



SLAY

RIDE

DAVIDSON KING

# SLAY RIDE

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SAINT BROTHERS

BOOK 1

DAVIDSON KING

Copyright Page

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**Series: Saint Brothers Book One**

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# CONTENTS

[Trigger Warning](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Synopsis](#)

[Part I](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Part II](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Part III](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Closing Note](#)

[Other Books by Davidson King](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[About the Author](#)

# TRIGGER WARNING

This book contains on-page violence, torture, attempted rape, and off page mention of child abuse.



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

The books I write skirt along the line between light and dark, therefore I tend to say my stories are gray-ish. This is slightly darker than my others and does contain sensitive issues. Please heed the warnings.

Dark or not, I enjoyed writing this book and love introducing all of you to the amazing Saint brothers. While this book is set at Christmas time, you will quickly see it can be read all year round.

*This book is dedicated to Qhuinn, my Jubilant Jester, and outstanding fanboy! You make me smile every day and empower me to never give up. Thank you for everything. Never change.*

## SYNOPSIS

Christmas is a time for joy, family, and friends to gather around the tree and fill their hearts with love. Unfortunately, there are some people who don't deserve happiness during the holidays.

Mason keeps to himself. His best friend, JJ, is the only one he chooses to be close to, plus his job keeps him busy. Excitement isn't something he needs or wants in his life. One night, that all changes when he's cornered, and his life is threatened. His saviors? Well, they turn out to be just as dangerous, and the mysteries surrounding them soon flip Mason's world upside down.

Gabe and his brothers spend their lives making sure those who deserve death get what's coming to them. The one person they never see coming is Mason. What for them should have been a simple rescue turns into even more chaos than they ever thought possible.

Enter the Saint brothers' dark and twisted world on a slay ride that will have you on the edge of your seat, swooning for the bad boys, and trying to survive the fall of revenge.

# PART 1

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## MASON

*“The world is a dangerous place,  
not because of those who do evil,  
but because of those who look on and do nothing.”*

*~ Albert Einstein*

## CHAPTER ONE

---

“YOU’RE COMING OUT TONIGHT. Please say you are,” JJ, my best friend in all the world, pouted as he asked. Was I so predictable that he knew I wanted to say no before he finished his sentence?

“I’m closing tonight.” I probably could convince my manager at Books and Bistro to let me go early. She’d be happy to know I had a social life, but I was not a people person, and being around strangers was a special kind of torture. They were always a disappointment, super judgmental, and most of them simply wanted something from you. JJ was the exception.

After my parents died in a house fire when I was ten, JJ’s parents took me in. I had no other family, so his became mine. JJ knew me better than anyone.

“Okay, so you’ll be a little late. It’s a Christmas party at Scheherazade, invitation only, and I snagged us some. Please, Mason?”

With a heavy sigh, I nodded. “Okay, I can meet you in front of the club at eleven.”

JJ hugged me so tightly, I swore my bones cracked. I wasn’t a big guy. At five foot four, I weighed one hundred and twenty pounds. I loved food but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t bulk up, so I stopped working on it. Add in my dull brown eyes, and I really wasn’t anything to write home about. I had good hair, though—a perfect auburn color.

I loved my job at Books and Bistro and was on the fast track to becoming a manager. I just knew it. What more did a person need besides books, food, coffee, and comfy couches to read on? Nothing.

“Okay, love you, gotta run.” JJ rushed out of my apartment, likely late for his job. He had gotten a position at some law firm and was loving it. When he’d gone off to college, I’d decided not to. I’d been working at Books and Bistro ever since I graduated high school.

“See you later,” I shouted to the now-empty space.

My place was perfect for me, and honestly, I didn’t actually have to work. My parents had left me a life insurance policy, and my grandparents had set up a trust fund for me as well. I gave JJ’s parents the entire insurance settlement after my folks died, even though they said they didn’t want it. It was the least I could do.

I’d bought an apartment outright. It overlooked the river on one end and the city on the other. I had three bedrooms, a kitchen, and a comfy living room, so in truth, it was all I needed.

Yeah, I hated people, but I hated being lonely just as much...I was a conundrum, no question about it. Books and Bistro was like a second home for me—it filled my loneliness tank and kept my head above water.

My life was pretty good, and I couldn’t complain too much about it.



AS SOON AS JJ and I entered Scheherazade, I deflated. I had never set foot inside the exclusive place, but what had kept my curiosity piqued was the expectation that the interior based its name on its origin. It did not. They clearly only liked the name Scheherazade and not the story behind the character.

“I know that look,” JJ shouted over the stupidly loud music.

“What look?”

He rolled his eyes. “You thought this club would be like the book *One Thousand and One Nights*, didn’t you?”

He *did* know me so well. “It’s just that I’d hoped maybe there’d be some Persian design, at least. But this place is no different than Club Rain or that other one that was a carbon copy of every other place you’ve dragged me to.”

“You’re being a bah humbug!” JJ playfully shoved my shoulder.

“There aren’t even any Christmas lights up. How is this a Christmas party?”

He waved me over to follow him to the bar. The bartender wore a Santa hat, and JJ gave me a pointed look. “See?”

“Wow, you sure showed me,” I deadpanned.

JJ ignored me and ordered us each a holiday drink, and I scanned the entire area. There were so many bodies swaying, rubbing. I mean, was it dancing or sex?

“Drink.” He shoved a glass in my face. It was red, and the straw was designed to look like a candy cane.

I sipped the fruity and slightly minty drink and continued people-watching.

“Let’s dance.” JJ grabbed my arm, but I quickly pulled away.

“Absolutely not. I can barely walk without falling on my face. Why would you want me to go out there and murder people with my flailing limbs?”

“Dra. Mat. Ic!” He chugged his drink and placed the empty glass on the bar. “I’m dancing. Watch me and make sure no creeper tries to manhandle me.”

“You’d like it,” I joked.

I watched as the crowd pulled JJ in until he was part of the gyrating machine that embodied the entire club.

I could people-watch all day. No, I wasn't a fan of mankind, but I loved coming up with stories in my head about them. I saw a woman between two men. Desperate to find her one true love, she willingly subjected herself to depravity to find him.

A man kissed another man near the DJ booth. They were aggressive in their touching, and I could picture them in a few hours, tumbling onto a bed, wrapped in each other and silk sheets. Making promises they'd surely end up breaking just so they could reach their climax.

"Jack and coke," a deep, smooth voice beside me said, pulling me away from my internal storytelling.

*Well. Damn.* He was tall and built without being mountainous. He had a sweep going on in the front of his perfectly styled brown hair. Did I mention he was wearing all leather?

I was staring, and maybe sniffing, because holy hell, he smelled good.

His eyes met mine, and while lust pooled in my gut, fear began to settle in too. His eyes were dark, fathomless. As if they'd never seen light and vowed never to let it in. The furrow in his brow and his permafrown were quite off-putting. My brain was yelling at me to look away, but his eyes were like tractor beams, hypnotizing me with their intensity.

"What are you drinking?"

He was talking to me. *Speak words, Mason.*

"Uh, I'm not sure."

He cocked his head. "You're drinking something, and you have no idea what it is?"

I shrugged. "My friend bought it. I think it's some holiday special."

He turned to the bartender when his drink was handed to him. "Another holiday whatever that is, for this guy too."

*He bought me a drink?* "Thanks. I'm Mason." *Yay for words.*



“Gabe.” He sat on the stool, drink in hand, and scanned the room. While I never knew what I was looking for, Gabe seemed to be searching for something or someone in particular.

“Your Fruity Festivus,” the bartender said, and Gabe raised his brows.

“Thanks for humiliating me.” I narrowed my eyes at the giver of alcohol and took my drink. The bartender didn’t give a shit about embarrassing me.

“Is it good?” Gabe asked.

“Want to try it?” I held it under his nose, and he sniffed.

“Nah, I’m fine.”

Gabe returned to his searching, and I returned to my internal storytelling.

“Motherfucker.” The anger and disdain in Gabe’s tone had me leaning away from him. He jumped off the stool and turned to me. “I gotta talk to someone. I was thinking we’d maybe fuck later?”

*Seriously?* “Did you just ask me for a fuck? With no finesse at all?”

He peered over his shoulder at me. “No time to waste, am I right? So, yeah, I’ll be back in like five minutes.”

He didn’t give me a chance to answer. He was working his way through the dance floor toward some guy. As soon as he was on him, I noticed four others joined Gabe. Who the hell was this man?

## CHAPTER TWO

---

I STUPIDLY WAITED for five minutes...more like twenty. Obviously, I had no self-preservation or self-respect if all it took was a hot, scary man telling me we were going to fuck to brush aside my worth. After I finished the drinks JJ and Gabe bought me, and neither man was in my sights, I decided to call it a night. This wasn't how I wanted to spend my evening.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and texted JJ that I was going home and to text me later to let me know he was safe.

I slipped off the bar stool and made my way to the door, breathing in relief as soon as fresh air washed over my face.

I'd parked a few blocks from the club, and halfway there, the chill of winter started biting through my clothes. Leaving my coat in the car might not have been the best idea, but I wasn't schlepping it around the club, and I hadn't wanted to wait at a coat check.

When I turned onto the street where I'd parked, glad I would be in my car with the heat blasting in a few moments, I hustled even more. Only three more feet and...

A huge man wearing a ski mask, covered head to toe in all black, stepped in front of me. Two others flanked him. "Well, hello there, little popsicle."

"No, not tonight. I'm freezing."

The man cocked his head. "I'll warm you up."

I wasn't sure if he meant in the "light you on fire" kind of way or the "him on top of me while I screamed for help" way. Neither sounded desirable.

"My car is right there, but thanks." I tried to move to the left, but he was right there.

"How 'bout we take you home."

"Again, thanks but no thanks."

I clutched my keys in my hand, forcing the hard metal tips to slip between my fingers. If these assholes were going to attack me, I was absolutely leaving scars on their bodies.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, likely JJ responding to my text. Suddenly, staying at the club wasn't such a bad idea. One of the guys was standing close to my car, and I knew if I even got that far, he was going to stop me.

"I wasn't askin'." The guy closest to me grabbed my arm—of course, the one I had my keys in, and they dropped. "Were you plannin' on stickin' me with those?" He chuckled darkly. "Hear that, boys? We got ourselves a feisty one."

The guy standing to my right rubbed his palm over his crotch. "I like 'em feisty."

*Fuck.*

There was a tug on my shoulder, and I was lifted off the ground by this large and terrifying man. Now face-to-face with him, all I could see through the ski mask were his bright-green eyes.

"Let me go!"

"When we're done with you, we'll decide what to do with you."

I tried kicking, but I might as well have been hitting a brick wall for all the good it was doing me. The man laughed; then his buddies joined in. I remembered that JJ had once told me that if I ever found myself trapped in a hold, I should go limp. He'd reassured me that the sudden dead weight would surprise the person, and I'd be able to slide out of their arms.

As soon as the asshole lowered me, I did as JJ had explained, thinking I'd slither out of his grasp.

"Already compliant?" He hummed, his grip only tightening more.

This wasn't going how I'd hoped.

"Help! Someone, help me!" I was shouting at the top of my lungs, and these three were cackling as I was dragged down an unlit alley. How clichéd. If I wasn't about to be assaulted and likely killed, I might have found it funny.

"G," the man holding me called out to one of his fellow assholes. G, well, it was something. "Gag this piece of meat."

"Hel—" My cries were cut off as a wad of cloth was stuffed into my mouth.

"Much better." He smiled through the hole where his mouth was. His two friends were holding my arms against the wall while he started unbuttoning my pants.

I no longer felt the bite of the winter chill. I no longer cared about the headache that was beginning to form before I left the club. I'd take it all back if it would get me out of this nightmare I was in.

"No more kickin', huh?" He slid my pants down and squeezed my soft dick so hard, a tear slid over my cheek. "So lovely." His hot tongue licked my tear away.

I tried grunting loudly, praying someone, anyone, would hear me.

"Turn him around," he ordered his friend.

I was spun roughly, my cheek scraping the rough bricks, tearing, stabbing. My pants were long gone, and the air brushed my backside. I did not want any of this. I wanted to be away from here. Fear choked the very life from my body and like an echo in the darkness, I heard its cries to run, but I was frozen. Helpless...vulnerable, and that was the worst hell ever.

Rough hands spread my ass, and I clenched my eyes closed, desperately trying to imagine I was anywhere else but here.

There was so much weight on my body, but like a snap, it was gone. I collapsed to the pavement, my head jolting forward and slamming against the wall. My vision became fuzzy, but I tried to see what had happened.

I turned and could vaguely make out all the bodies. The three guys were being pummeled by four, no, five people.

Flesh meeting bone, growls, swearing. I tried to reach for my pants, but my shoulder was out of socket, and pain bloomed over the area. With my other arm, I stretched and finally grabbed them. Nausea rolled through my stomach and I turned, throwing up everything I'd ever eaten in my entire life.

When that torture was over, I peeked at the fight in time to see one of my rescuers pull out a very large knife and start stabbing the big guy on the ground—one of the guys that had been restraining me—over and over.

I was grateful they were helping me, but trading one evil for another was not a recipe for good. I'd gotten a leg into my pants when the alley began to spin, and my vision got worse.

“Shit,” I mumbled, and then the world went black.

---

I OPENED MY EYES, and everything was dark—so dark, I wondered if I really had opened them. That thought didn't linger, because a second later, I knew something wasn't right. The smell of the room wasn't one I recognized. The feel of the fabric beneath my hands... a bed, not mine.

The material against my chest was unfamiliar and certainly not mine. I tried lifting my head, but it was as if a bat had been swung at my face, and I let myself fall onto what I assumed was a pillow.

There was no part of me that had forgotten about my three attackers, and the last thing I remembered was maybe five people stepping in and... one of them stabbing the big man.

The door opened, and I would have faked sleep, but it was too late. A figure stood in the entryway, their body blocking

out all the light.

“You’re awake, then,” he grunted and walked away, leaving the door open.

With the brightening of the room, I saw two pills and a large glass of water on the nightstand. I reached for them carefully since my shoulder was ridiculously sore. Each pill read “Tylenol,” and sure, it could’ve been a ploy, but I was in so much pain and my throat burned as if it were on fire. So I popped them into my mouth and chugged the room-temperature water. Just as I finished, someone else walked into the room.

My vision wasn’t fuzzy anymore, so as soon as he came closer, I was able to make out his face.

“Gabe?”

“You remember me. That’s good, I suppose.” He sat on the bed. “You weren’t at the bar when I got back, so I went looking for you. Found you in a bit of a situation.”

“A situation? They were going to rape me and probably kill me.”

He nodded. “No probably about it.”

I sat up, trying to ignore the pain radiating through my body. “Why’d you save me?”

“You had a dislocated shoulder, so we righted it. Maybe a concussion.” He shrugged. “We bandaged you up, and you’ll live.”

“Thanks, but you didn’t answer me.”

“I know, Mason. I do what I do. Now rest a little longer. Shep is making dinner, and you’ll need food, seeing as you puked up a Thanksgiving dinner in the alley.”

He stood and started to walk out but stopped right before leaving. “You’re pretty banged up but still hot.” In a blink he was gone, and all I could do was stare at the open doorway.

*What the hell?*

## CHAPTER THREE

---

THE TYLENOL DID VERY little to help with my aches and pains, but reality came crashing down, and I realized I needed to get the hell out of wherever the hell I was. I wanted my bed, my books, and to get drunk with JJ, tell him about this horrible night and why I'd now decided to become a recluse.

I searched the room, but there was no sign of my clothes. Clothes which had my wallet, maybe keys if they'd picked them up, and my phone. *Shit, shit, shit.* The shirt I was wearing was black and too big, and the shorts didn't fit very well. If I went out in this, I'd freeze in minutes. Not to mention, I had no idea where I was.

I needed to assess the situation. I hoped like hell these guys weren't planning on killing me. I mean, a strong part of me was convinced that if they were, I wouldn't have been given clean clothes, medicine, and a bed. But who knew how psychopaths really thought?

Slowly, I stepped out of the bedroom, into a long hallway that appeared to be leading out toward a living space, where I could hear the sound of voices. The scent of food made my stomach rumble, but fear kept the hunger at bay.

"Is the princess awake or not?" a voice that sounded like they'd swallowed glass spoke, making me jump and press my body against the wall.

"He is, just resting some more until food is ready." I knew that to be Gabe's voice.

“You can’t keep him, Gabe. The fact that he’s here at all is fucked up. Shoulda dropped him at the hospital,” someone else said, and honestly, they had a point.

“He saw us, Angel. You want me to take him to a hospital, where he would tell a cop or orderly or who the fuck knows, he witnessed us killing three guys?”

*Wow. They killed them all?*

“Gabe, I get it. He’s pretty, and you want to fuck him, but he’s a liability. We don’t keep people.” The man with the gruff voice sighed. “He’s gotta go.”

*Go, as in die?*

“We aren’t killing him.”

*Thank you, Gabe.*

“What do you suggest, then? Should we keep him chained to your bed where you can fuck him at your leisure and ply him with your massive cock whenever he eats all his veggies?” The person who asked sounded almost proper.

“Fuck off, Noel. Nick, tell your brother I’ll glue his hand to his dick while he sleeps if he doesn’t get the fuck away from me.”

“Noel, stop bothering Gabe. He’s...sensitive.”

A burst of laughter echoed through the space. As much as I loathed the idea of going into that room, I couldn’t hide in the hallway forever. I took a deep breath and stepped into the large living space.

All laughter ceased, and five pairs of eyes met mine. *Holy shit*. These weren’t men, they were Vikings. Possibly. I mean, yes, they were men, but...*Wow*.

“Good morning, Sleeping Beauty.” The man with the rough voice winked at me. He had a bushy brown beard, and his head was shaved on both sides with long thick hair down the middle. His eyes were a piercing blue.

“Uh, hi.”



“Aww, he’s precious, Gabe.” A tousle-haired blond guy with brown eyes and a wicked smile had moved to stand beside me and placed his arm around my shoulders, inciting a hiss from me.

“Don’t touch him, Nick. He’s hurt.” Gabe glared at the blond, and that was when I saw another guy who looked a lot like the one beside me. His hair was different—blond, but with a half pony and undercut. Also, brown eyes and a disinterested expression.

“My apologies.” He released me and sat next to his—possibly—twin brother.

“I’m Angel.” A large Black man with a big beard and a completely shaved head stepped up to me.

“I’m Mason.” I held out my hand, but Angel didn’t take it. He turned and went over to the couch.

“These two are Noel and Nick, and yes, they’re twins. Over in the kitchen, that’s Shep.” The guy who’d called me Sleeping Beauty nodded curtly.

“I, uh...thank you for saving me.”

“Gabe insisted.” Noel placed his hand over his chest, and mocked, “We must save my fuck toy. Come with me, men, and protect his virtue.”

All the men, minus Gabe, laughed.

“Well, thanks.” I shuffled my foot over the soft carpet. “I, uh, where are my clothes?”

“Dryer.” Angel gestured toward a spot in the room. I heard the tumbling, which meant they weren’t dry yet.

“Thanks for washing them. You didn’t have to.”

Nick scoffed. “Oh, we really did. There was dirt and vomit all over them.”

“Oh.” I met Gabe’s gaze. He wasn’t speaking, and I had no idea why. “As soon as they’re done, I’ll be out of your hair.”

“And go where?” Shep narrowed his eyes and fear crept up my spine.

“Home?” I looked at each man. “I’m not in another country or anything, am I? Hell, how long have I been out?” *Oh, no. JJ.* “I need my phone,” I said frantically.

“Whoa, calm down, you rabid little rabbit.” Noel chuckled. “You’re not far from where you live. You’ve only been out for a day. We checked on you, and Gabe texted your friend, who was being persistent.”

