel’s arms. “Thanks, son.”

The four of them left, Theo asking if Josiah was awake yet as they disappeared down the hallway. Ayesha and Joel remained behind, brows wrinkled.

Joel looked down at his empty arms. “What just happened?”

“I’m not sure.” Ayesha looked around the room. “There were kids in here, weren’t there? It all happened so fast.”

He erased the gap between them, took both her hands, and kissed her palm. “Since my parents seem to have this handled, and we have some time before the party, are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“I think so. Plus, I pumped earlier, so there’s food for all three kids. I’d say we can disappear for a couple of hours.”

“At least.” He yawned, walking them to the owner’s suite. “But we need to set an alarm this time. Our last nap turned into a sleep.”

EPILOGUE

Joel watched as Theo raced around, going from activity to activity, his friends running beside him. Everyone had attended, from Theo's classroom to the soccer team. Theo might have been a hare in a tortoise world, and not everyone would understand or accept that, but that didn't stop him from being one of the most amazing kids even to be born into that tortoise world.

Malia and her family flew out for Theo's birthday, and he spotted Josiah and Josiah's friends teaching her how to do a turn on a skateboard. It filled him with pride to know how kind Josiah's friends were, primarily because Josiah was kind himself. Like Josiah, they didn't coddle Malia because she wore a prosthesis, but they didn't push her too hard, either.

What he wasn't looking forward to, primarily for Josiah's sake, was having "the talk." At the moment, he wasn't sure whether he'd rope the guys in or whether it would be him and Ayesha. He was leaning more on the guys because Ayesha had a panic attack if he hinted at it.

"Hey, Eesh? With Malia popping up more and more, think we should go ahead and talk to Josiah about sex?"

Ayesha's face lost all its color. "He's just a baby, Joel."

"Eesh, Josiah's twelve now."

"A twelve-year-old baby."

"Whether we like it or not, biology is going to start kicking in. He'll start having...sensations, and that's if he doesn't already. Shit starts getting intense around puberty."

"What sensations?"

"Sexual feelings. Physical attraction. Curiosity about sex. Increased interest in...anatomy. At least, more interest. Then there are the surprise erections. Those, I do not miss at all."

Ayesha scrubbed her face, and he watched her go from gray back to her usual lovely brown as she removed her hand.

"Joel, baby, I can't do this. I can't. And what do you mean by 'more interest'? Malia barely has 'anatomy' to speak of."

"Not Malia. When we're out, I notice where his eyes go. The boy is an ass man."

"Please stop. I'll go into early labor."

"Babe, it's better that we guide him than leave him to try to figure things out independently. That's where he'd run into problems."

"You didn't start having sex at twelve, did you?"

"God, no."

She exhaled.

“But that’s around the time I definitely started thinking about it.”

Tiare snoozed in the carrier strapped to his chest, adorable as hell in her little cardigan with the animal ears. It was the first time he got to spend alone with her all morning. If she wasn’t with her grandparents, she was with someone else—Dez, Mo, Giorgio. She adored Giorgio, the lucky recipient of her first official smile.

Dmitri and Sydney had made it out with their boys. Dmitri’s treatments were going well, and he’d already regained much of the weight he’d lost over the last several months.

“Baby girl,” Joel kissed the top of Tiare’s head, “I want to let you know now that your family’s a little...unconventional. One of your uncles is a high-functioning *something-o-path*—the jury’s still out. Your father is, apparently, not right in the head. All of your uncles are, I guess you could argue, dangerous. Then the worst infraction of them all, sweetheart? The absolute worst? It’s your godfather.”

“Why am I the worst?” Adrián smoothed Tiare’s hair with an index finger. “Huh, little querida? How could I be the worst?”

“The querida ban extends to my daughter.”

Adrián laughed. “I concede. She is her father’s daughter.”

“Your feelings for my wife are finally dying?”

“Not dying. Transforming. It’s a love that’s wrapped in friendship. Like I’m part of something bigger.” Adrián looked out at Theo’s birthday party bonanza. “This is amazing. No wonder Central fears Alpha. They can never break this up.”

There wasn't a chance in hell.

“From what I understand, the final count is Alpha, Gamma, Delta, and Omega,” Joel said.

Adrián folded his arms across his chest. “It all makes me uneasy. You think I would be used to this. In Rio, there was violence all the time. In my favela, we didn't listen to the government. We didn't listen to the police. They weren't the ones we saw patrolling the streets with guns.”