I shot a glare at Gabe. A moment of bravery coursed through my veins. “What did you tell him? Don’t hurt him!”

Gabe jolted off the couch and got right in my face. “You’re not in a place to give orders.” His eyes sparkled with so much anger. “You’d be dead if it wasn’t for us.”

“I—”

“Just go to the fucking room. When we’ve decided what to do with you, we’ll let you know.” Gabe spun on his heel and stormed out of the large living space. A few seconds later, a door slammed.

Four guys, who I felt were barely tolerating me, were now looking at me as if I were prey. Without taking my eyes off any of them, I took a couple of steps back and kept going until I was in the bedroom.

I shut the door, locked it, then took the desk chair and pressed it under the doorknob. They were going to kill me. Any chance of being spared had gone out the window the second I’d decided to get brave.

There was no way I was going to get into that bed again. As a matter of fact, if they managed to get in here, I didn’t want them to find me. The only place I could see to hide was a closet.

Inside were the usual clothes, shoes, and a bunch of unlabeled boxes. Nevertheless, it would have to do. I squeezed in, grabbed an unrolled sleeping bag, and hid behind it. This was probably the dumbest thing ever, but like when I was a kid, it gave me some semblance of safety.

One thing I couldn’t figure out, though. If they were just going to kill me, why’d they save me?

## CHAPTER FOUR

---

I WAS STARVING, my legs were throbbing from cramming myself into this closet, and I was positive I'd been here for hours. No one had even attempted to come in. I tried dozing a few times, but it was pointless. The slightest noise jolted me awake.

I wasn't sure the exact amount of time I'd been in there when I finally heard someone try and open the door. Their voices were muffled, but I could make out one.

"It's locked."

I tightened the sleeping bag around my body, making sure I was completely covered. I'd know the second they managed to unlock the door because the voices would get louder.

"Something's fucking blocking it." I thought it was that guy Angel but couldn't be one hundred percent sure.

A few bangs, and I heard footfalls come into the room. "Where the hell is he?" That was Shep. His voice was distinguishable.

"He has to be in here," the man I thought was Angel said.

"Could've gone out the window." I heard Shep come closer to the closet and the creak of the window. "Nah, he'd die from the fall."

That was when I heard the closet door open. "You in here, Sleeping Beauty?" I felt things shifting in the small space and falling on top of me, but I remained silent.

"He in there, Shep?"

Shep chuckled darkly a moment before the sleeping bag was torn from my body. Piercing blue eyes practically glowed in the inkiness.

“Yeah, he’s here.”

Angel’s head popped in behind Shep. “What the fuck you doing?”

“Hiding... isn’t it obvious?”

Shep and Angel shared a glance. “Angel, tell Gabe to get his ass in here.” Shep’s expression softened minutely. “You gotta eat.” He pushed back, giving me room to follow, but I really didn’t want to.

“Get out here, Sleeping Beauty.”

With a sigh, I hefted myself out of the closet, my knees cracking as I did.

“Sit on the bed, and I’ll get your food.” He narrowed his eyes. “Don’t lock the door.”

I waited to sit on the edge of the bed until Shep left. I stared at the door, wanting to be prepared for anything and everything.

Voices from another room echoed off the walls.

“You brought him here, Gabe. You deal with him. Angel and I aren’t going to babysit him, and Noel and Nick aren’t in any shape to ever watch over another human being if you want them to live.”

“Hey!” the twins said.

“We do what we always do.”

“You want us to vote? Because I’m not positive you’ll like the turnout.” I was almost certain that was Angel’s voice.

“It’s how we’ve always done it. I brought him here without a vote and put you all in a bad spot. I shouldn’t have done that. No one gets between us. Now let’s vote.”

I peered behind me at the window. The fall or cold would probably kill me, as Shep had mentioned, but if death was

greeting me tonight, I was sure as shit choosing my way.

I rushed off the bed and opened the window. It was only two floors, maybe, but Shep must have assumed I'd be impaled by the sharp iron fence below if I jumped. He was likely right, but there were divots in the foundation, and I had tiny feet and hands.

I quickly grabbed a sweat shirt that was in the closet and a pair of shoes. I tied the laces together and hung them over my neck. As soon as I hit the ground, I'd put them on so I wouldn't have to trek through the snow barefoot. There had to be a house or gas station or someplace to call for help.

I couldn't wait any longer. There was no screen, so I hefted myself up and sat on the windowpane. After a deep breath, I made my descent. It was a little slippery, but with the divots, I was able to make it to the ground. There was snow, so I swiftly put the too-big shoes on. It felt like tiny pieces of glass were stabbing at my legs, but I ran as fast as I could. I didn't stop for anything.

A few cars drove by but never slowed down. I watched horror movies; I knew the possibility of whoever pulled over being one of the psychopath posse.

Finally, I saw a gas station, and not just any gas station. I knew where I was. I rushed inside Max's and rested in a helpless heap on the counter.

"Jesus, man, you out dressed like that?" I didn't know the clerk's name, but I nodded. "Dangerous. You need help?"

"Police, call the police."

His eyes widened, but he did as I asked. After he hung up, he went over to the coffee station and fixed me a cup.

"Drink this. It'll warm you up. I have a blanket in the break room. Hold on, and I'll get it."

Wrapping my hands around the Styrofoam was like finger nirvana. The steam warmed my frozen nose, and I took a moment to let my heartbeat calm.

“Here you go.” The clerk wrapped a fluffy—and oh, so warm—blanket over my shoulders, and I took a breath as my body temperature found a livable number.

It only took five minutes for a police cruiser to drive up. Two officers entered the gas station and nodded to the clerk, then over to me.

“You appear to be in a state,” one of them said. The name on his coat read “Gilly.”

“I am, Officer Gilly.” I then proceeded to tell them both about the last thirty-six hours of my life.

They listened patiently, only asking for descriptions of the five men who’d kidnapped me—their words, but I couldn’t argue—and of the men who’d assaulted me.

As I got to the part where I escaped through the window, I saw a car pull up next to the cruiser outside. The officers had their backs to the door, so they couldn’t see the two men in the vehicle. Angel was driving, and Gabe sat in the passenger seat. Both looked murderous, and I froze.

“Mr. Daws, are you all right?” Officer Gilly noticed where I was staring and went to turn, but by the time he followed my line of sight, the car had sped away.

“Uh, yeah, the whole night just has me spooked.”

He nodded. “Thing is, Mr. Daws. These five men who you said stopped your attackers, are you sure you didn’t get any of their names?”

Okay, so maybe I didn’t tell the police everything that had happened in the last thirty-six hours. But those guys had saved me, and there was a one percent chance they wouldn’t have voted to kill me.

“No, they didn’t use their names. Why?”

Gilly glanced at his partner and sighed. “The department has had their eyes on the Saint brothers. Five guys who grew up together in a foster home. Every year during the Christmas season, there are killings, and every year any witness we can

get our hands on says the same thing as you. There were five, all men, but no names, no nothing.”

Okay, weird. I mean, I did know their names but still... bizarre.

“Are they serial killers? And if you know who they are, why haven’t they been arrested?”

Gilly’s partner answered me. “No proof. We can’t just arrest five guys living together because someone said five guys. We tried a lineup once, and that was a bust because the lady said she didn’t see that well.”

“So, these five people kill around Christmastime like Krampus, and the police can do nothing?” This wasn’t boding well for me.

“Unless you would be willing to do a lineup?” the cop inquired, and I shook my head frantically.

“Let us drive you home. We’ll have a car stationed outside your complex. In the morning, we can see if you can think of anything else.”

“I don’t have keys to get into my place.”

“I’ll call the building manager on the way. Anything else?” Gilly asked.

“I have a spare set of keys inside my apartment, just need to get in.” I shrugged. “Do you think I can call my friend JJ to stay with me tonight?”

They both gave me a warm smile. “Sure thing.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

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JJ STORMED into my apartment with a bag of snacks and a twelve-pack. “You scared the shit out of me, Mason!”

“Sorry, I couldn’t call you. They took my phone—which they still have, by the way.” I scratched my head. “And my address, since I’m fairly sure they have my wallet.”

JJ huffed. “Thank God there are cops outside. You might need to move and change your name. Plastic surgery is an option.”

I grabbed a beer and a bag of cheddar and sour cream chips and walked to my couch. “Don’t be ridiculous.” I did make a mental note to check out the cost of all JJ had suggested, though.

“I’ve heard about the Saint brothers, Mason.” He joined me on the couch with his own bag of chips and a beer.

“Oh?”

“Yeah, last year they were brought in as suspects for the murder of some corporate bigwig and like three other people.”

I blinked, a chip halfway to my mouth. “How’d they die?”

“They found one of the guys hanging from a chandelier in his office, sliced to pieces. The other three were positioned in the boardroom with their throats slashed.”

Bile began to rise in my throat, and I dropped the chip into the bag. “Do you know anything about the other years?”



He shook his head. “No, but we could google Christmas killings and our zip code.”

I took a deep breath. “I’d rather not.”

He shrugged. “You should hire a bodyguard.”

I hummed. “That might not be a bad idea, but wouldn’t I need, like, an army of bodyguards? JJ, you didn’t see these guys. They were brutal. I watched one of them stab a guy over and over.”

He nodded and started scrolling on his phone. “I wonder how much it costs to buy an army.”

I chuckled. “I’m serious.”

“Oh, I am too, Mason, believe me.” He placed his phone on the side table. “This is no joke. The cops won’t stay out there forever, and something tells me these guys are patient.”

I sat back and swallowed two large gulps of beer. “For tonight, JJ, I want to watch mindless movies and try not to think about my impending homicide.”

JJ snuggled close, slipped a chip between my lips, and smiled. “Deal.”

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NIGHTMARES PLAGUED ME. I tossed and turned in my bed, jolting up periodically either due to the frights or the pain from moving around. JJ was in one of my spare bedrooms, even though he’d offered to sleep beside me. I wasn’t sure if I was trying to prove to myself that I was fine or convince my brain *to be* fine.

By morning, I was exhausted and cranky. JJ made me breakfast and left it covered on the stove. There was a note attached to the fridge saying he had to go to work but would be returning afterward.

I sighed, ate my pancakes, and spent the rest of the morning showering and trying to appear put together.

The clock read eleven thirty, and I had to be at my job in an hour. I could call out, but I was craving normalcy. One peek outside showed the cruiser below. I figured I'd go down and tell them I needed to get to work. If they wanted to drive me, they could, or follow since my car was returned to me last night—thanks to JJ and one of his colleagues who'd gone back to the club to retrieve it for me. I grabbed my coat, scarf, hat, and gloves, and exited my apartment. With everything locked up, I hauled ass to the elevator. Worry tingled in the furthest point of my mind, and I was jumpy, but I was going to be fine...I had to be.

“Going somewhere, Mr. Daws?” One of the officers was standing by his car when I stepped out of my building.

“Actually, I was about to come talk to you. I need to get to work. Did you want to drive me or follow me or abandon me to probable death?”

He laughed. “We can drive you to work, Mr. Daws. It's a public place, so we'll report to the station. What time are you off? A car can come and retrieve you.”

That was easier than I thought it would be. “I'm off at five, not too long a day.”

He nodded, then opened the back door. “Hop in.”

Once we started moving, the other officer in the car turned to face me. “You didn't happen to remember anything new?”

I shook my head. “I'm really shocked I remembered everything I already told you.” Why wasn't I telling them their names? Hold on a minute...“Can I ask you something?”

“What would that be?” His brows rose.

“You all know the Saint brothers, right?”

“We know *of* them, obviously.”

“You're asking me their names. Is that just to see if it's the same guys or do you all not know them? I find it hard to believe you don't.”

“We know who the Saint brothers are. It's linking them to the crimes we've found impossible.”

I wasn't sure what to say to that. I'm sure if the brothers had gotten their way, I'd be another unsolved murder for them.

As soon as I entered Books and Bistro, one of the baristas, Helen, smiled at me. "Mason! JJ called and said you were mugged the other day. Are you okay?" My friend was always looking out for me, and I had to explain the bruises somehow.

I nodded and removed my winter gear. "I am. My body is still a little sore, but sitting in my apartment and staring at the walls is boring."

"Well, I've got down here covered. You want to deal with the books upstairs?"

"Sure, that's my favorite." I hiked up the steps to where we sold all the books. The bistro was on the first floor, and there were books and coffee on the second floor. Ralph was behind the counter, so I waved and went right to the back to see what new titles we'd received.

There was a full cart of books that had been entered into the system this morning, so I pushed it out and began putting them on the shelves.

I was in the zone. As I placed each one, I made sure to read the synopsis to see if I'd be buying any before I left. I was in such a bubble, I didn't realize someone came up behind me until I felt a bump.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't—" I spun around and came face-to-face with fathomless eyes. "Shit."

"Mason, you're a slippery one," Gabe growled.

"I'm honestly not, though. I do believe in self-preservation, however."

"*Hmm.*"

"Please don't kill me."

Gabe sighed and shook his head. "What did you say to the police?"

"I told them what happened."

He clenched his jaw. "Everything?"

“No. I should’ve, but I didn’t.”

He pushed me until my shoulders hit a shelf of books, his arms caging me in. “What didn’t you tell them?”

“Uh...” I was finding it hard to think, breathe, word. “Your...names.”

He cocked his head to the side. “That explains why no one has come knocking on our door.”

“Look, I know you all think I’m a liability, but you guys saved me, and I won’t forget that. I just want to live and not be murdered.”

His eyes narrowed, and he pursed his lips. “Cops been telling you about me and my brothers?”

“Yeah, they really wished I knew your names. They said you guys, uhh, well, you kill on Christmas or whatever.”

Gabe stepped away, and I was both relieved and sad when he did. “They don’t understand anything.” He pressed his finger against my chest. “But you, Mason Daws, know a whole hell of a lot. You speak, and I promise the next time you see me and my brothers, it will be your end.”

He started to walk away and crazy me stopped him. “Gabe?”

He peered over his shoulder at me. “What?”

“The vote, what was the outcome?”

He chuckled darkly. “You don’t want to know.”

I didn’t have to hear the words to know exactly how the brothers had voted. They wanted me dead, and Gabe was probably the only reason I wasn’t.

## CHAPTER SIX

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JJ OPENED my apartment door before I was able to slot the key in. I looked up, alarmed. His face was pale and his eyes wide.

“What is it? What happened?”

He grabbed my arm, pulled me in, and shut the door. “Have you been watching the news?”

I shook my head and walked over to my Christmas tree, switching on the lights to illuminate the room better. The only other glow was from the TV.

“Well, check it out.” JJ raised the volume on the television.

*“Police are calling it a Christmas Massacre. Four reported dead in what appears to be, methods consistent with the gruesome, almost ritualistic, murders of the last few years.”* The reporter’s expression was grim.

“You know this has to be the work of those guys, right? The ones who kidnapped you.”

I whipped my head around to stare at JJ. “You don’t know that.”

“Seriously, Mason.” He gestured to the television in a “you can’t be for real” manner. “Is this not exactly what the police told you they did? Also, the reporter said it was like the others.”

I didn’t know why I was defending the Saint brothers. They wanted me dead, but something was niggling at the back of my brain. “Who were the victims?”

“Are you even listening to me?”

“JJ, I’m going to tell you something, and you need to promise me two things, and you need to not freak out.”

JJ plopped on the couch, a defeated expression adorning his face. “I’m going to hate this.”

I didn’t argue with him. “Yes.”

“Get on with it.”

“Gabe came to my work today and told me if I said anything to the cops I’d die, but”—I held up a finger when it looked like JJ was going to interrupt—“he said the police didn’t know what they were talking about and, well, I believe him. They aren’t going to hurt me, JJ. I just have to pretend I can’t identify them, and I’ll be fine.”

There was a long silence, and I could tell JJ was processing everything. He sighed, and with tender eyes, looked at me.

“Mason, they aren’t simply killing people; they are slaughtering them. No question these victims suffered before death was given. What kind of men could they be if not monsters, and why would you want to let them walk around uncaged?”

“Can a person walk around in a cage?”

“Don’t be a smartass.” JJ glared. I knew he was worried about me.

“Sorry, and yeah, they scare the shit out of me, but Gabe... I don’t think he wants to hurt me.” I turned toward the TV again. “What if these so-called victims aren’t good people?”

“So now the brothers are avenging angels?”

“I don’t know...maybe.”

JJ rolled his eyes. “Shit.”

“JJ, these killings, the victims, do they have anything in common?”

“How would I know?”

“You work at a legal firm. Maybe you can find out?” I batted my eyes, knowing none of that shit worked on him.

“You want me to maybe lose my job over this?”

“Don’t be so dramatic, JJ. I’m just asking if you can find anything out. I know that guy you pant over has a cop brother. Maybe he knows.”

JJ gasped and clutched his chest. “You’re using my crush on me?”

I nodded, a smirk forming on my face. “I sure as hell am. You said the other day you wished you knew what to say when you come face-to-face with him, so, you’re welcome.”

He sat back, lips pursed. “You’re manipulative.”

I stood to get a drink from the fridge and patted his head. “You’re the best.”

JJ stayed the night, even though I was feeling better after my encounter with Gabe—which I did not tell the police about.

By morning, any dread that lingered was replaced by curiosity. I prayed JJ would find something today on these victims. I knew in my heart there was a story there.

“Good morning, Mr. Daws,” the police officer from yesterday greeted me when I exited my complex.

“Morning.” I looked up and down the street. “I think I’ll drive today.”

The officer’s smile dipped. “There was a killing last night, and we’re hoping to link it to the Saint boys. We don’t want them getting nervous and taking out any loose ends.”

I cocked my head as I listened to the man’s worried tone. “I’m fairly sure you may not have been allowed to say that to me.” I shrugged. “Okay, but I’m still driving. You can follow me if you’d like.”

With a sharp nod, he got into his cruiser while I fast-walked to my car. I was happy to see it was in one piece, still

clean. Once the engine was rumbling, I headed off to Books and Bistro.

---

JJ TEXTED me as I was leaving work to inform me he'd gotten his colleague-slash-crush to talk but was meeting him for dinner to get "deets." No info tonight, it seemed.

I waved at the cops as I got out of my car; they'd been with me all day parked outside every place I was. Apparently, they were still guarding me, and while my gut said it wasn't needed, it was nice to feel like I mattered.

Everything after entering my complex was muscle memory. Checked mailbox, shuffled through the envelopes while I took the elevator up, made a left when I reached my floor, passed by three doors, slid key in lock, opened door, and...froze.

*What is that smell?* I flicked the light on and tossed my keys into the bowl by the entrance. *Is that lavender, maybe, and...I sniffed...vanilla?*

I placed the mail on the counter as I moved through the spacious apartment. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary.

"JJ, are you here?"

My question was met with silence, and I moved into the living room, where light was flickering. As I stepped farther in, I realized a candle was lit.

"JJ, if you're fucking with me, I will put a dead skunk in your car."

Still no answer. I bent toward the lavender-and-vanilla scented candle, a chill running down my spine as I blew it out. A second later, the television turned on, and I jumped. The reporter from last night was talking into the camera, different clothes, different day.

*"That's right, Jim. This house behind me, clearly demolished, is said to be the home of the Saint brothers. These*



*men have been on the police's radar for years. A spokesperson for the police department said earlier that all five men were people of interest."*

I gulped, the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end.  
*Mother—*

"Hey there, Sleeping Beauty."

I spun around and gasped as Shep stared at me like the lunatic he probably was. Fear crippled my speech and paralyzed my movements. From behind the blue-eyed Viking came his four brothers, each one looking deadlier than the last time I saw them.

"Fuck," I said before passing out.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

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IN MY ENTIRE life I'd never been so terrified that I'd fainted. Even when the three guys in the alley had tried to do despicable things, I'd only passed out due to head trauma.

As soon as I blinked awake, I knew instantly I was on my couch in my apartment. Part of me wondered if I had dreamed it after falling asleep watching the news. That thought was squashed with the sound of voices.

“He’s awake.”

Footsteps were followed by five faces hovering above me.

“I know I’m a scary fucker, but I never had someone wipe out without me at least getting my hands on them.” Shep’s grin was unsettling.

“Wha...why are you all in my apartment?” I decided not to try to sit up because I worried any movement on my part would be seen as a threat, and I’d die.

“You were watchin’ the news just now, were you not?” Angel quirked a brow.

“Yeah, but what’s that got to do with me?”

“Nothin’. We need a place to stay.” Angel smiled and slapped Gabe on the shoulder. “And Gabe said you’ve been very unhelpful to the police and didn’t rat us out. Figured you’d be willing to assist us further.”

“The cops are outside.” As if my words summoned them, there was a loud knock on the door.

“Mr. Daws, it’s the police.”

Shep sighed, but it was Gabe who spoke. “Get rid of them, Mason.”

The five men scattered. I sat up quickly and watched as they rushed down my hallway and into the bedrooms.

“Mr. Daws!”

I was jarred out of my stupor. “Hang on!” I shouted, not wanting them to bust my door open.

My head throbbed slightly, probably from fainting and the fact that I wasn’t at one hundred percent since the attack. I straightened my clothes, ran my fingers through my hair, and opened the door.

“Hey, guys, sorry. I fell asleep on my couch watching the news. Come in.” I held it open wider, and they entered.

Officer Gilly, the cop I’d spoken to after my kidnapping, was looking everywhere he could from his spot in my living room. His partner was meandering around the kitchen.

“So, you were watching the news?” Gilly raised his brows.

“A little, until I fell asleep. Why?” I was playing stupid, and I was usually good at it. I worked with the general public; faking emotion was in my job description.

“Someone blew up the Saint brothers’ place,” the other cop—I believed his name was Daly—said.

I widened my eyes and gasped. “Who?” I wasn’t sure if I was convincing them, but in all honesty, what I’d heard on the news didn’t tell me much, and the brothers hadn’t either.

“It’s an open investigation, so we can’t discuss it much with you. Our first concern was them coming here, possibly eliminating anyone they might have thought did it.” Gilly shrugged. “They don’t leave many people alive.”

“Allegedly,” I blurted out and regretted it as soon as I did.

Gilly looked over at his partner who began sizing me up. “That sounds a lot like someone who would be supporting their rampages.”

“What? No. I mean, you all told me you had no evidence that supports their crimes.” I pointed to Gilly. “So, you can’t be sure.”

“They kidnapped you, Mr. Daws.” Gilly took a few steps toward me. “Don’t think for a second that they wouldn’t have killed you had you not escaped.”

I shook my head. “I never said it was the Saint brothers who kidnapped me.” That was the moment I realized they were trying to get me to confess who did it.

Daly scoffed. “When you were interviewed after your escape, you acted like you agreed they were the ones who did it, and now you’re not. I think perhaps you should come down to the station and look at some photos. Tell us if the faces we provide match your kidnappers.”

Part of me wanted to snap at the cop, asking why they hadn’t done that earlier, but I held off. “Right now? It’s been an exhausting few days, and I really just want to go to bed. Can I come in tomorrow?”

They were silent for so long, I was afraid I was about to be hauled off in cuffs.

“Nine o’clock, no later,” Gilly said. “Cops are outside, and we’ll have two inside the complex. If they decide they want to get to you, we’ll stop them.”

If they only knew. “Thank you, Officers.”

I walked them out, thanking them one last time before shutting and locking the door. I rested my head on the wood, saying a silent prayer, hoping I hadn’t just sentenced myself to death by sending them away.

“They totally know you’re lying.” I turned in time to see Nick plop onto my couch.

“Maybe.”

“What are you going to tell them in the morning?” Gabe folded his arms over his impressive chest and leaned against the wall.

“Will I be alive come morning?” I tilted my head, a little sass slipping from my lips.

Gabe smirked. “Depends how you answer the question.”

“I don’t plan on saying I recognize any of you.” I started walking toward the kitchen, but Angel blocked my path.

“Where you goin’?”

“To my kitchen to make food because I’m human and require it to live. Since none of you are planning on killing me currently, I would like to eat.” I stepped around him, knowing if he didn’t want me to go, I wouldn’t have passed.

“I’m starving.” Noel followed me in, rubbing his hands. “I’ll help.”

“How about you all get the fuck out of the kitchen, and I’ll make something to eat. Lord knows I’m the only one among us who can cook.” Shep hip-checked Noel out of the way.

“I’ll have you know, I’m quite good.” I stood in front of the refrigerator.

“Whatever, Sleeping Beauty. Move.”

I sighed and marched into the living room and faced Gabe. “Why are you all here?”

“Our place was destroyed.”

“I heard, but why are you *here*, in my place?”

From the couch, Nick responded, “You’re making it sound like you don’t want us here.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but there was another knock on the door.

“You are popular,” Gabe muttered.

“Not usually. You all might want to hide.”

All five of them scattered down the hallway again, and I went to greet whomever the hell this was. When I opened the door, I was shocked to see JJ.

“Mason!” He shoved his way inside, hands full of files, which, I assumed, was why he didn’t use the key I gave him.

“JJ, uh, why are you here? I thought I wasn’t seeing you tonight.” *Why is everyone fucking here?*

“I was at dinner, and to my shock, Blaze brought files with him an—”

“Stop.” I held up a hand. “His name is Blaze?”

“Do not name shame, Mason!” He dropped the files on my coffee table. “As I was saying—”

“You left him at dinner, didn’t you?”

There was a pregnant pause before he spoke. “I sort of took the files and ran...but I had a good reason.”

I smirked. “Uh-huh.”

JJ visibly cringed “He was a sleaze. Nothing like I thought. He said crude things. While I’m all for dirty talk in bed with a man, he was *eww*...so, I took these and ran when he went to the bathroom, and I hope I’m not fired.”

He sighed and sat in one of my armchairs. “Blaze apparently had so much info on the Saint brothers and—”

JJ and I both turned and faced the hallway as all five brothers stalked their way toward us.

“Mason,” JJ whispered. “Please tell me we’re sharing a nightmare right now.”

“I wish. JJ, don’t make any sudden moves.”

JJ rolled his eyes, and I saw him eyeing the vase near the window. Apparently, I wasn’t the only one.

“Did you want this?” Shep grabbed the vase and handed it to JJ. “There you go, dirty boy.” He winked, and JJ flushed bright red.

“Let’s all have a seat and see what JJ brought us.” Gabe grabbed the files and started passing them out to his brothers. I prayed that whatever was in there wasn’t going to be what ended the two of us.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

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“TELL ME WHAT IT ALL SAYS.” Shep went back to the kitchen to make food while JJ and I sat close together on the couch.

I eyed each brother as they read whatever was in the paperwork JJ had brought over.

“Did you read any of it?” I whispered to JJ.

“Some. Enough to race over here.” He also kept his voice low.

“This guy, Blaze, why does he have all this information on us?” Gabe lifted his gaze, his dark eyes sparking something alive inside me, but I tried to hide my shiver.

“I asked him that too. He said the district attorney has been trying to build a case against you all. Blaze took interest.” JJ rolled his eyes. “He wants to be in with the DA, and after five minutes talking to him, I saw why.”

“Why?” Angel smirked.

“Both are pretentious windbags who think of people as property and not human beings.”

I turned my head toward JJ. “I thought you were a cheerleader for justice for all?”

“I am, when it’s true justice.” JJ shifted, his posture relaxing. “Blaze told me, and I quote, ‘Sometimes you need to make people look guilty, even if they didn’t do the crime.’ Something about it being for the greater good.”

“That’s horrible.” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I knew the world was full of corruption, but I tried to hold on to hope. I guess I was right to dislike human beings.

“What’re in the files?” Shep stepped out of the kitchen, wiping his hands on a towel.

It was Gabe who answered. “They have everything in here, from our births to graduations, to the foster houses we were in up until...” He didn’t continue, but with a nod of Shep’s head, I knew he understood.

“Every crime they think we did is in here too,” Noel scoffed. “No offense, but some of these are so horribly orchestrated, I think even they know we didn’t do them.”

“Looking for scapegoats.” Nick shook his head, eyes still scanning the papers.

I found it hard to believe they were completely innocent. “Are you saying, you didn’t do any of those crimes?”

Nick grinned—the type you’d see someone who loved playing games would give. “I never said that.”

“They have robberies in here.” Angel slapped one file closed and opened another. “Oh, this one I remember.” Nick, Noel, and Gabe moved behind Angel to read.

“Which one?” Shep hollered from the kitchen.

“Fallon St. James.”

I remembered that name. He was a big-time financier that was killed three years ago...on Christmas Eve. They’d found his body sliced up and hanging on the tree in the town square. Nailed to his chest was a sign that read “Overdraft Fee Paid.” I didn’t understand it then, and I still didn’t.

“That was your handiwork?” I asked.

Gabe clenched his jaw. “It was, and before you start developing feelings for that sleazy, bloodthirsty asshole, know that he put a lot of people out of business and on the streets.”

“Like you?” I wasn’t sure when I’d grown a pair of balls, but judging by the swat JJ gave me, he was shocked too.



Gabe opened his mouth to speak but was cut off by Nick. “They have Scarlett in here.”

I glanced at JJ, who mouthed, *Who is Scarlett?* I shrugged because I had no idea.

There was a clang in the kitchen, and Shep rushed out, snagging the file from Nick. “Motherfuckers.”

“It’s where the cases seem to begin.” Nick swallowed, and for the first time, it wasn’t anger and fear emanating from the brothers; it was sadness.

Shep tossed the file to the ground, pictures and papers spilling out like a macabre rainbow. JJ gasped and I looked away...but only briefly. The sight was horrific, and I’d seen horror movies. JJ and I both had, but these...this had really happened.

The girl, maybe sixteen, had bright-red hair, almost an unnatural shade. She lay on the floor, naked in a pool of blood. Every part of her body, minus her face, appeared ravaged. Bite marks, stab wounds, cigarette and cigar burns. In one of the photos, there were men and women in a semi-circle around her. For a moment, I assumed they were CSI or police, but in another photo, there was a profile of a man smiling...Fallon St. James. How would Blaze have these, and how had any of these people not been arrested for this?

“Scarlett Baris,” JJ said. “Sixteen years old. She was raped, tortured, and murdered on Christmas Eve, 2018.” He reached over and picked up the picture of people surrounding her lifeless body. “How could they think you all did this when it’s clear you’re not there?”

I swallowed down the bile that rose before I answered, realizing why. “Most of them are simply the backs of heads. They can say it was them.”

“And the women?” JJ was angry, and my blood began to boil.

“I don’t know, JJ.”

I’m not some insanely smart person when it comes to watching or reading mysteries. Usually, I’m the last to figure it

all out. But as I stared at these photos, the graphic description from the coroner, and saw the date, it all slammed into me.

“She’s why you do this.” I looked up into Gabe’s fathomless eyes. “These people, everyone involved in her murder, you’re taking them out one by one, aren’t you?”

“What do you mean?” JJ asked, his eyes squinting at the picture in my hand.

“This girl. She’s...you all knew her. Your killings take place during Christmas. Mostly on Christmas Eve, but through the years, you’ve done it for a few days. If I go through the rest of these files, I bet each person you actually killed was there the night Scarlett was brutally murdered. Am I right?”

“You want a fucking cookie or something?” Angel snapped.

“No, I want to understand.” I could feel my anger rising, bubbling beneath the horror of this girl’s death.

“Why?” Gabe glared.

“Seriously? You brought me into this when you kidnapped me, when you threatened me, and when you five broke into my apartment and decided you were staying here. I think I have a right to know what you’ve pulled me into.” I hadn’t realized I was standing and moving closer to Gabe until he bumped me with his chest.

“You have a fire in you.” He bit his lip, brown eyes glittering with mischief.

“Who was she?” I whispered.

“Scarlett was our sister.” It was Shep who answered. “The six of us shared a foster home, and one day our foster parents told us they were adopting us. Our lives were shit until they came along. And then, in a matter of a year, Scarlett and our foster parents were dead, and the five of us stood on the ashes of the only people who cared about us. We vowed to make every fucking person pay.” He slammed a casserole dish down on the table. “Dinner is fucking served.”

## CHAPTER NINE

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WHILE EVERYONE ATE, I gathered the files and brought them to my room. No appetite was poking at me anytime soon, that was for sure. I was surprised that JJ seemed to understand after Shep explained everything...almost as if he agreed with all of it.

As I sat on my bed going over every piece of paperwork and picture—the sound of everyone eating and chatting in the other room softly echoing in the apartment—I realized how wrongly I'd judged the Saint brothers.

“You should eat.”

I jumped at the sound of Gabe's voice. He leaned against the doorjamb, his eyes boring into me as if he could read my thoughts.

“Not hungry.”

He stepped into the room and shut the door. Tendrils of fear would normally creep along my spine, but instead I was calm. Curious why he was approaching and choosing privacy.

“Scarlett was the best of us. A girl with five aggressive brothers. We were overly protective of her, and all of us were inseparable. When the Barises took us in, we'd made it clear Scarlett came too. With a smile, they accepted.” Gabe sat on the corner of the bed and ran a finger over the front of a closed file as he spoke, and I clung to every word.

“Not a day goes by that I don't wonder, if we hadn't begged them to take her too, would she still be alive?”

My hand gently touched his arm, shocking us both. I offered no words, and I was glad when he continued talking.

“We lived in a gorgeous Victorian house not far from here. A mall, new police department, city hall, you know the mecca of the city that was completely rebuilt?”

I nodded. Our town had become a city within ten years. What were once houses and parks became a glass and concrete forest.

“No one wanted to sell, and our foster parents were no different. I remember the feeling of unease as I’d roam around town. Cops, strangers, all staring. They tried bullying the homeowners, and under great pressure, many sold.”

I wasn’t liking where this was going, but I didn’t dare utter a word, knowing the second I did, he’d clam up. He was lost in his memories, and there was something akin to the pain he’d endured that I understood.

“One night, our parents had to go to a council meeting, supposedly to stop the destruction of our neighborhood. The meeting was supposed to end at eight, and when ten o’clock approached and they never showed up, we all knew something had happened.” He chuckled darkly. “All of us, aside from Scarlett, were over eighteen but chose to stay living there, knowing the fight our parents were going through. One or two of us should have gone with them to that meeting.”

His brows furrowed and he sighed. “They were killed in a car accident. A semi hit them at seventy miles per hour through an intersection. An investigation concluded that our adopted father’s blood alcohol level had surpassed the legal limit.”

He looked over at me, eyes filled with anger, despair, and so much regret. “He never drank. His mom had been a horrible alcoholic, and he never touched the stuff.”

“He was set up.”

Gabe went on as if I hadn’t spoken. “When they were killed, everything got worse. Our foster parents left the house to all of us, and with everyone so desperate to have the city

they felt they deserved, they assumed the six of us would roll over for millions.” He shook his head and narrowed his eyes at me. “Our adoptive parents died December twenty-second. We held out for a year, until a week before the following Christmas, when Scarlett went missing.”

I couldn’t understand why taking her would make the brothers sell the house.

“I see the questions rolling around your head. Scarlett was taken, and we were told if we wanted her back, we had to forfeit the house. So, we did. We signed everything we were told to and handed the keys over. Then there was radio silence...Then Scarlett’s body was found.”

“But you gave them what they wanted.” My anger boiled in my stomach, and my heart ached.

“We received a message the day of her funeral on one of the flower stands. It read: ‘Let this be a reminder that we take what we want and make those who don’t bow to our will pay in blood.’ ”

This time I gripped Gabe’s hand. “And you couldn’t tell the police—”

“Because they were in on it.”

“Which is why they’re trying to get the five of you locked away. You’re killing everyone who murdered your parents and sister.”

He nodded.

“You do it during Christmas so they know it’s you, so they all know, but you’re smarter than them because they can’t prove it.”

He tilted his head, a small smile playing on his beautiful lips. “They attempted to kill us tonight by blowing up our place because they thought we were in there.”

“They can’t prove it’s you, so they’re returning to their old ways and trying to take you all out.”

Gabe sighed. “You would be a huge help to them.”

I gritted my teeth and thought about my parents, how they were taken from me in a fiery blaze.

“They won’t get it, ever.”

In a move so sudden, so unpredictable, Gabe cupped the side of my face. “If they find out you’re helping us, they’ll kill you.”

“You five didn’t seem to care much about that while you were breaking into my apartment.”

Gabe pressed his forehead to mine. “Something about you, Mason, I can’t explain it. The moment I saw you at the club, I gravitated toward you, and when you escaped, it was like my skin itched until I found you.” He looked at me then, eyes glistening with lust and need. “I wanted to fuck you into the stacks at your work, not caring if the building fell on top of us. And right now, every nerve ending feels alive just from touching you.”

How we went from talking about horrors, destruction, and the startling reality that so many people wanted us all dead, to craving the feel of Gabe moving inside me, licking, sucking, and devouring every inch of me, I didn’t know.

“I should be afraid of you, Gabe, but I think if you don’t fuck me right now, I’d wither away anyway.”

He crashed his lips to mine ungracefully. His sounds were animalistic; he tore at my clothes like a beast, and I was his willing victim. I could die wrapped up in this man as long as death came after I did.

When we were stark naked, lying on my mattress, I wrapped my legs around his waist and rutted against his hard cock.

“Fuck me, Gabe.”

His smile was all sin and salaciousness. And then he devoured me whole.

## CHAPTER TEN

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THE SCRAPE of Gabe's teeth along my flesh as he tasted every inch of me he could was a welcomed pain. Never had I felt more alive than when he shoved his tongue in my ass as he jacked me off.

I knew there was no way the guys in the living room didn't hear us, but I couldn't care even a little. It was as if I were on the brink of life and death, and both were appealing.

"Fuck, you taste amazing." Gabe's voice rumbled against my heated skin, and I spun us until I sat on his lap, his back pressed to the mattress.

"My turn." I reached beside my bed for the lube, silently thanking the condom gods when I didn't have to root around for one. "Lie there like a good boy." I winked as I pumped his cock, loving the hiss he made.

Gabe had prepped me enough, and I had to admit, I was loving the pain with the pleasure. As soon as I was sure he was ready, I lifted my ass. After he slid the condom on, I squirted some lube on my hands and slicked up his covered shaft as he gripped my hips.

"Careful." His voice was soft, caring, but in this moment, I didn't want kindness. I wanted to feel every inch. I wanted to scream.

Once I was lined up, I sat fully, relishing in the burn and stretch. This was perfection.

"Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhit." Gabe's neck arched, and I didn't waste a second. I leaned into him, licked a stripe over

the stretch of skin, and delved my tongue into his waiting mouth as I rode him with everything I had.

In a flash, I was on my back with my legs over his shoulders. “You’re...fuck, Mason.” Sweat slid down his nose, his eyes obsidian, and I wanted to get lost in this memory, in this sensation forever.

He relentlessly pounded into me, and I vaguely knew I was shouting. It was as if I was so far away from reality, floating along a river of ecstasy. Nothing could hurt me here except Gabe...and I wanted him to.

As my orgasm washed over me, for the first time in my entire life, I almost blacked out from coming. As if my body had never been to this precipice...and it hadn’t.



I JOLTED awake to the burst of laughter that echoed through the apartment. I reached over toward Gabe, but the sheets were cold. *He must be in the living room.* I slowly—because my body ached wonderfully—got out of bed and went to my ensuite bathroom. The moment I turned on the light, I was assaulted by my reflection.