“Favelas are like neighborhoods, right?”

“Yes. Poor, but not without love. Not without community. With my mother and with my friends, I was content. If someone was gunned down in the street,” Adrián shrugged, “we would say it was their fault. Called it law and order. Called it justified.”

“Until it was your mother.”

“How'd you know?”

“How did she die? Your mother.”

“For saying no. For believing her body was her own. They left her in the streets. I saw it happen from my school window. After that, I don't remember much. I didn't for a while. Everything inside me died with her.”

Theo tossed a beanbag clear into a cornhole opening. Around him, his friends cheered, and even from across the field, Joel spotted the red tint to his caramel complexion and shy grin.

“Are the rumors about you true?” he asked.

“Some are true. Some are not.” Adrián circled a hand in the air. “I did despise humanity, stayed away from it. Then, I saw someone's heart for the first time in my life.”

“Eesh.”

Though it didn't last long, a broad smile pushed Adrián's cheekbones higher on his face. “For her to love you the way she does told me a lot about you. At first, I thought you were some asshole who wouldn't think twice about leaving her if things got bad. A woman like Ayesha, you die for. Until I met her, loneliness, for me, was a security blanket. So, and I know it might not be what you want to hear, especially coming from me, I'm grateful to you.”

Joel stretched the muscles in his neck.

“You had the urge to say ‘thank you’ but then swallowed it, didn't you? I can see you trying not to choke.”

Despite himself, he smiled. “Whatever, man. I'm conflicted. I appreciate your respect for Ayesha. She's the love of my life, and you devoted yourself to helping her, which, in turn, helped my family. Still, the primitive male in me... flexes.”

Adrián laughed.

Tiare stirred.

Joel repositioned the hoodie on her head. “Why do you feel uneasy?” he asked.

Again, Adrián shrugged. “Don't know. Every morning I wake up, I get this feeling like I'm looking at the last of my sunrises.”

A lull fell between them.

Tiare released a small cry before settling back to sleep, and Joel checked his watch. Her next feeding was coming up soon.

“I've been thinking about trying to meet someone new,” Adrián said. “Larke's sister, Wren? She's...yeah, she's

definitely my type.”

“Well, Dez keeps saying Thanasis is ‘weird’ about her, but he won’t elaborate on what that means. Because it’s Thanasis, I wouldn’t touch that with a ten-foot pole.” Joel patted him on the shoulder. “But who knows? Ayesha’s father was married when he met her mother. Rumor is, she has a sister out there somewhere.”

“With my luck, she’ll be happily married.”

“If it’ll get you to stop drooling over my wife, I’ll help you break up the marriage.”

Adrián burst out laughing.

Tiare’s eyes fluttered open.

“Well,” Joel removed her from the carrier and planted several kisses on her cheek before holding her against him, “I’m gonna go feed this adorable monster.”

“Claro. Até mais, mano.”

“Come on, cutie. How was my baby girl’s nap, hmm? Don’t worry. Daddy knows where Mama keeps the bottles of the premium breastmilk.”

“Where are you going?” Tayler asked, appearing before him like she’d stepped through a wormhole. “To feed her? Is it feeding time? Can I do it? I’ll do it. You rest.”

Before he could answer, Tayler had Tiare in her arms and was halfway across the lawn.

Laughing to himself, he set the carrier on the nearest surface and searched until he found Ayesha standing underneath an elm tree.

And she was looking right at him.

He jogged over, stepped behind her, wrapped his arms around her waist, and kissed her neck. She turned her head so he could plant one on her lips, then leaned back against him as he rested his chin on top of her head and sighed with a level of contentment he felt throughout his body.

“I know, baby,” she said, stroking his forearm. “And I love you too.”

Thank you for reading.

xoxo,

Alex

Gage Wolfe & Tayler Diaz

Grey

Dez Harding & Larke Tapley

Monroe

Julien Hunter & Arihi “Ari” Jonesboro

Thandie

Giorgio Pozza & Moana “Mo” Jonesboro

Aleksi

Mike Huang & Xara Merritt

Mikey J

Curtis Savea (deceased) & Ayesha Price

Josiah Savea

Theodore Savea

Joel Lattimore & Ayesha Savea

Josiah Savea-Lattimore

Theodore Savea-Lattimore

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* * *

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