My naked body was covered in patches of pink, from teeth scrapes to suck marks. I chuckled and started the water. At least my face wasn’t ravaged. I’d possibly get away without too much ribbing when I faced everyone.

I washed up quickly, brushed my teeth and hair, threw on a pair of sleep pants and a T-shirt, and went to face the music.

As soon as I stepped out into the living room everyone—including JJ, who was still here—began clapping. Even Gabe.

“Very funny.” I bowed, playing it off as if I wasn’t mortified. I wasn’t really, but seeing all the faces and the knowing glint in JJ’s eyes, it was a little uncomfortable.

“It’s late. I figured you’d sleep.” Gabe handed me a glass of ice water, which I was very grateful for.



“What time is it?”

“After midnight. The police knocked on your door. JJ answered and said you were asleep.” Noel shrugged. “Seemed to buy it since he’s been here before.”

“That’s why I haven’t left. I figured they assumed I was staying.” JJ was sitting between Shep and Angel, a large bowl of popcorn on his lap.

“I have two guest rooms with beds, and that couch pulls out if you all want to get some rest.”

“Nick and I will take a room.” Noel grabbed his brother’s hand, and I watched as they went to one of the bedrooms.

“I’ll share with you.” Gabe bit his lip. The flutter in my belly in anticipation of anything that mind had in store was thrilling.

“I can sleep on the floor if—” JJ was about to get up when Shep pulled him down.

“Nah, I’ll share with you.”

JJ blushed and I met his gaze to see if he was okay, and... yeah, he was fine with that.

“Great, you two can take the other room, and I’ll take the couch. Now fuck off.” Angel nudged JJ away, and I silently watched as they disappeared into the other guest room.

“He’ll be fine.” Gabe dropped his arm over my shoulders.

“I’m sure he will be.”

“Angel, if the cops knock again, come get us.”

Angel responded by giving us the finger and wrapping the throw blanket that was on the couch over his huge body.

With a laugh, Gabe took my hand and guided me back to the bedroom. He plopped onto the bed, a small smile playing on his lips.

“JJ was telling us your parents died in a fire.”

Oh, well, that was a mood killer. “Yeah.”

“I’m sorry.”

I shrugged. “I was ten, and JJ’s parents took me in. I never worried about money, and while I do miss my parents, I was fine.”

He nodded. “What caused the fire?”

I tilted my head because it was such an odd question. “I don’t really know. I mean, I think I was told but—”

“Did you know that the house where your parents died was demolished? The land was bought and is now the home of one of our state senators?”

I sat beside Gabe, unease settling in my chest. “I knew it was demolished. There wasn’t anything to save. JJ’s parents asked what I wanted to do when people came sniffing around about the property, but I was a kid. I didn’t want any part of it. JJ’s parents were my legal guardians and helped me sell the land. I decided to donate the money as soon as I was eighteen. I didn’t need it, and I knew my folks would be happy to see me do some good with it.”

Gabe reached over and gripped my hand. “Senator Chandler lives in a home built on the land your parents died on, and it’s not a coincidence.”

“What are you...? How do you know any of this?”

“While you slept, we asked questions and JJ talked. My brothers and I have been chasing every fucking demon who destroyed our family. It only took a Google search to find out what happened to the land you sold. Senator Chandler was one of the people who had a lot to gain from the rebuild that cost my foster parents and Scarlett their lives.”

It was as if I were being held down by a boulder, and all the blood was leaving my body so agonizingly slow, I couldn’t even scream. The realization of what Gabe was saying began to settle like a knife through my heart. “You think my parents were murdered?”

“I do, and I think your demons and mine are dancing to the same song, Mason.”

I felt as though the floor beneath my feet fell away and I was falling into darkness. I didn’t want to believe anything

Gabe was saying. I knew we both had great losses in our lives, but it was too familiar, too much of the same.

“We’ll make them all pay, Mason. I promise.”

I met his black eyes, and I knew he meant every word. Maybe I was crazy to believe what he was saying, but everything they’d shown and told me washed any doubt away.

My parents were murdered.

“Come here.” Gabe pulled me to him, wrapped his arms around me, and was the perfect big spoon. “I wasn’t sure if I should tell you.”

“No, I’m glad you did. I just...I—”

“Don’t know what to do.”

“Yeah.”

“Fortunately, I do.”

How such a horrific statement could settle peacefully in my bones I would never know, but it lulled me to sleep.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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I WAS surprised when I woke to only JJ in the kitchen, cooking. Angel was snoring away on the couch, Gabe was still in bed where I left him, and none of the other brothers were awake. It actually gave me a great opportunity to talk to my best friend.

“Morning.” He smiled as he flipped pancakes.

“Morning, JJ.” I sat on the stool by the breakfast bar. “Before the others wake up, we need to talk.”

“This is about the Senator and your parents, isn’t it?” I didn’t have to answer that question—I was sure the expression on my face said it all.

“Mason, I was wrong about these guys. While I don’t agree with how they’re finding justice, I don’t think they have much of a choice.” He lowered the gas and faced me.

“So, you no longer think they’ll kill us?”

JJ shook his head. “Those cops outside your place, the ones roaming the hallways, and checking on you? They aren’t here to protect you; they’re using you to bait the brothers here.” He shrugged, a humorless laugh escaping. “The fact that they’re here already is comedic.”

“JJ, do you really agree with what Gabe said? They were killed for their land?”

He pursed his lips. “I don’t think that’s the only reason. I don’t feel like they’d be murdered just for a house to go up in its place. But as I lay in bed last night, unable to sleep because

Shep thrashed all over the place, I did more research.” He quirked a brow.

“You have to be careful, JJ. I’m sure red flags go up anytime someone pokes at things on the Internet.”

He waved me off, flipped the last of the pancakes, and shut the gas off completely.

“I used Blaze’s ID. Before you ask how I knew it, believe me, the dude wanted in my pants badly yesterday and thinks he’s so untouchable, he left all those files there...even his codes. Idiot. I’ll deal with the fallout of that later.”

I couldn’t argue with the idiot statement. “What did you find?”

“Did you know your father was looking to run for Senate? He hated what they were doing here and through the rest of the state and wanted to help stop the corruption from a really high platform. It was only after he put his bid in that your parents were killed.”

I was ten and hadn’t known anything about politics. I was sure my father would have told me, but he was killed and never had the chance.

“Listen—” I started to speak when there was a pounding on my door. It wasn’t a pleasant “I want to check up on you” kind of knock.

“JJ, get Angel up and into the bedroom.”

He rushed over, but Angel was already on alert and followed JJ down the hallway. They were out of sight by the time I opened the door.

“Mr. Daws.” Gilly didn’t look like the kind officer from the day before.

“Officer Gilly, I just woke up. What’s this about?”

“We need to come in.”

I sighed but opened the door. “What is it this time?”

“We know your friend is staying here. A Blaze Haberty claims he stole important documents from him last night.”

I was never so happy I'd taken the files into my room than I was at that moment.

"JJ is asleep. I'm not waking him, and unless you have a warrant for his arrest, or to search my premises, I'm going to have to ask you to leave." I stood a little straighter. The realization that these men had no interest in my well-being but, instead, would rather see me bleed to keep what was theirs, filled me with a bravery I hadn't known I had.

"I'd like you and the rest of the officers to stop following me and camping out. No one is trying to kill me, my friend stole nothing, and you're harassing me."

Gilly leaned uncomfortably close to me, the flecks of gold in his eyes flickering like fire.

"This isn't a game you want to play, Mr. Daws. Don't make the same mistake so many have and try to go up against forces far more powerful than you'll ever be."

If there weren't six people huddling in the bedrooms, ready to leap out and protect me if these cops tried anything, I probably wouldn't have responded.

"Officer Gilly, my father used to tell me that no one wins every game forever. Eventually they become complacent, and that's their demise." I cocked my head to the side. "Too bad you never met the man." My father never actually told me that, seeing as I was a kid, but it was written on a plaque JJ's parents gave me that had hung in his study.

Gilly's eyes narrowed. "You're making a huge mistake."

"And you already made one." I slammed the door in his face and locked it, releasing a breath I hadn't realized I was holding. The fact that I wouldn't be going into the station at nine was implied.

"Mason, are you okay?" JJ rushed to my side. In a daze, I slid to the floor.

"I think I just fucked myself."

Shep walked in, followed by his brothers. "Welcome to the club."

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“YOU’RE GOING TO WORK?” Gabe asked as I zipped up my coat.

“If I don’t, it will look suspicious.”

“I’m going to have to go in to work too. If Blaze is making a huge deal to the cops, I should make it look like I don’t know what the fuck he’s talking about.” JJ grabbed his messenger bag and put it on.

“You all need to stay here.” I grabbed Gabe by the shirt and pulled him closer. “Don’t go vigilante until I get back.”

“Once the cops are cleared out, we have work to do, Mason. This isn’t over yet, and Christmas is coming.”

I knew the brothers were adamant about every kill being around Christmas. You’d think with everyone knowing this, they’d all get more protection. But I’d learned arrogant people often thought themselves untouchable.

“Let me talk to my boss and see about taking some time off. I can claim it’s for the holidays. I just don’t want to leave her high and dry.”

There was conflict in Gabe’s expression, but he wasn’t about to argue. He nodded curtly and stormed down the hallway.

“He’s a moody fucker. Do what you gotta do.” Shep shooed us away.

JJ and I decided to carpool. I’d drop him at his job, and then I’d go to mine. We got out an hour apart, but my day ended before his. I’d stop at the store, get a few things, and pick him up.

The entire drive, JJ tapped his foot, and I couldn’t complain because I was white-knuckling the steering wheel. Being out of the apartment took away that air of safety we’d both felt with the brothers.

When I pulled up to his building, I grabbed his arm. “Be safe. Anything happens, even if you think it’s probably nothing, call me. I’ll leave and get you.”

“You too...I mean, leave if something happens. Don’t be a Brave Little Toaster.”

I chuckled, kissed his cheek, and watched him until he was securely inside the building.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

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THE HEAT WAS MAKING me sweat, so I lowered it. I was humming Christmas songs, desperately trying to get my mind off the fear clawing at me.

I was at a four-way intersection, and the light turned red, so I stopped. The town was all gussied up for the holidays with lights, wreaths, and mini trees. There were a few windows that had Hanukkah decorations and even a few with Kwanzaa.

Just as the light turned green, someone smashed into the rear of my car. It wasn't hard enough that I was concerned medically, just irritated.

With a sigh, I reached into my glove box, pulled out my insurance papers, and waited for the guy to get out. *This jackass better have insurance too.* The person was still in the driver's seat, so I rested my head on the top of the seat, and waited. No way was I stepping outside and exposing myself. I could see police lights in my periphery. Normally, that would've made me happy, but as of late—and after learning of their corruption—my only hope was that this would go smoothly.

He stared at me through his windshield, making no move to get out. I'd seen that "oh, fuck" moment in movies, read them in books, but up until this second, I never was the main character. The man was sneering at me, with a glint of what I'd refer to as a knowing grin.

My passenger door opened, and I'd stupidly not been paying attention to my surroundings. "Scream, and I promise

I'll shoot right through you and leave you to bleed out." Gilly's face was pure rage and slight delight. When I looked in the rearview mirror the other driver was getting out, and he was sneakily slipping a gun in his waistband.

There were people bustling about, paying little to no mind to me. To them, it was a minor fender bender, and Gilly was a cop...no way he was a bad guy.

"You're going to get in my car. If you put up even the slightest fight toward me or my friend here, the officer watching your friend, JJ, will receive orders to make him pay for your stupidity."

*Shit. Shit, shit, shit.*

"Fine." I exited my vehicle and moved to the police car. I knew once I was inside, I was fucked, but no one was watching, no one realized the corruption and horror on these streets every day. They smiled at Gilly, and he waved, wishing them a good morning or a Happy Holidays.

"Get. In." He pushed me roughly inside, causing the top of my head to scrape on the frame.

"What about my car?" I asked once Gilly was in his car.

"Already handled." He pointed to the left, and I saw a tow truck.

"You really thought of everything," I said as soon as he got settled into the driver's seat.

He hummed, put the car in Drive, and all I could do was stare out the window.

As I passed the holiday cheer, my heart began to ache. There was no happy ending for me. I knew there was going to be no coming back from wherever I was going.

I had only been with Gabe for one night, and while any relationship with him would be intense, I had hoped, maybe, he wanted to have one with me.

I rested my head on the top of the seat. Shortly after, the town was behind me, and I could tell we were driving to a place where screams disappeared in the wind.

It wasn't a truly long trip, and soon enough we were pulling into a driveway of a house that had seen better days.

Gilly, gun in hand, opened my door. "Move."

I took a few steps and stopped.

"I said move!"

Turning around, I met his angry glare. "They'll come for me, Gilly. Even if you kill me today or tomorrow, they will come for me. And then, they will come for you."

His nostrils flared, and he narrowed his gaze. "He wanted you awake and unharmed when you talked. But fuck that."

"He, who?"

I didn't get my answer. Gilly's arm raised, I tried to duck, but he held me firm in his other hand. With the handle of his gun shining in the sunlight, it slammed down.

Just before my world went dark yet again, I heard a sinister chuckle and seven words that shook me with fear.

"What a wonderful Christmas gift he'll be."

# PART 2

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## **GABE**

*“Life being what it is, one dreams of revenge.”*

*~ Paul Gauguin*

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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SHEP WAS BAKING up a storm in the kitchen. Cakes, donuts, some jelly things, I didn't even know what else. Angel kept flipping through the channels, never settling on anything. Noel and Nick were sitting together, slaving over all the files JJ had brought home, along with some other info the twins had been able to obtain. Me? I couldn't stop pacing. Ever since Mason and JJ left that morning for work, something had felt off.

None of us would admit that the two quirky guys were getting under our skin in a not-so-terrible way. However, this was different, unsettling. Like someone walking over your grave unsettling.

“Mason left his cell number on the fridge; so did JJ.” Noel quirked a brow and Nick smirked.

“And?”

Nick huffed, slapped the papers he was reading on the table, and pulled out his cell. I watched as his fingers danced over the keyboard. A moment later there was a chime, and the knot in the center of my chest loosened.

“JJ says he is doing good and just ate lunch, it was yummy, and he is still alive.”

Shep's sigh of relief was heard from the living room. “I hope he ate something not wrapped in wax paper.”

My scary brother had really taken to JJ, and fast. None of us did relationships—we never wanted to get close to people because knowing us never ended well for anyone.

“What did Mason say?” Angel asked as he tossed the remote onto the couch beside him, settling on the news.

“Nothing yet, but I’ll let you know when he messages me.” Nick returned to his reading, and that knot in my chest snapped tight again. Something was wrong.

“I’m sure he’s fine.” Shep came over and patted my shoulder. “Have a snickerdoodle.”

“I don’t want a snickerdoodle, Shep. I just...” I tugged at my hair.

“You like him, I get it. We all do. Remember what Mom used to say? Don’t worry until there’s reason to worry.”

Noel snorted. “Yeah, uh, our whole life is a worry, Shep. If Gabe thinks something’s wrong, we shouldn’t ignore it.” He stood and moved to the door.

“Where are you going?” I rushed over to him, placing my hand on the knob.

“I’ll cover up and go out the back. I’ll head over to his job and see if he’s all right. He’ll never know I’m there.” He sighed. “Gabe, this is kind of my specialty. I sneak.”

“Let him go.” Angel raised his brows. “Then we can all stop watching you do the left-to-right shuffle.”

I pointed to Noel. “Be careful, be quick.”

“Got it.” He was covered and out the door in a few minutes, and I continued my pacing.

My phone didn’t vibrate for almost half an hour.

“Noel?”

“Gabe, he’s not here. Never showed.”

“Fuck!”

“What is it?” Shep asked and Nick and Angel were already moving toward me.

I held up a finger. “Did anyone know where he was?”

“Shit,” Angel hissed.

“No, his boss said he never even called in, which was unlike him, and her calls went straight to voice mail.”

“Get over here.” I ended the call and looked at Nick. “Message JJ and tell him not to leave the building; one of us will come get him. The second he steps out—”

“Yeah, I got it, Gabe.” Nick was already texting before I could finish.

I moved over to the window and saw that there was no cop car waiting. I knew when Mason left, they tended to return to the station. I didn’t find that odd. What I did find odd was the big black van idling across the street.

“What’re you looking at?” Angel joined me.

“Ever seen that van over there?”

“Gabe, I don’t know this neighborhood.”

I nodded curtly. “Keep an eye on it until Noel returns.”

“Sure.”

I moved next to Nick. “What did JJ say?”

“To get our asses over there to get him, that if Mason is missing he needs to be here.”

“We better hurry. I get the impression JJ won’t wait long.” Shep scratched his beard. “Noel’s out; he can get him.”

Nick nodded and was on the phone in a sec. I could hear him talking but was having a hard time making out what he was saying. My head felt as if I were submerged in water. The same fear from when Scarlett went missing surfaced. I knew what these people were capable of and I knew that no matter what they asked for, they would still kill him.

“So Noel’s not coming back? Can I stop watching this van?” Angel hooked a thumb toward the window.

I narrowed my eyes. “No. As a matter of fact. Keep watching.” I grabbed my coat.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Shep tugged on my arm.

“I’m going to see who exactly is in the van. Trust our gut, right?”

His blue eyes darkened. “We got eyes on you. Be careful.”

I left the apartment and took the stairs to the first floor. The rear entrance, where the dumpsters were, was the best place to exit. I was extra vigilant and as I approached the van, I pulled my piece out.

I could make out two men in the front and sure enough, both were staring at Mason’s apartment complex. The passenger window was open, and one of the guys was smoking. Perfect.

I quickly grabbed his arm and yanked. The crunch of bone was like music to my ears; his pained screams weren’t. In another swift move, I shoved the barrel of my gun into his mouth, shattering his teeth.

“Fucking twitch, and I’ll make the inside of this van look like a Picasso.”

The driver raised both of his hands. “What do you want?”

“Let’s not do this innocent shit. Why are the two of you casing out Mason’s apartment?”

“Who?”

I scoffed. “Fucking games.” I pressed the passenger’s arm back more, and he grunted in pain.

“Fine, Jesus. We were told to watch the place in case... well, in case you and your brothers showed up.”

“By who?”

The driver’s gaze was defiant. He eyed his friend, who was barely coherent due to the pain.

“You know what me and my brothers are capable of. The fact that I need to continue breaking your buddy here is amazing to me.”

“Gilly, okay?”

“Of fucking course.”



I released the guy's arm and gripped his dick. "Where did they take Mason?"

The passenger was desperately trying to talk, so I removed the gun from his mouth. Strings of blood and saliva followed.

"All we know is to watch this place, call in if any of you show up. Gilly said they were handling Mason but we're low on the totem pole, dude. They don't tell us more than we need to know."

That I believed.

The sound of a car caught my attention and a second later, two doors slamming shut echoed in the air.

"Gabe." Noel was beside me in a flash.

"Looks like Gilly sent these fuckheads to watch the building in case we arrived. They confirmed Mason was taken but don't know where."

"Fuck that shit," JJ shouted and I watched as he ran over to the driver's side, wrenched the door open, and began beating on the driver.

"Where the fuck is my friend, you piece of shit motherfucking asshole? You tell me, or I will scratch your eyes out of your stupid ugly head!"

"Noel?"

"On it." My brother, with a smile on his face, unhurriedly went over to JJ and started pulling him off the driver, who had blood flowing from his face.

"I swear we don't know!" the passenger said and I stepped back, releasing his dick from my death grip.

"We believe you." I pulled out my suppressor from my pocket and screwed it onto the barrel of my gun.

"Hey, what the fuck?" The driver moved, likely to get his weapon, but I was faster.

In a blink of an eye, they both had holes in their heads and were slumped over.

“Noel, get JJ inside. We need to figure out our next move.”

With a single nod, Noel took JJ by the arm and guided him toward the door of the building. Before JJ disappeared, his green eyes shone with a rage I hadn't yet seen on his normally gentle face. *Another monster created from the hands of greed.*

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

---

NOEL HAD STOLEN a car to pick up JJ and was working with Angel to get the dead guys into it—they'd toss it into the lake later. As for the van, that would be used as a message. Shep drove it down the alley next to Mason's place until we could get organized.

"I knew something was gonna happen." JJ was seething. He paced the living room, his face bright red.

"When he dropped you off this morning, was anything suspicious?" Shep was speaking softly to JJ, as if he were trying to calm a dangerous animal.

"Seriously? This entire town has become suspicious to me. This afternoon I had lunch delivered because I now never want to go anywhere. The guy that brought it to me was Mike, who'd been bringing us food for months. All I could do was stare at him. I was never skeptical of him before, but now I wasn't sure if he was good or bad. I cut a piece off my sub and asked Denise to try it before I ate it in case it was poisoned."

"What would you have done if it was? Denise could have died." Shep was sporting a smirk, and it was aimed at the guy who clearly had ensnared him.

JJ shrugged. "She's never been nice to me, so not sure it would have been much of a loss."

"You're a little scary." Shep lifted a plate of cookies to JJ, forcing the man to stop his pacing.

The front door opened, and Nick strolled in. "Got the van cleaned out, and it's ready to go."

“Good.” I grabbed a box that had been delivered that afternoon. We’d ordered some clothes since all of ours were piles of ash. I cut it open and took out a black pair of jeans and a black long-sleeved Henley.

JJ was chomping on cookies while he booted up his laptop. “Cover your face and hands,” he said around a coconut delight.

“I’ve done this a few times.”

He rolled his eyes and started typing. “Ah-ha, I had a feeling.”

“What?” Nick, Shep, and I surrounded JJ.

“Mason’s car is in the impound. Towed there this morning, an Officer Germain signed off on that.” He hit a couple of keys. “Why would IA be signing off on an impound?”

“Maybe because he’s a scuzzy piece of shit like the rest of the police department and every government official in existence?” Nick lifted his shoulder. “My guess.”

“Fair enough.” JJ shoved another cookie into his mouth.

“We’ll be sure to get that back.” Shep grabbed his clothes and fifteen minutes later, the two of us were in the van. Nick was staying behind to watch JJ. Angel and Noel would return soon enough.

“I’ll place the van; you get into the lot to get Mason’s car.”

“No problem.” Shep cracked his neck, and I could see his angry determination.

Mason had always been part of this, always drawn into this viper’s nest, but it was as if he’d been asleep. His folks were killed just like mine, and he was only now becoming aware. Yeah, I had a huge part in Mason finding out and guilt was eating away at me something fierce, but I learned a long time ago not to hold on to the wrongs of others.

The expansive impound lot was behind the police station. I let Shep out a block ahead and waited until he was out of sight, parking the van across the street from the station but on the other side of the road.

I slinked out of the vehicle and walked over to where I'd dropped Shep off. As soon as he brought the car around I'd get in, hit the button on the remote Nick gave me, and we'd drive off.

It took Shep ten minutes, but he came through. Once I was in I hit it, and we watched as the hood of the van blew off and flames erupted. Written on the side of the van was "Return What Is Mine."

Gilly and probably every cop in there would know what that meant, but it wasn't incriminating, and they'd never find any evidence that we'd even been in that van.

We drove off, and I watched through the rear window as cops stormed out of the building. I hoped Mason wouldn't pay the price for our latest spectacle.

---

SHEP I returned to a full house, minus Mason. All of them were watching the news, where crews were just pulling up to the scene in front of the police station.

"This was your brilliant plan?" JJ gestured to the TV.

"You have a better one?"

JJ huffed and moved over to his laptop. "I did some research into pretty much all the names in the files. I fell down a rabbit hole with Senator Chandler."

"How so?" I hung up my coat and sat beside him on the couch.

"He's a quiet guy, lives in his house on the hill where Mason used to be. His politics are bland, and he doesn't take any risky stands."

"Okay, so he's good at covering his tracks." My brothers and I were no different.

"No one, and I do mean no one"—he narrowed his eyes at me—"is that good."

“Fine, whatever, I’m guessing you found something?”

“Nope. I found lack thereof.”

Shep had come over, and even the rest of my brothers were being pulled in.

“Explain.” Noel perched himself on the back of the couch.

“He makes no waves, none at all. Zero controversies or scandals. Here’s what is interesting, though.” He clicked a key, and Senator Chandler and a man I didn’t recognize were laughing at some ribbon-cutting ceremony.

JJ looked at each of us and blew a raspberry. “This is why they’ve gotten away with everything for so long.” He pointed to the man with the senator. “That’s District Attorney Crispin Broderick, and the ribbon-cutting ceremony is for a research facility.”

“It’s not out of the ordinary that a DA and a senator would be seen at an event,” Angel responded, earning himself an eye roll from JJ.

“Uh-huh, and what if I told you the research facility was only known for its name and not what they do there?”

Nick hissed. “Sus indeed.”

“Guess what it’s called?” JJ actually appeared gray as he asked.

“What?” the five of us said in unison.

He hit a few more keys and the picture panned out. In big red letters attached to a large industrial yet stylish building was the name: Scarlett Research Facility.

“Every single one of them die,” Shep practically growled.

“I think it’s time we pay the senator a visit.” I couldn’t take my eyes off the screen, but I knew my brothers were in agreement.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

---

GETTING into a senator's house wasn't easy. I wasn't sure how other political figures handled their security, but it couldn't be normal that Chandler had ten guards just on the outside of his property.

"We're not getting in there." Angel's voice sounded through my earpiece.

Each of us was surrounding the property, looking for a vulnerable spot to get through, so far none of us were having any luck.

"None of this finds Mason," JJ grumbled. He was in the car with Shep—we couldn't leave him at the apartment alone.

"You don't know that," Nick whispered; he was the closest to the house.

"Gilly has a daughter, son, and wife. Take one of them, and I guarantee he'll start talking. I understand you want them all to pay for your sister's murder, but getting Mason has to be top priority."

"How do we know Mason isn't in there, JJ?" I asked as I peered through the binoculars to the second floor of his mansion. I could see the senator talking on the phone.

"I don't know, but why would he be? That would be stupid with his family in the house."

"JJ's got a point, Gabe. We should grab one of Gilly's kids." Angel would be the one to agree with that.

"We aren't like them." I closed my eyes and took a breath.

“You’re right. We’re not,” Noel responded. “We won’t hurt them, but Gilly doesn’t know that.”

“I think I can get blueprints of the senator’s house. He had it built, so there has to be a plan. If you run in there, guns blazing, you all die and Mason does too...Then it’s just me, and how long will I last without any of you?”

“Shit.” Shep wasn’t having that. “Retreat.”

If one of us called retreat on any of our missions we had to pull back, no questions asked. We all had to be in it, or the chances of things imploding were high.

“Everyone meet at Mason’s,” Nick whispered, and all communication ceased.

The apartment was crawling with cops when we returned, so we drove on without stopping. Shep and JJ were in the lead, and we stayed behind their car. We drove for close to thirty minutes until we pulled down a winding driveway. At the end was a cabin on a lake.

“What is this place?” I asked once we stood on the large porch and JJ pulled out a key.

“Mason’s cabin. He hasn’t been here in a year, but he often comes here when the city gets to be too much. I usually join him.”

Shep was pulling out a box that was in the trunk.

“What’s that?” Nick questioned.

Shep smirked. “JJ thought we should bring them with us when we left for Chandler’s in case the place was raided. I thought he was crazy; turns out he wasn’t.”

“The files?” My eyes widened.

“Every single one.” Shep smiled, and we entered the cabin.

“No doubt that’s exactly what they were looking for.” Angel flipped on the lights.

Every piece of furniture was covered in white linen, and we helped pull it all off, and then we got situated.



“Two miles along the road is a store. Someone should get food.” JJ was frowning as he stared at a picture hanging on the wall. It was easy to see that it was Mason and JJ as kids.

“I’ll go.” Nick snatched his keys.

“Not alone.” Noel followed him out.

JJ turned and for the first time since Mason went missing, he was crying. “He’s my family, Gabe. I know he’s not much to you, and maybe you two would’ve been something, but he’s my brother. Like all of you have each other, he and I are it. If he dies I…” JJ choked out a sob and Shep wrapped him in his arms.

“We’re gonna get him back.” I hoped we would be able to keep the promise Shep had just made.

That night Shep cooked while JJ searched for any and all information he could find on Gilly’s family. Tomorrow was Saturday and his daughter Heather Gilly had cheerleading practice in the morning, and judging by her social media she was going to “hang out with her besties after cheering.” That would be the perfect opportunity to grab her.

“Dinner,” Shep shouted, and we all started toward the table when JJ’s phone chimed with an incoming call.

His brows furrowed as he slid it out, gasped, and hit Speaker. “Mason?”

“Sorry, not Mason.” I didn’t recognize the voice that spoke.

“Who is this?” JJ sat on a chair and placed the phone in the center of the table.

“Yeah, I’m not giving you my name. That’s not—”

“Gimme five minutes and I’ll figure it out, shitdick,” JJ interrupted, and Noel smacked his shoulder.

The man on the other end laughed. “Feisty, I like that.” Then he let out a long sigh. “Mason was feisty for a while too.”

I didn't like the sound of that. I gestured for JJ to get him to elaborate.

"Is he still alive?" A silent tear slid over his cheek, but JJ's voice held firm.

"For now."

"I want to see proof of life." Good. JJ was thinking.

"Are you sure that's what you want—Jaxon with an x?"

No shock, the person had information on JJ. From the look on JJ's face, he wasn't surprised either.

"Wow, you can google. Good job—now show me Mason."

Damn, he was feral.

"Very well." There were some sounds and a pained moan that resonated through my chest. Mason was in bad shape. "Incoming photo...remember, you asked for it."

JJ got the ding, slid the screen over, and immediately covered his mouth. I couldn't tell if he was going to be sick, but the shock on his face was enough for me to know it was bad. I slid the phone over, and I couldn't breathe.

"What..." JJ swallowed, tears falling freely now. "What the fuck did you do to him?"

Mason was strung up, his arms and legs making him into a human X. He was naked, covered in bruises and cuts. The side of his face was swollen, and his head was slumped forward as if he'd passed out.

"He's a fighter, and if you'd like him to keep fighting the good fight, you'll hand over those brothers and the files you stole from the DA's office."

"Not sure you're in a situation to negotiate," JJ said, and I had no idea what he was talking about.

"Is that right?" The man scoffed. "I think I hold all the cards."

"It's that narcissistic attitude that will be your destruction." JJ sneered at his phone.

“Funny.” There was a sound of shifting, and the man’s voice became louder as if he were closer to the speaker. “Mason said the exact same thing before I took a cattle prod to his stomach.”

JJ closed his eyes, and I’d had enough. I grabbed the phone.

“Let me make something perfectly clear to you, asshole. We’ve each seen what the other can do. Difference is, you think you’re unbreakable and I know nobody is. Mason dies, you and everyone you know dies with him.”

“Gabriel Baris...or should I say Saint. Are all the brothers there? Noel, Nicholas, Angel, Shepard?” He chuckled. “How festive. I often refer to you as the Christmas Avengers.”

“You want us, we want Mason. How do you see this happening?” I ignored his jabbing.

“I give you an address, you show up with the files, and I will make sure Mason is returned to Jaxon.”

Noel rolled his eyes. “You must think I’m an idiot. No deal. Mason first. Once we’re sure he’s okay, we’ll go wherever you want.”

“Do you think I’ll agree to that?” The man’s laugh was dark, and it sent a shiver up my spine.

“I’ve seen how much your word is worth. It’s my way, or I send these pictures and files to the news reporters who are currently camped out in front of the police station.”

“*Hmm...*” Footsteps echoed, telling me wherever he was had to be a large, cavernous area. A warehouse, maybe. “Scarlett,” he whispered her name, almost with reverence.

“Do not say her name!” Angel shouted.

“She was lovely, sweet, pure.” He hummed. “Her screams were a symphony. I often replay them in my mind when I can’t sleep.”

“You motherfucker.” Nick charged at the phone as if he could kill the man from within.

“Seems the conversation is getting a little heated for my liking. Jaxon, I’ll call you tomorrow, same time. If you’re agreeable, I will make the trade with you. If any of the brothers speak to me again, I’ll kill Mason live for you to witness. Are you understanding me?”

“Yes,” JJ said as he pointed to each of us. “Until tomorrow.” And JJ ended the call.

He stared at us, anger and hate filling the air. JJ started pacing while my brothers all glared at the phone.

I had to give them something to focus on. “We have twenty-four hours. We grab Heather Gilly and when he calls tomorrow, Officer Gilly will already know we have his daughter. Let’s see if they’re feeling so confident at that point.”

“It’s not a game!” JJ yelled.

“It is to them.” I left the table, no longer hungry, and locked myself away in one of the bedrooms.

All I could see as I closed my eyes was Mason’s battered body.

“I’ll bring you home,” I whispered into the darkness of the room.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

---

ANGEL, Nick, Shep, and JJ were at the lake house while Noel and I were in charge of grabbing Heather. JJ didn't want any harm to come to the girl, and we were all in agreement. It was only supposed to be convincing to Gilly that we would hurt Heather should he not make sure Mason returned to me—to us—alive.

“Looks like they're finishing up.” Noel jerked his head toward the group of girls walking off the football field.

“I confirmed she took her car. Let's hope she's not carpooling.”

We watched as the girls all talked for a minute and much to our relief, Heather walked off alone in the direction of her little red Kia. I started the car we'd conveniently borrowed, and as soon as she got inside hers, drove up behind her, blocking her in.

Noel watched to see if anyone noticed or was coming close while I slipped out of the car. Heather was scrolling through her playlist when I knocked on her window.

She jumped, then chuckled and her window came down a moment later.

“You scared me.” She had her hand on her chest, but she just laughed.

“Sorry. I think I scraped your bumper earlier, and I waited because I didn't want to cut out without sharing insurance info.”

“Oh, no!” She dropped her phone into the console and opened the door. “That’s nice of you, let me see the dam—”

When she was behind me walking near the rear of the car I grabbed her, shoving a cloth into her mouth to muffle her scream. Noel was now in the back seat and opened the door.

“Her phone?” Noel shouted over her muffled screams. Her legs and arms were flailing but Noel had the syringe ready.

It was a low-dose sedative to put her in a twilight state, nothing that would cause permanent damage.

“In the car, which is perfect. I’m sure he has some tracker on it.”

Noel injected her, and ten seconds later she began to relax. I shut the door and quickly moved to the front. I had no doubt the school had cameras, that was why a mile away we had another car waiting. They’d run these plates and eventually find it, but they’d have no idea what car we were switching out.

JJ had asked his mother if he could borrow hers for a few days since she and his dad were on vacation. He had a key, and she’d easily agreed. No car being reported stolen would mean they’d have no idea what vehicle we were using.

Noel and I were careful to look away from the school so they’d never see our faces. Sure, they’d know it was us, but there wouldn’t be solid proof. We breathed easy as we got to the woods where JJ’s mom’s car was stashed. A short time later we were pulling up to the cabin.



“SHE’S SLEEPING. I thought it was a twilight drug?” JJ shut the door as he left the bedroom Heather was currently tied up in. We would each take watch so she was never alone. Once she was awake, we’d bring her out here.

“She’s fine.” I waved him off as I opened up the prepaid phone Nick had grabbed at the store the other day.

“Ready?” Shep inquired as I sat at the table with the phone.

“Fuck, yes.” I dialed Gilly’s cell number, which had been surprisingly easy to find.

“Yeah,” he answered.

“Officer Gilly.”

There was a pregnant pause before he responded. “Who is this?”

“Oh, forgive me. I’m the newly acquired owner of your daughter.”

“My...motherfu—”

“Yeah, yeah. Well, you only have yourself to blame, Officer. You took something of mine, and I’m returning the favor.”

“I will—”

“Funny story. We got a phone call last night from the man holding Mason, and he sent us proof of life. Mason wasn’t looking too good...What shape do you think Heather will be in when, or if, you get her home?”

“If any of you hurt her, I’ll—”

“You’ll what?” I shouted. I’d evened the playing field. “Did you think it was your rules? Ha! Here’s the way this will go. Mason is returned alive, and then you’ll get your daughter back. He dies, she dies...Go ahead, Gilly, call my bluff.”

I had no doubt he was tracing his daughter’s phone as we spoke, and he’d find it exactly where we left it.

“We are expecting a call this evening where JJ is supposed to agree to turn us over, along with the files, in exchange for Mason. That’s not a deal we’ll be taking, so you have less than twelve hours to make sure the new one stands. Do you understand me, Gilly?”

“Don’t lay a finger on her.” There was so much anger in his voice, and I’d love to have thought it was because he

cared, but I was sure it was because I took his toy and he wanted it back.

“Best not to fuck this up.” I disconnected the call.

No one said a word for a solid minute. Twelve hours we would have to wait for that call to come through, and none of us really knew how things would go down. This was a huge gamble and for the first time in a long time, I was afraid.

I wasn't fooling myself into thinking Mason and I were going to build a house far from here and live happily ever after, but I'd never been hooked on someone the way I was him. When I saw him at the club, every part of my mind and body had needed to talk to him. Seeing him getting attacked in that alley had flipped a switch inside of me, and from that point on I knew I'd never be able to stay away from the man.

“Gabe.” I looked up, Nick was in the doorway leading to the bedroom. “She's awake.”

“Okay, let's bring her out here.” I stood and swung the chair around.

Angel got the rope and JJ went to the kitchen, intent on making sure she was given water. Nick carried her out. She wasn't fighting much, likely because the drugs were still in her system.

Once we had her tied to the chair, her mouth taped shut, I waited for her to make eye contact.

“Heather, I'm going to explain everything to you; afterward I'll remove the tape. Do know that if you scream, I'll sedate you again. Nod if you understand.”

She did.

I went on to explain everything. Heather's eyes widened every time I mentioned her father, but to my surprise she didn't appear shocked by anything I was saying. It took a good fifteen minutes to get through it all, and when I gently removed the tape she was silent.

Her gaze was on the floor and her bottom lip trembled. “Some kids love their parents, look up to them, want to be



them. I've spent so much of my life hiding from mine, waiting for the day I could get as far away from them as possible." She lifted her head, rage and sadness swimming in her eyes. "I can help you."

"You *will* help us; we'll exchange you for Mason," Angel said.

She snorted. "My dad, he...I don't doubt he'll try to make the trade happen, only because he likes me and my brother under his thumb, and the thought of anyone else having us makes him rage. But he doesn't have as much power as you think he does. Whoever is holding your friend, he won't agree to your terms, and my father is a coward to anyone who isn't his family."

"So you're saying what, exactly?" JJ stepped into her line of sight.

"I'm saying when your phone call comes, you're not going to get the answer you're hoping for."

"And what do you suggest?" JJ held a glass of water with a straw to her lips, and she gulped it down before answering us.

"I might know where Mason is being held."

Shep released a hefty laugh as he came to stand beside me. "Right, let's go with your plan and get ambushed." He leaned closer to Heather, his hands on the arms of her chair. To her credit, she didn't flinch. "We're not idiots, little girl."

"I want these guys to pay as much as you do. I know you don't believe me, but it's true." She turned her head, and Shep stepped back. "They take what they want without consequence...at least, that was before the Saint brothers." She chuckled darkly. "I'd listen to my father go on and on about how you were a thorn in his side."

"Why do you hate him so much?" JJ pulled a chair close to her and sat.

"Don't think because I'm his daughter that I get through life easily. Like I said, my father's a coward to anyone who isn't his family. If someone wants something that belongs to

him, he caves.” She narrowed her eyes, and none of us needed her to elaborate.

JJ took out his phone and showed her something. I peered over and saw it was Mason from last night.

“This is my best friend. His parents were killed, the brothers’ sister and parents too. This is what happens when you stand up to them, but it won’t stop any of us. We promise not to hurt you—that was never our intention, but if you know where he is, please tell us.”

Heather didn’t take her eyes off the phone. “I think that’s The Shed.”

“The what?” Noel cocked his head.

“My dad and his asshole posse play poker there and... other things. It’s two miles behind Saint Vincent’s Church in the woods. My brother and I were brought there a couple of times.” Her voice cracked. “I’m pretty sure it was a house once, but the inside is gutted so we call it The Shed. I recognize the walls. The black streaks.” She turned away from the phone.

“We have to be careful but quick.” Noel was tying his hair up as he spoke. “They won’t know we’re coming, and that’s an advantage. Something tells me they won’t have a lot of security around a place they think no one knows exists.”

“Can I ask a favor?” Heather looked up at me, tears streamed down her face.

“What’s that?”

“When you rescue your friend, don’t give me back... please.”

The silence in the room was startling, everyone was regarding me.

“If that’s what you want.” With a deep breath I added, “Maybe we can get your brother out too.”

It was small, but she smiled.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

---

WE KNEW that if Mason was in The Shed as Heather had told us, he wouldn't be able to walk or run. JJ made sure to get blankets, water, clothes, and a first-aid kit packed and in the car. Only four of us could go to have enough room to also fit Mason, so Shep stayed behind to watch JJ and Heather.

"You'll have to carry him," Noel said as he parked the car as close to The Shed as we could.

"I know."

There was certainly activity going on, but all I saw was one man outside. Just as suspected, they had no idea we'd know about this place.

"Noel and Nick, you take out the guy outside, Angel and I will get inside and—"

"You don't know what you're walking into, Gabe," Nick hissed.

"You think they have an army in there?" I rolled my eyes. They called it a shed, but it was bigger. It could have even been a house at some point, like Heather had said. I couldn't tell, but it wasn't housing a happy family baking pies or anything, and it wasn't hiding an army.

"Gabe and I will go over to the other side and see inside. If it's clear we'll go in, if not we'll wait for you two." Angel's compromise was fair, and we all agreed.

We exited the car, and Angel and I hung back a bit so Noel and Nick could flank the man walking the periphery. Once all

three were out of sight, we progressed toward the door, where there was one window we could see into, the others blacked out.

“Check it out; I’ll watch your six.” Angel kept an eye out and I peeked in.

The inside was gutted to look like one huge room, making it easier to scan the place. In the center was Mason, arms tied above his head and he practically dangled. His toes barely scraped the floor. No guards? Sons of bitches were way too cocky.

“Just him,” I whispered, and judging by the expression on Angel’s face, he was thinking the same thing I was...Either this was a trap, or they were idiots.

I tried the door handle and to my surprise, it turned. “This is almost too easy.”

“Be careful, Gabe.”

I slowly entered, and it was empty except for Mason. I rushed over, knowing Angel and the twins were near. He was out cold. I felt for a pulse, breathing a sigh of relief when there was one.

“Is he alive?” Noel had the clothes tucked in a bag across his chest—a last-minute call before we exited the car—and began slipping on the loose pants. Mason didn’t even flinch.

“Yeah, but I worry when we get him unhooked, the rush of blood to his arms might make him scream.”

Angel handed me a towel. “It was on the table. Gabe, you’ll have to shove it in his mouth. He won’t know what’s going on, and we can’t risk him being heard. We’ll take it out once we get to the car.”

I knew he was right, but the thought of being the reason Mason was scared didn’t sit well with me. I took the towel.

“Nick, arms around his stomach. When I say lift, do it, and I’ll cut the rope. Noel and Angel, hold his arms and bring them down slowly.” I couldn’t focus on the shape he was in at that moment. There wasn’t an unmarred spot on his body.

All three nodded, I gently pushed the towel into his mouth, and again he didn't move.

"One, two, three."

Nick lifted, I cut, Angel and Noel had his arms, and the moment they slowly lowered them, Mason woke and tried to scream.

"Mason, it's me, Gabe, and my brothers. Please, don't yell; we're getting you out of here."

His eyes were shifting all over the place, looking but not seeing. His muffled screams tore me up inside.

"We gotta run." Noel grabbed the knife I'd dropped after I'd cut the rope, and he ran. He'd get to the car first and start it.

I carried Mason bridal style. Nick was in front of me and Angel in back. We didn't stop, just ran, and halfway to the car Mason ceased moaning. When I glanced at him, I saw he'd passed out.

Inside the vehicle, I removed the towel while Angel opened the kit and began doing what he could. Mason's wrists were bloody and raw. Angel opened a bottle of water and went about cleaning them. Mason grunted, but I wasn't sure if it was from Angel's first aid or Noel's driving.

By the time we pulled up to the cabin, Angel had applied topical aloe and wrapped his wrists. He did the best he could with the other wounds, but we had to get Mason inside and assess the damage.

The minute we got out of the car, JJ was opening the front door.

"Shit." He moved out of the way, and I brought Mason over to the long dining table JJ had set up as a makeshift exam table.

My brothers and I had gotten our fair share of injuries through the years, and we often couldn't go to the hospital so we'd learned to fix ourselves. I only hoped the extent of our knowledge would help Mason.

“We need to clean out his cuts...Hell, his entire body needs to be sanitized. Afterward, I can bandage him up further.” Angel was gently lifting the blanket off Mason.

“JJ?” I looked over at the man, his eyes wide as tears flowed along his cheeks. He might not have been the one tortured, but he was wallowing in every second that Mason was.

He was gripping the stack of gauze tightly. I reached out and gently touched his hands, causing him to jump. “Sorry, I need these.”

“He’s...”

I nodded. “I know.”

Heather came over with a towel and as soon as Mason was stripped, she laid it across his groin.

“He deserves whatever dignity he can get.” Her eyes were red rimmed and puffy and she didn’t take her gaze off Mason. “My dad made this happen.”

“Yeah, he did.” I wasn’t sugar-coating this for her, and I realized I didn’t have to.

Mason never woke as we cleaned and fixed him up. JJ sat beside him at the table, holding a cold compress to the side of his swollen face.

“Keep checking him for fever. We’ve cleaned out those wounds as best we could, but infection is possible, even with the penicillin I gave him,” Angel said as he moved to the sink to wash his hands. He was by far the most knowledgeable when it came to medicine.

Angel had always had a passion to become a doctor, and our lives going to shit hadn’t stopped him from teaching himself through the years.

“We should move him to a bed.” Mason lay on the table, cleaned, patched up, dressed, and asleep.

“He has stitches, Gabe.” Angel dried his hands. “They fucked him up. I worry about moving him too much.”

“One more time, then. I don’t want him waking up on a hard table, Angel.”

It took the lot of us to get Mason moved into a bedroom. JJ told us which was Mason’s, so that was where we placed him.

JJ fussed around, making sure the lights were dim, that there was water beside the bed, and whatever else he could do to keep himself busy. All I could do was stare at the man who’d quickly and easily wriggled his way into my heart.

“Everyone I end up caring about gets hurt.” I thought I’d whispered it to myself, but JJ obviously had super hearing.

“Don’t be stupid. Even if you and your brothers never came into Mason’s life, those pricks still killed his parents. You opened his eyes to it, and there’s nobody in the world more stubborn than Mason.” He pointedly looked at me. “Not even you or me.”

I leaned down and placed my hand over his covered foot. “I never wanted someone to wake up more in my life and at the same time not to so he wouldn’t feel any pain.”

JJ nodded. “Yeah...”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

---

MASON WAS NEVER LEFT ALONE. If JJ had to use the bathroom or eat, I would sit with him. While he didn't wake, he twitched and moaned. What was he dreaming? Or was he stuck in a nightmare?

"The call should be coming through any moment, Gabe." Noel popped into the room.

"JJ, you need to be there for it."

"I'm not leaving Mason alone." He glared at me, and I understood.

"We can't take the call in here. If Mason hears that man's voice, it could set him off. Noel will—"

"For sure." He squeezed JJ's shoulder. "I got him."

It took a minute, but JJ relented and walked out of the bedroom. Noel smirked.

"These two are a lot of work."

He wasn't wrong. I followed after JJ and had just entered the kitchen when his phone rang.

"Here we go." JJ released a breath and pushed the button. "Hello."

"Jaxon."

"Piece of shit."

Shep rolled his eyes, but it was funny how JJ and Mason didn't think before they spoke.



“Feeling brave after your field trip today?”

“Where’s my daughter?” Gilly’s voice interrupted the conversation, and bubbles of joy over how angry he sounded floated around my chest.

“Oh, Heather?” JJ looked over at the girl, who was glaring murderously at the phone.

“I’ll kill every last one—”

“Enough!” the man shouted. It was slight, but Heather gasped. “Jaxon, if you think getting one up on me ends any of this, you’re sorely mistaken.”

“I dunno, dick, I think it sort of does.”

“You’re a fool.”

I leaned close to the phone. “And you’re fucked.”

“I want my daughter returned to me within the hour or—”

“You’ll what?” I slammed my hand against the table, making JJ jump. “Nothing, that’s what. You have no leg to stand on, neither of you do. Honestly, we didn’t even need to take this call, but I wanted to make one thing clear.”

Nobody said a word, so I continued.

“There’s nowhere you can go that we won’t find you. There’s no prayer that can save you. I promise every single one of you will suffer, welcoming death as an old friend by the time we’re done.”

At that I ended the call, and I spun on Heather.

“Who is he?”

“What?” Her eyes widened but there was no hiding her fear, her desperation to think of anything other than the question I was asking.

“You know that voice. Who is he?”

She covered her face with her hands and shook her head, almost as if she were hiding and trying to escape the thought.

“Heather, if you know who that man is, please tell us. Mason, you, your brother, Scarlett—everyone whose personal

hells he had anything to do with deserves for him to pay.” JJ gently removed her hands from her face. “Please.”

“He was using a voice changer thing but when he shouted, it was like it cut out and...” She started to sob, and JJ immediately embraced her.

“I know, saying his name makes it real.” JJ rocked her as she cried.

“Just say it once, and we’ll never ask again.” I waited. We all did. It was the last name we needed. The head of the snake.

“Crispin Broderick.” The sound of Mason’s pained voice had us all spinning to face him. Noel was holding him up.

“Sorry, man, he had to go to the bathroom; then he heard Heather crying and...I couldn’t stop him, so I figured I should help him.”

“The district attorney,” Angel growled. “We should’ve fucking known the second we saw him in that picture.”

I moved toward Noel and Mason. “Let me help you.”

I was relieved when Mason agreed, and I walked him over to the living room couch, to where we all moved. JJ still had a hold on Heather, but there was no question he wanted to run to his friend.

“Did he do this to you?” I asked Mason once he was as comfortable as he could be.

“No...he had muscle.”

“So the senator isn’t in charge?” JJ cocked his head.

Mason started to shake his head but winced. “At one point they thought I was passed out. Crispin got a call, and it was Chandler. He was telling the senator what to do, not the other way around.”

“Here.” Shep handed Mason a glass of water he gladly took and slowly sipped.

“Thanks.”

“I know this is a stupid question, but how are you feeling?” Angel crouched in front of him.

“You’re right, Angel, that is a stupid question.” That was all Mason said, and Angel got up and huffed.

Mason’s gaze flickered over to Heather. “Are you Gilly’s daughter?”

“Yeah.” She’d calmed herself, but there was no hiding her shaking.

“And we’re at my cabin?”

“We had to move fast. Your apartment was swarming with people, and it was the only place I could think of.” JJ shrugged.

“It won’t take them long to figure out we’re here.” Mason winced when he moved his arm to his lap.

“My brother.” Heather sat forward from where she’d taken a seat in an armchair. “You said we’d get him.”

Mason met my eyes. “What’s going on?”

We spent the next few minutes explaining how everything had happened after he’d gone missing and how it had led to Heather being a willing kidnappee and her plea that we save her brother.

“Where is he?” Mason asked after Angel handed him some pain pills. I knew they’d end up knocking him out, but that wasn’t necessarily a bad thing.

“I don’t know if he’s going to school with me being gone, but he’d be there during the day. He’ll be at football practice tomorrow. It’s usually after school but they’re squeezing in an extra one before break this Sunday.”

“We need a new location; after that we grab him and go,” Nick said.

“Unless our waiting forces Gilly to hide his son,” I argued. “No, we get him, then move.”

“You’re just deciding this for us?” Nick scowled.

“Fuck, Nick, what do you think they’ll do to him if they can’t get their hands on anyone else to hurt?”

“We can’t save everyone, Gabe.” Nick stepped up to me. “This was never about rescuing; it was about revenge.”

“He’ll die.” Mason’s voice was starting to slur, likely due to the drugs. “They only asked me once where the Saint brothers were. Once. Never asked me another thing. First guy came in, then another. I remember at one point asking them what they wanted. They wouldn’t answer me. All they wanted was to inflict pain.”

Heather’s hiccupped cries filled the air. Nick slumped and sat on the chair.

“Shit.”

I clenched my jaw to stop myself from screaming and spun to face Heather. “We’ll get your brother tomorrow. Tell us every place he goes to and every place your father would take him.”

We spent the rest of the night devising our plan. Come morning we’d pack up, get Heather’s brother, and by the time Christmas was over every single one of these sick motherfuckers would be dead.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

---

ANDREW GILLY WAS GOING to be harder to grab than his sister was. His beloved father was clearly on high alert, and there were four cop cars in the parking lot at his school. Not to mention, the man himself was on the sidelines.

“Not happening,” Shep said from the passenger’s seat.

“Luckily Heather told us he usually goes to his friend’s house afterward, we can—”

“If he goes, Gabe. The whole routine has changed since we took Heather.” It was only Shep and me; the others were headed toward a location JJ had found. It was an Airbnb a couple of towns over. The two of us would get Andrew and meet them there.

“Yeah...okay, let’s wait it out.”

Shep was scrolling on his phone. “This place JJ found is ridiculous. It’s a three-floor mansion with freaking ten bedrooms and sleeps over twenty people. Why so big?”

“I heard he got a good deal, and Mason was paying. Not many people are booking houses near the water in December, Shep. He got it for a month—let’s count our blessings on that one.”

He hummed. “Mason is pretty loaded. Why do you think he works and was living in an apartment?”

I shrugged. I could only guess. “Maybe because he needs to keep busy, and the quickest way to lose your money is to spend it. He also bought his apartment, rather than renting, and

I think he works and keeps things small because he wants to stay humble.”

From the corner of my eye, I could see Shep grinning.

“What?”

“You really like the guy.”

“Are we going to talk about guys we like, Shep?” I faced him. “You and JJ are—”

“Oh, I’d fuck him so hard his ancestors would feel it, if he’d let me.”

I raised my brows. “But?”

“But we’re kind of on the run and all.”

Fair enough. “After we get the kid, we won’t be running for a while. We need to get a solid plan in place before we execute it. That means busy days and slow nights.”

Shep huffed but when I glanced at him a few times, he had a smile on his face.

---

OUR BREAK TO grab the boy didn’t happen for two more days. Gilly had left for work, looking mighty ruffled, and that put a smile on my face. I’d love to say he missed his daughter, but I’m sure it was a much darker reason.

Once Gilly had driven away, Andrew slipped out of the house, and judging by the expression on Andrew’s face, he was upset. He started down the driveway, turned left and kept going, so Shep and I watched.

“Maybe going to a friend’s house?”

Nope, the kid was walking right to us.

“What the fuck?” Shep whispered. A moment later the back door opened, and he got in.

“Uh...can I help you?” Why I was trying to play it off like I had no idea who he was, I didn’t know.

“Last night Heather texted me from some strange phone. Said two guys were following me and I had to find a way to get free of my parents and go with you.”

“And you just believed it was her?” Shep turned to face the kid, who eyed Shep as if he were shit on his shoe.

“We have a code word, so we always know we aren’t being played. Yeah, because that’s what my life is like now. Can we get out of here before my dad comes home?”

I put the car in Drive and quickly drove away.

“You sure you’re thirteen?” I asked after we were on the highway.

Andrew didn’t say anything, but I looked through the rearview mirror and he was staring out the window.

None of us talked and by the time we pulled up to the rented house, I was never happier to get out of a car before. The kid was freaking me out with his silence, and there was an air about him that made you feel as if he were an adult trapped in a child’s body.

“Drew!” Heather ran out the front door—*so glad people are making sure she isn’t doing idiotic things like running out of a house while we’re trying to be discreet*—and embraced her brother.

Only when he saw Heather did he finally smile, and I could tell he was hugging her with all of his strength.

Mason leaned against the doorjamb, an arm wrapped around his midsection. A warm smile adorned his face as he watched the siblings hug.

“I’m sure we’ll have an interesting call this evening,” Mason said as soon as I was in front of him.

“I’m looking forward to it.” More gentle than I’d ever been with anyone, I pressed a kiss to his forehead. I swore it was the only place on his face that wasn’t sporting some type of bruise. At least his swelling had gone away.

“Let’s get everyone settled.” Mason went deeper into the house and I waited until Heather, Andrew, and Shep were

safely inside before shutting and locking the door.

Even though Mason had used a fake name to rent the house, Nick and Noel weren't confident enough to forgo security. As I glanced around the interior, I saw all the little cameras facing any possible entrance. If I walked the grounds, I was sure I'd see more out there.

"Nick went to the store to get food; Noel went to get more monitors to view the property." Mason shrugged and moved to one of the couches.

"I thought you had food delivered?" I turned when I heard voices only to see JJ and Heather showing Andrew around.

"We did, but Nick wasn't happy with the substitutions." Mason snorted and I went to join him on the couch.

"Sounds about right."

Mason laid his head on the cushion with a sigh.

"How are you feeling?"

"Sore, but I'm not dizzy when I walk around anymore, so that's a plus."

"You look a lot better." Tenderly I ran my finger along the side of his face. "No more swelling."

Mason's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed, and tears filled his eyes. "They were brutal, Gabe. I hung there and I wasn't a person. I was a release for them. They knew by not asking me more than once where you all were they were taking away the only option I had to make the pain stop. They never cared. I was there to send a message, to be the next move on their chess board."

A lone tear slipped down his cheek and if he wasn't hurting, I'd have wrapped my arms around him and hugged the broken back into place.

"Psychopathy, narcissism, sociopathy, take your pick, Mason. They all sleep fine at night. They have their own vision, whatever that might be, but they work together to fulfill their sick needs and wants."



“I never saw his face. He didn’t change his voice, and that’s how I knew who he was—I’d heard him doing some press conferences.”

“Who?”

“Crispin. Weird, right?” He looked at me. “If I was going to die, would it matter if I did see his face?”

“He’s not a stupid man; otherwise he’d already be dead. He wasn’t in the picture when my sister died. He always plans for the what-if. In this case—worst case, you got out or we rescued you, and he didn’t want you being able to identify him, having seen his face. He didn’t for a second realize you recognized his voice. Even when he knew we had Heather, he probably thought he had enough power over her that she’d never talk. Doesn’t explain why he still used the voice changer when he spoke with us. Maybe in case he thought we were recording it. That would make sense.”

“We do have an advantage since Heather did in fact see him, and I know his voice.” Mason agreed and sniffed up the rest of his sadness. “We can use that against him.”

“That’s the plan.”

“Let’s get to it, then.” Mason slipped his hand into mine and squeezed.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

---

“ANGEL DESTROYED MY CELL.” JJ dropped the remnants of his phone onto the dining room table. We’d just finished dinner and Mason had told JJ to go get it.

“Why’d you do that?” I glared at my brother.

“The fact that you need to ask blows my mind.” He jabbed a finger at the crumbled phone. “Do you think they can’t track that phone when they call later? We got burner phones for a reason. They were probably coming in their pants thinking about the call they’d make tonight.”

*Shit.* How hadn’t we realized that?

“Now what?” Heather asked.

“Andrew, you gotta toss your phone because—”

“I already did.” He shrugged. “When we stopped to get gas on the highway, I threw it in the back of a pickup truck.” He smirked. “Saw that in a movie once. My dad can track our phones, so I wasn’t taking a chance.”

“Smart fuckin’ kid, he should be in charge.” Angel fist-bumped Andrew.

“We have the burners. Can’t we call?” JJ scooped up his trashed phone and tossed it into the garbage.

“No.”

I turned to Mason, who was sitting beside me. “No, why?”

“They can’t get in touch with any of us. Gilly lost both his kids, and Crispin isn’t doing shit about it. Could cause some

infighting, maybe weaken the links. Let them stew a bit. When we have a solid plan, we'll contact them." Mason lifted his shoulder. "Or we don't, but they don't have the power here. We do."

Everyone appeared to like that idea, so we dispersed. Heather and Andrew went to the living room to watch a movie while Nick and Noel walked the grounds. Angel was at the monitors, keeping an eye out, and Shep was forcing JJ to help him bake cookies.

"You should rest." I took Mason's hand.

"I'm tired of resting...unless, you want to rest with me?"

"I'm not fucking you. You're in no shape for sex."

Mason's eyes widened. "Wow, I say 'rest with me,' and suddenly it's a fuckfest in your mind?"

"Well, what the hell else could that mean?"

Mason snorted, breathed deeply, and I swore he was speaking slower. "I know our customs seem strange to you, Gabe, but here on Earth when people say rest, they generally mean just that."

"Like lying in bed and sleeping?" He nodded. "For real?"

"Forget it." Mason rose slowly, and I quickly joined him.

"No, okay, yeah, I'll lie with you."

Mason didn't say anything, simply grinned, and I took it as a win. Once we got to his room, he moved to one side and I to the other. I kicked my shoes off and went under the covers.

Neither of us spoke and after we were both comfortable, I lifted my arm in open invitation. As soon as Mason rested his head on my chest, I wrapped my arm around him tenderly as a rush of rightness flooded me.

I wanted to be tangled up in Mason for the rest of my days, and so I vowed to myself to make that happen.

---

WE WOKE the next day to close to a foot of snow, and it was still falling. Shep took the opportunity to bake the day away while JJ happily helped. Andrew and Heather were quiet but when JJ handed them hot chocolate, they smiled and soon I even heard them laugh.

“It’s Christmas Eve,” Mason whispered as he came up beside me. “I’m sorry.”

Gently, I draped my arm over his shoulder. “It’s okay. Every year we get closer to finishing these fuckers off. We spend the rest of the year working out who’ll be next. Seems since meeting you, we’re going for the grand finale.” I shrugged. “I’m just as happy starting the year off with all of them gone.”

“It’s still a hard time for you.”

It was. I imagined it would always be rough this time of year, but even though we were in the middle of a tornado of shit-tastic proportions it didn’t feel hopeless. Maybe that was because of Mason.

“I’m okay, honest.”

He opened his mouth to say something but was cut off by Angel.

“Holy fuck!”

We all rushed toward the living room, where Angel had the TV on.

*“Sources within the police department are saying Mayor Veldecci was stabbed and strung up on the town’s Christmas tree. I asked if there were any suspects, and I’m hearing arrest warrants will be going out for Gabriel, Angel, Shepard, Noel, and Nicholas Saint, a.k.a. Baris this afternoon.”*

“That’s bullshit. We didn’t do this one!” Noel yelled at the TV.

“Wasn’t Mayor Veldecci, like, ninety?” JJ asked. “I mean he was always re-elected, but I mean...he was so old. Is he part of this?”

Shep shook his head. “Nothing we’ve found had him on our radar.”

“Maybe that’s why he’s dead.” Mason sighed. “The senator is a puppet, and Crispin is pulling all the strings. Maybe Veldecci wanted no part of it or he wasn’t helping where he was, and they want someone else on the throne, so to speak.”

“Who’s the deputy mayor?” Nick was scrolling his phone as he spoke. “Elaine Falco?”

“Wait, really?” JJ and Mason said at the same time.

“You know who that is?” I’d never heard of her.

“She’s a very nice woman. She came into Books and Bistro a couple of months ago, venting about how she couldn’t wait to be mayor so she could actually do something about the scummy people in this town.”

“Great.” Angel scoffed. “She’s either saying that out loud for others to hear so she looks good, or she is good. And we know what happens to people who say shit like that.”

“We need to find out.” JJ stood and faced the room. “I have an idea that will be perfect if she truly wants to clean up the streets.”

Heather snorted. “You realize next year is an election year, right? I wouldn’t be surprised if Crispin did this so he could have the last powerhouse right where he needs them. Elaine would never win against whoever they put up. Oh, and there’s no way she’s bad news. My father hates her.”

“Is there more of a background check than that?” JJ grinned. “For my plan to work, though, we need to be sure she’s on our side.”

“There’s no way she’s gonna be fine with us after everyone we’ve killed.” Angel moved toward the large window, staring at the thick flakes that fell. “I always knew that when this all ended we’d either be dead ourselves, or we’d have to run.” He turned, his expression grim. “I’m fine dying as long as those motherfuckers are dead first.”

“Why does anyone here have to die?” Mason shifted in his seat with a wince. “I think it’s safe to say that having them arrested won’t be good enough. They’ll figure a way to get out.”

“Which brings me to my plan.” JJ clapped his hands. “Are you all going to let me tell you?”

I made a “get on with it” gesture.

“Elaine wants them out, and she wants in. There’s no question she knows what’s going on, but she’s alone in this. She was never going to be able to stop them herself. Why do you think you never saw her at a press conference about the killings? Because she was fine with them. The bad guys were being taken apart. What if we can make her see our side, promise to eliminate the poison in the town. In return she can expose them all after their deaths, and we can have one person holding the bag. Someone who, with the loss of Crispin and the senator, won’t have any clout...won’t have anything.”

“Gilly,” I whispered.

“Yeah.”

We all turned and faced Andrew and Heather. Andrew looked at his sister before speaking.

“My dad gets to live?”

“He’d never see the light of day,” I promised.

“Does he have to, though?” Andrew’s gaze was haunting. I didn’t know what he’d been through, but I recognized that darkness. So I said the only thing that would sate the demon lurking behind that stare.

“No, we can find another way, if you need him dead.”

Neither Andrew nor Heather responded to that; they each simply gave us a curt nod.

JJ pursed his lips. “Okay, but he will be the one to take the fall. Someone needs to be arrested in the end. Maybe we can talk death after he’s been ridiculed and destroyed.” He smiled at the kids. “No one will mourn him by the time we’re done, I promise.”

“When did you become so violent?” Mason chuckled.

JJ shrugged. “When they fucked with my family.”

Now that was something we all understood.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

---

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, on Christmas, we were greeted with the news that our arrest warrants had been issued. That was unavoidable and while we all were angry, Mason wanted to have a peaceful Christmas.

“A day off,” he proclaimed. As soon as JJ agreed, Shep was on board and even the kids appeared happy.

The house we were renting had a Christmas tree up, which helped us get into the spirit. Without gifts we opted for Christmas movies, cookie decorating, and a huge feast. There was no talk of murder, arrest warrants, shitty people, or past trauma.

As the sky grew dark and everyone was peaceful and content, Shep started a fire and JJ and Mason brought us all hot chocolate.

“I know this isn’t the best Christmas, but for what it’s worth, I’m glad I got to spend it with all of you.” Mason smiled at Andrew and Heather, then at the rest of us.

“Best Christmas I’ve had in...well...ever.” Andrew sipped his hot chocolate.

No one said anything. Andrew and Heather had been through a lot, things maybe none of us could imagine and after this was all over, they’d need a lifetime of therapy. No matter what happened to me, my brothers, Mason, or JJ, those kids were getting out of this and would live amazing lives. I’d make sure of it.



Mason and I were the first to go to bed. I didn't question if I would be sleeping with him; he took my hand and I willingly followed.

Soft rumbles of those still awake could be heard as we snuggled under the covers. Mason's fingers idly stroked the hairs on my chest and while everything was a mess outside of this house, tranquility settled within me.

"Gabe?" Mason whispered, as if speaking would break the serenity surrounding us.

"Yeah?"

"They never hurt me...in that way."

*That way.* I knew he meant they didn't rape him but he didn't have to say the word, it was like a cloud of humidity I often found myself walking through when my mind would get away from me.

"Good."

"Gabe?" He rested his chin on my chest, his big brown eyes sparkling in the dim room.

"What's wrong?" I tenderly scraped my fingers along his scalp, smirking when he hummed.

"Nothing's wrong...well, I mean outside of all the other shit that is *in fact* wrong."

I chuckled. "Okay. Why are you saying my name like you want to ask me something?"

"I..." He swallowed loudly, and I could see nervousness weighing heavy in his gaze.

"Rip it off like a Band-Aid. You don't have to be embarrassed." I slid my hand until I cupped his cheek, my thumb lightly rubbing over his bottom lip where a small cut still lingered. "There's nothing you can ask me that I wouldn't do everything in my power to make happen."

His eyes dipped, and his skin flushed a gorgeous pink. "I feel gross."

Okay, that wasn't the response I'd been expecting. "You're going to have to elaborate because I'm starting to get a vibe here, and I'm not sure it's the right one."

He laughed humorlessly. "I shower and try to wash away the feeling of their hands and fists on my body, but it's like they're etched in my flesh forever. When they cut me, it was as if they were bleeding me of any good I had inside. When you rescued me a huge piece of who I was stayed behind." He gripped my hand, his brown eyes trying desperately to hold back the tears.

"They didn't just cut down the tree, Gabe, they tore the roots from the ground so it wouldn't grow again."

"Oh, Mason."

"But the soil is good, and a new tree can grow. Please..." He blinked. "Wash away the feeling of them with your hands, your fingers. Show them they didn't destroy me." He lifted himself up until his face was an inch from mine. "Make love to me."

"Mason."

"Don't say you don't want to hurt me or you don't think it's a good idea, because I know my body. I want gentle, I want sweet." He moved, a tiny wince painting his face as he kissed me. When he pulled away all I could see was caramel eyes. "I want you, Gabe."

I lifted my arms, hands cradling his face and kissed him. "Like I said, there's nothing you can ask me I wouldn't do everything in my power to make happen."

Through black and blues, he smiled, and right there Christmas was perfect.

The room was silent, only the rumbling of lingering voices in the living room disturbing the quiet. Mason sat up and just when he was about to remove his undershirt, I stopped him.

"I'll give you what you want, what you need, but we do this my way."

The side of his mouth curled, and he dipped his chin enough to tell me he accepted my terms.

I pinched the hem of his shirt and slowly lifted it up. He still had difficulty raising his arms over his head and when all of this was all over, I'd make sure he saw the right doctors.

“Put your arms out, and I'll do the rest.”

As he did as I asked, I saw the glimmer of tears dancing over the rims of his eyes. Not pain—he had a grimace when he was hurting—no, I suspected I was erasing the insidious touches and he was overwhelmed. He could cry if it helped wash away the nightmares. I'd build us a boat and sail through the waters to safety. Mason had become my lighthouse in the never-ending storm that was my life...I could be the same for him.

Once his shirt had been removed, I made sure to keep eye contact. I'd seen the bruises, the slices, every message Crispin, Gilly, and the others were sending me and my brothers. In this moment Mason needed me to see him, and I would.

“Lie down on your back.”

He didn't hesitate and as soon as he was flat, I delicately drew his pants off his legs. Over blemished flesh until he was open to me in all his fractures...the most beautiful man I'd ever seen.

“Please take off your clothes.” Mason's voice cracked within his whispers.

I moved off the bed and quickly divested myself of my boxers and undershirt. I hovered only a moment before cautiously resting half on top of him. I wouldn't put my full weight on him, but when our skin touched he closed his eyes and released a heavy breath.

“Thank you,” he whimpered.

I pressed kiss after kiss over his face, not missing a single inch, making sure he was with me, not stuck in their created purgatory.

As soon as his honey-brown eyes met mine, I smiled.

“Time to free you,” I said, swallowing his sobs with my mouth as he let go.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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METHODICALLY, I traced every inch of Mason's colorful skin with my lips and tongue. When I paid special attention to a particularly gnarly bruise, he tensed, his hands fisting the sheet as if he were trying to pull himself out from a sinking hole.

"Stay with me," I prayed to the hope he was clinging to.

His fingers released the cotton and trembled through my hair, and I continued my purpose. Not a piece of his body would be untouched by me by the end of this. He craved love; I'd give him that and more.

His cock was hard and while I knew he needed me as deep inside him as I could be, there was no way it wouldn't hurt him. He'd bled enough and I wouldn't be the reason he screamed...ever.

Tenderly, I wrapped my lips around the head and sucked, relishing in his pleased moans. So carefully, I engulfed his rigid shaft until my nose pressed against the soft tuft of pubic hair and all I smelled or tasted was Mason.

"Oh, Gabe." His voice wasn't breaking out of fear; that was a sound I knew all too well. Mason was flying, and I wanted him to soar far away from the reminiscent agony that had festered in his mind.

My fingers whispered over his heavy balls, cupping and squeezing as I imbibed on the flavor that was solely his.

He bucked up, pushing even farther down my throat and I gladly welcomed the burn, desperate to take away all the bad and leave him floating in every ounce of good.

“I’m coming.” He latched on to my hair, his nails biting into my scalp, and a moment later he flooded my throat and the reward was all mine.

As I lifted off him, my release pooling beneath me, the world washed away and the radiance of Mason’s smile, his blissed-out gaze on me, centered all the scattered pieces.

“Let me—”

“Oh, sweetheart, if you think I didn’t come just tasting you, you’re crazy.”

He never said a word that I didn’t fuck him. I cleaned us both and wrapped him in my arms only to sink into slumber alongside the man who had come to own my heart.

---

I WOKE to a flurry of activity. In the kitchen, Shep and JJ were putting breakfast on the table while Heather and Andrew were going on and on about the way to build the perfect snowman. Nick was fixing some dangling wire by the door while Noel was telling him he was doing it wrong. Angel had a laptop on his forearm and was typing with his other hand.

“What the hell?” I shouted silencing everyone. “Why is it so fucking loud in here?”

“I’m cooking, pots and pans, *clang, clang, clang.*” Shep shrugged while JJ pointed at my brother and nodded.

“What he said.”

“Nick is angry because his original wiring is for shit, and as soon as I said I could fix it he became Diva Dicks over here \_\_\_”

Noel’s words were cut off when Nick pushed him.

“Fuck you, reject.”

“Enough!” Angel shouted as he stood between the twins, who were about to rearrange the room with their bodies.

I looked over at Heather and Andrew; they watched the situation with wide eyes.

“They do this all the time.” I gestured to the twin dumbasses. “So you two think you know how to build the best snowman?”

Andrew fidgeted with his fingers as he spoke. “Well, I mean I’ve built more than Heather ever has, so I sort of mastered it.”

“And I’m older, and have like...I’m just older.” Heather rolled her eyes and slumped on the couch, realizing she wasn’t winning this.

“I can show you.” Andrew smiled softly at his sister.

She patted the cushion beside her. “Yeah, okay.”

Mason sidled up next to me once everyone returned to doing what they were doing, minus the fighting.

“I think tensions are running high.” He pressed a warm hand against my back. “We need to get this plan going. Sooner it’s complete, the sooner everyone can get on with their lives.” He glanced at the kids. “Or start them.”

“I want it over.” As I said the words, I realized how true they were.

For years I’d been driven by revenge. Vengeance pumped through my veins, not blood. Canvassing every bruise on Mason’s body didn’t diminish my need to make every single one of them pay, but where I’d seen no end previously, now I craved it. Mason did that.

He grinned and gripped my hand. “We have a call to make.”

It took an hour to get everything set up, everyone in place to play their part, and a script. Around the dining table all of us sat, even Andrew and Heather—they were instrumental in this.

Elaine Falco wouldn’t have any idea that we’d be calling, so even if she had the ability to trace a burner phone, she’d never get the chance. No one was taking any gambles. For all we knew, Crispin and the others were hoping we’d do just this.

Noel and Nick set up blockers, and that was the extent of my knowledge. Nick only said, “If they try, it won’t work. Trust me.” And of course I did.

“Hit it.” Mason gestured to me, and I hit Call.

It rang a few times before a man’s voice answered.

“Hello?”

JJ and Mason would talk first, so JJ began. “Good almost-afternoon. My name is Jaxon, and I very much need to speak with Mayor Falco.”

“What is this pertaining to?”

“I’m sorry, sir, this is a very sensitive matter. I’m instructed only to converse with Mayor Falco.”

“I can’t guarantee she’ll agree, hold on.”

No one uttered a word as we waited, and we waited a long time. Angel was tapping his pointer finger on the wood, and I was sure I could read his thoughts. Was the gamble worth it?

“Hello?” Elaine sounded unsure.

“Mayor Falco, I know it’s the day after Christmas and you’re likely spending it with your family, but it’s imperative I speak with you.” JJ was hyperfocused.

“My husband told me your name is Jaxon?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Okay, Jaxon, I’m listening. What’s so important you had to have this conversation with me now?”

“I saw on the news that Mayor Veldecci was killed, and the Saint brothers are being hunted in the crime.”

“That’s correct.”

“They didn’t do it, and I don’t expect you to believe me based on just my word but I’m willing to prove it, and help you take down every corrupt son of a bitch in our town.”

We sat in silence, waiting for her response, listening to her take deep breaths on the other end of the line.



“I don’t know why, but I believe you, Jaxon. Something about Harold’s murder didn’t fit the style of the brothers, but it was the one crime the DA’s office was able to pin on them.”

“And if I told you the reason for that was because the DA himself is the one who orchestrated it?”

JJ had gone off script, every set of eyes were on him, and I wasn’t sure if he was a genius or a fool.

Elaine was silent for a beat before she sighed loudly. “I’d tell you that didn’t surprise me at all.”

“Mayor Falco, it’s not safe to do this with you over the phone. While I’m out of harm’s way, you’re not. I would bet your lines are tapped, and I’ve already said enough. What I’ll ask of you next will take a great deal of trust on your part.”

“What is it?” There was no hiding the quiver in her voice. She’d lived in that town where the monsters ruled ruthlessly and were unforgiving.

“I will come for you. You won’t know when or how—but just understand, I will. Please don’t fight it. I promise I can make this end.”

“Very well, Jaxon. Until then.”

The call ended, and Mason was the first to break the silence.

“Why do we even have a script, JJ?”

“It’s fine!” He stood abruptly. “In the end, she agreed to meet. I...there was a feeling I had that Heather and Andrew couldn’t talk, that it wasn’t time. Right now, anyone listening thinks it’s me. Yeah, they likely linked you all to me, but this felt right.”

There was a pregnant pause, and then Shep rose from his seat and squeezed JJ’s shoulder.

“Instinct is everything, trust it.” He faced us. “Two days’ time and we grab Elaine—let’s make sure it’s flawless.”

It had to be. If it wasn’t, we’d be over before we started.

## PART 3

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*“Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared with scars.”*

*~ Kahlil Gibran*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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### **Mason**

MY REFLECTION WAS NOT my friend. Cuts were healing, my skin was a rainbow of torment, my face fractured like a hard-played doll.

I turned away from the bathroom mirror and stepped into the shower. As I hung my head, I pretended the water was washing away all the black-and-blues and sealing all the flawed skin.

I was stupid to think that Gabe's touches, that his sweet caresses would make me better. I was not okay.

Even though the water hitting the tiles echoed loudly, I could hear them...the voices. I had lied to everyone. They'd never *asked* me where anyone was after that one time, but they'd spoken. They'd called me horrible things. When you can't break something from the outside, you tear it apart on the inside, and that was just what they'd done.

I rubbed a finger over my hip, where a bull's-eye-colored pattern was. This would disappear; my fractured reflection would too. Inside...was another story.

My knees trembled and, not wanting to fall, I slid down the wall until I was curled on the floor, warm water covering me as my tears were sucked into the drain.

That was how Gabe found me.

“Mason.” Water was shut off, I was scooped up and wrapped in a fluffy towel. My body shook as sobs crashed through me. It was as if someone had hit a switch, and I couldn’t stop. I’d tried so hard to keep it bottled up, but it seemed my brain had said enough, and nothing held the gates closed.

“It’s going to be okay.” He held me, gentle hands over shattered flesh.

I could feel other people in the room, but I heard nothing but my agony surging from within.

“Baby,” Gabe whispered in my ear, his voice pure despair.

“He can’t stop; he can’t answer you.” Heather was so close. “What you see when you look at him is only the tip of the iceberg.” Light fingers touched my hair. “They got in here.”

“He told us they only asked him where we were once and —”

“He lied.” Andrew. They were telling him, but Gabe couldn’t know. He’d hate me, see me for what they did.

“He was tied, naked, vulnerable. They bruised him on the outside and broke him on the inside. They took all the parts he loves about himself and made him hate them. I don’t know how they do it, but they do.” Andrew sniffed, and I could hear them better as my cries lessened.

“You seem okay. You’re insanely smart—I forget you’re only thirteen sometimes. And sure, there’s no hiding you’ve been through a shit-ton. But you appear put together,” Gabe said.

“Do I?” Andrew asked. “Gabe, I don’t know what they drilled into Mason. That’s for him to tell you if he wants. I’ve been there, though. They tell you things, get in your brain, make you believe stuff.”

“Mason, listen to me?” Gabe turned my head until I was focused on him. Fury and fear shone in his eyes. “I will make them all pay and if it takes forever, I will make sure you know how amazing you are. You hear me?”

I did. I really did, but all I could do was bury my head and cry.

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“AND THEN THAT time you thought it would be cool to create a frog farm in my dad’s shed. You scared the shit out of him when he went in there to get the mower. I never heard him scream so loud. We’re talking soprano territory.” JJ was rambling on and on, so much that it woke me up.

I wondered who he was talking to, and I lifted my head to see but no one was in the bedroom but us.

“Oh, hey, you’re awake.”

I faced my best friend, who was smiling although his eyes were leery.

“Are you talking to me?”

“Yeah, I read that talking to people when they’re out helps them return to us.”

I scratched my head and lifted myself up to lean against the headboard. “I think that’s referring to coma patients.”

“Whatever, you were gone, man. I get it. I mean I don’t, but wherever you were wasn’t here and I hated it.”

I sighed and gripped his hand. “I’m sorry, JJ. I just couldn’t keep it bottled up anymore.”

“Better out than in, I always say.” He squeezed back and I laughed.

“I don’t think that saying means what you think it does.”

He shrugged. We were both silent for a breath until he spoke. “Gabe is finalizing the Elaine grab, so I came in. Uh... do you want to talk about it?”

“I can’t.”

He rubbed his thumb over mine. “That’s okay. When you’re ready, so am I.”

“I love you.”

He tenderly kissed my cheek. “I love you too, butt face.”

I rested my head on his shoulder and enjoyed the quiet with my best friend.

That lasted for maybe five minutes before the door opened and Gabe sauntered in. When he saw me awake, his relief was evident.

“There you are.” He smiled and I returned it.

“Here I am.”

I wasn’t under any delusion; I’d have to say something to Gabe about my breakdown, but I also knew he wouldn’t push me.

“How are you feeling, hungry?”

“I could eat.”

“Oh, good.” JJ hopped off the bed. “Shep made stew, and there’s so freaking much of it.”

“Sounds good.”

Without another word, JJ left the room while Gabe came and sat on the edge of the bed.

“I can bring food in here for you if you want.”

I appreciated the sentiment, but hiding would only prolong things. “It’s okay, what’s done is done, and I’m not dumb enough to think everyone doesn’t know I fell apart.”

He scooted closer, his big warm palm squeezing my knee.

“You’re not dumb, and we all fall apart sometimes. I think in a lot of ways, they’re relieved.”

I couldn’t stop my scoff. “Excuse me?”

“Mason, you’ve been surprisingly put together since we got you out. As soon as you were able, you pushed your way into all facets of this situation. Your brain made the choice for you. No more holding back.”

“I heard Heather and Andrew in here. They’re far too grown up for a bunch of kids.”

He dipped his head, his stare going distant. “They were forced to be. I can’t imagine the years of torment they’ve been through.”

I wasn’t held for years or months. Hell, it was mere days and it was fucking me up. How the two of them were even walking and talking was beyond me.

“I hate that for them.”

His smile was small, but his gaze held promises. “We’ll give them a life they can be happy in.”

I sat up and folded into Gabe’s embrace. “Parents are supposed to protect their kids from the monsters; they aren’t supposed to be them.”

I felt his nod. “Then we’ll do it for them.”

We sure as hell would.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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### **Gabe**

THE DAY we chose to snag Elaine Falco, she had three appearances to make. Anyone who may have been listening on the line when we called her would probably assume we'd grab her at the last one, but nope, we were taking her right after the second. It made no sense, and that was why it was perfect.

"If anyone sees any of you, the cops will haul you in." JJ was trying to make the argument that he should go with us and be the one to grab her, but that was ludicrous.

"JJ, I love you, but you can't take on any security she has." Mason placed a hand on JJ's shoulder. "The plan has Elaine getting a call as she leaves the event, telling her to get coffee at Harper's. You're making the call, she'll go, and from there we will get her. Trust this."

"And there's no way we're chancing any of you getting taken again." Shep was gesturing to Mason, JJ, and the kids.

JJ rolled his eyes. "Well, I'm going with you because I need to make the call, and I have to know when she's inside the coffee house, and don't argue that you can use one of your fancy earpiece things to tell me."

I nodded. "Fair enough."

That appeased the firecracker, and I turned to Mason. "Nick is staying here with you and the kids. Please don't argue with—"



“I won’t. We can’t all fit in the van, and the three of us wouldn’t be much help in a physical altercation.”

“I’ll have the house sealed tight and be watching for your return.” Nick mock saluted.

“Okay, we leave first thing in the morning.” I tapped my knuckles on the table, and everyone dispersed.

I was taking my cues from Mason regarding how he wanted to handle the cyclone in his brain. When he was ready he’d talk, or he wouldn’t. My goal was to help him however he needed it, and if that meant cuddling in bed watching an atrocious rom-com, so be it.

“This is a terrible movie.” I chuckled as I gently rubbed along Mason’s spine.

“Shut up.”

Everyone went to bed early, but Mason was wide awake and so I lay with him, watching horrible movies. It wasn’t until close to two in the morning that he finally dozed, and soon I followed.

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THE VAN ANGEL was able to obtain was inconspicuous. There was a popular HVAC company in town, and their vans were always driving about. He was able to get his hands on one, so no one would look twice seeing it parked on the street.

JJ was in the back with Shep. Noel, Angel, and I were up front in uniforms that were close enough to the company’s brand.

“First stop she’s doing is at the police station, some ‘after Christmas, pump the town up, everything will be okay’ speech.” Angel snorted.

“Good idea not grabbing her there.” JJ laughed but no one joined in. “Tough crowd.”

“After that she’s going to the library to read to some kids, and we’ll call her as she’s leaving.” Angel pointed to Harper’s.

“Two doors down from where we get her.”

“What was her third stop?” JJ asked.

“She was going to City Hall for her first official meeting as mayor.” Angel made a face at me. “Hope her missing that won’t bite us in the butt.”

“It would be too obvious if we grabbed her there. She wouldn’t want it seen that she was taken out in the open. My guess is, Crispin and company are going to be ready at City Hall. Even if they hear our call, they won’t be able to get from there to Harper’s in time.” I lifted my cap and scratched my head. “We only need to worry if she has a lot of security.”

“There’s a rear exit at Harper’s, right near the bathrooms. We need to tell her to leave that way, and we can get her there.” JJ handed us a printout. “See.”

“Where’d you get this?” I snagged the paper from his hand.

“There are no secrets on the Internet, Gabe.” I swore sometimes JJ acted as if I’d been a glue eater as a child.

“Maybe you don’t talk anymore, *hmm?*” I glared at him through the rearview mirror, but the guy wasn’t afraid. How’d this happen? We were terrifying men!

The speech in front of the police station was locally televised, so we watched from Angel’s tablet. Once she was done getting everyone all happy again, we kept our eyes out for her entourage.

“Anyone want a granola bar?” JJ asked, and Angel peered over his shoulder.

“No.”

“Rude.” JJ unwrapped a granola bar. “Here, Shep.”

“Thank you. I happen to love me some chewy chocolate chip granola bars.”

That man was whipped.

Fifteen minutes later, three SUVs pulled down the street and parked in front of the library. We watched as a total of six

people exited the vehicles, five of them security.

“That seems like overkill.” JJ stuck his head between Angel and me.

“Get back.” I pushed him away. “The last mayor was murdered; I’d find it stranger if she had no one guarding her.”

“This will take probably half an hour to forty-five minutes.” Angel unbuckled his seat belt. “Once she exits, JJ makes the call, Gabe, Noel, and I go to the rear of the coffee shop. Shep drives the van over there.”

“Got it.”

JJ and Shep chatted in the back while the three of us vigilantly watched the library. It was forty minutes later when the doors opened and Elaine walked out with security.

“Make the call, JJ.” I zipped up the front of my uniform and slipped out of the van. Angel and Noel followed, and I knew Shep would get the van where it had to be.

No one paid us any mind, just some HVAC guys doing some work. There was an alley next to the coffee shop. Two dumpsters and a few parking spots, likely for employees. The door was ajar, which was insanely convenient. Angel, Noel, and I stood on either side of the door and waited.

“I’m just using the facilities, I can do that without a guard, Mel. Get me a cappuccino. I’ll be out in a sec.” Elaine had clearly gotten the call and was trying to lose the security. That would make our job a lot easier.

The van pulled into the lot, and a short time later the rear door of the cafe opened the rest of the way, and Elaine Falco stepped out.

Her eyes widened when she realized it was us. I pressed a finger to my mouth. “Gotta trust us.”

She sighed heavily, looking behind her as if debating running or screaming. Then she released the door.

“Okay, kidnap me already.”

Prepare for the worst, hope for the best; that was how the saying went. This was the best scenario for how this could go down. Not long after, Elaine was in the van, and we were on our way to the rental house.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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### **Mason**

“THEY’RE ALMOST HERE.” Nick came into the living room, where I was watching a movie with the kids.

Andrew tensed beside me, and I quickly grabbed his hand and looked him in the eyes.

“We can do this. We are strong. Nothing breaks us unless we allow it to, you understand? It’s going to hurt, it may even reopen wounds you tried to heal a million times over.” Without thought I pulled him close and wrapped my arms around him. “Silence never heals. Whisper in her ear and let her be the horn that shouts it. Let your burden be hers.” I pulled away and met Heather’s teary gaze. “We will win this.”

They nodded, and the three of us passed Nick as we moved to the table to wait. He squeezed my shoulder on his way to the door, ready to open it for them.

Time moved like molasses, and I both wanted to get it over with and also wanted her to never show up. I spoke of being strong, but inside I felt like a box of broken glass. Andrew was picking at his cuticles, and I covered his hand with mine. No. I would be what these kids needed me to be.

The front door opened, and JJ was the first to enter. He was unscathed, and there was a small smile on his face. That told me everything I needed to know. They had her, and it had gone well.

Elaine stepped into view, and I took a moment to observe her. She reminded me of Angela Bassett. Odd first thought—but the resemblance was uncanny. She was beautiful, and there was no hiding the fire in her eyes or the power of her presence. She was here to fight, and it wasn't for the monsters. It was for their prey.

Her brown eyes met mine, and then widened when she saw the kids.

“Heather and Andrew Gilly?” She turned toward JJ. “Why are they here?”

“Not shocking my dad didn't report us missing.” Heather rolled her eyes.

“We have a lot to tell you, Madam Mayor.” I patted the table. “Sit wherever you'd like, and know that what you're about to hear won't be easy. But for you to understand why any of this began, why it can't end with arrests and regular justice, you have to listen.”

Gabe sat beside me and JJ next to the mayor once she took her seat. The brothers took positions around us, and I wondered if they even realized they instinctively acted as a protective barrier.

“Mason Daws.” She smirked. “I've heard about you.”

“I'm sure you've heard about a version of me.”

She eyed the kids. “Why are you two here, and are you okay?”

Heather swallowed and began scratching at the wooden finish. Andrew gripped her hand much like I had for him.

“We're okay,” Heather murmured. “Better here than home.”

Elaine pursed her lips and side-eyed me. “Who's going to go first?”

“I will.” Gabe sat straighter, and all heads turned to him. “In order for her to get the whole picture, we need to start from the beginning.”

The brothers appeared agitated, but I didn't think it was from telling Elaine about their parents, mine, or Scarlett. It was about having to hear it again. To listen to the nightmare, you had to relive it.

Gabe told the tale, and not a single person interrupted. Heather and Andrew had never heard why the brothers did what they did, and when Gabe got to the part where he explained what had happened to Scarlett, it had Heather, Andrew, and Elaine in tears.

When he finished telling Elaine not only about his family, but about all they'd killed who were involved, you could've heard a pin drop.

"Jesus Christ," Elaine whispered. There was no hiding the redness in her eyes.

"My turn." I cleared my throat.

"There's more?" She wiped her cheeks, and JJ handed her a tissue.

"There's so much more." I could do this. "It started when I wouldn't give up the brothers."

Elaine listened as I told her everything that had happened to me, without getting into specifics about the mental abuse, and about what I'd discovered about my parents' deaths. I never told her what Crispin or the others had called me while I was strung up in The Shed, but she got the gist. She didn't say a word when I was done, just turned her head to Heather and Andrew.

"I don't think my dad ever wanted kids." Heather's voice shook. "I don't ever remember a time he did fatherly things. Our mom, she's always drunk or high and doesn't care what happens to us unless our dad tells her to care."

Andrew didn't release his hand from his sister's as she told of the torment they went through. Heather was only seven when her father had first handed her over to Crispin to do what he wanted. Andrew was younger.

I had to swallow bile as I listened to the things that were done to them. After hearing Gabe tell me about Scarlett, I

shouldn't have been shocked, but their father did this. Handed them over to monsters over and over again.

I glanced behind me where Angel was standing and holy hell, he was shaking with rage. They all were. They were kids, their youth stolen from them.

"I..." Elaine cleared her throat. "What do I say to any of this?" She shook her head as she stared at the table surface. "I can't fathom...I knew they were monsters, corrupt to the max, I just—"

"Can't imagine a father and mother handing their children over to slaughter?" I asked.

"You've all endured so much."

"Do you understand why putting them in cages won't end this? Life gives them power," JJ explained. "I've worked with lawyers, Mayor. I know finding loopholes is their specialty and with a DA, a senator, police officers, and other high-profile people at the helm of this fucked-up ship, they'll never serve a day if they are given a chance to fight for it."

Elaine's brows rose and she nodded. "You're right but... you want me to sanction their murders?"

"No." Noel stepped forward. "We want you to get out of our way and let us do what needs to be done, and we promise to hand you all the evidence needed to prove they are who we are telling you they are. In the end, yes, they all die, it's the only way. Gilly will hold the bag and go through the wringer only to meet the same fate, but for handing his kids over he goes through a public shaming first. When it's over you clear us, become mayor, and keep the promises you've been making. Make our home what our parents and our sister died trying to rebuild."

She met each of our gazes—aside from red-rimmed eyes, she was a sphinx. What would happen if she said no? Would we keep her here?

"What do I say about what happened to me today?"

"Here's the problem," JJ implored. "No matter what you say, Crispin won't believe you. We're sure he has taps on your



phone, so he knows we were coming for you. Your safety is compromised.”

“I can’t hide.” She scoffed. “I won’t.”

“You can’t die, Mayor.” Shep crossed his arms over his chest. “You are paramount to this plan working.”

“I can hire security. My husband has some military buddies who work in a security company. I’ll be okay. Do what you have to do.” She glanced at Heather and Andrew. “I’ll pick it up where you all leave off.” She flicked her eyes to Gabe. “Make those motherfuckers pay.”

*Well, damn.* Mayor Falco was badass.

Gabe smirked. “Oh, I promise they’ll regret every moment of their lives by the time we’re done.”

“I’m going to tell my security I went for a walk and took an Uber to the cliffs to think, say I wasn’t feeling well. They won’t question it...or at least won’t be vocal about not believing me.”

Nick slid a burner phone over to her. “This is how we talk from here on out. In the bathroom, shower on.” He handed her a small remote-looking thing. “Run this over every room. If it lights up red, that means there are listening devices present. Don’t remove them, just know where it’s safe to talk and not. Showers tend to muffle noise enough but know where your weak spots are, always.”

She took both the phone and the remote. “Thank you.”

“I’ll drive you as far as I can; then you call an Uber to get you.” Angel jangled the keys. “Time to start the show, Madam Mayor.”

She nodded curtly, rose from her chair, and stared right at me. “Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster.”

“Friedrich Nietzsche?”

“Yes.”

I lifted my shoulder. “It takes a maniac to catch a maniac.”

She furrowed her brows, obviously not knowing who'd said that. Everyone else chuckled and I clued her in.

“Sylvester Stallone, *Demolition Man*.”

She rolled her eyes. “I hope we all don't die.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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### **Gabe**

ORIGINALLY MY BROTHERS and I would pick off one or a few of the motherfuckers responsible for our family's murders at a time, but the old way of things wasn't going to work now. Every one of them had to be on high alert. Shockingly, through the years none of them ever ran, knowing they were being taken out as they saw their partners die...they stayed. None of them ever turned or tried to help themselves. That was a therapy session right there.

We were at the point where those left were the ones on top and their personal muscle. We couldn't fuck this up; one screw-up and they'd all be in the wind or we'd be dead.

"Blaze," JJ said one evening as we were taking a much-needed break.

"What about that perv?" Mason asked as he shoved popcorn into his mouth.

"He obviously knows everything, or at least a hell of a lot. While he's not in the picture we have and likely didn't kill your sister, your parents, or yours"—he gestured to me—"he has to have been part of some shady shit and probably has info on where they'll all be."

"You're saying grab him and only him?" Angel cocked his head. "And that wouldn't be suspicious?"

JJ scoffed. “Something tells me that if Blaze disappears for a day, none of them would be shocked. We’ll have his phone so if they text or whatever, we’ll make sure they know he’s doing unsavory deeds.”

I looked over at Mason and my brothers. The kids had gone to bed and while they deserved to be involved with the justice we were serving, we also wanted to keep them as far away from it all as we could.

“Okay.” I stood up from my spot beside Mason. “Now we have to track him and—”

“Easy,” JJ interrupted. “Blaze is an idiot and a depraved sex addict. If there’s a hookup app, he has it.”

Nick chuckled. “Too fucking easy.”

“We play to his vileness, so to speak.” JJ shrugged. “Set up a hookup, and *boom*.”

And just like that, we had our beginning to the end. We had a million ways to make this all happen, but there would always be a flaw someone would find. This was what we needed.

Nick, Noel, and JJ didn’t want to wait; they ran off to where we had all the computers and began their hunt.

“What do we do?” Mason asked.

“We need to wait until they snag Blaze—that’s the key.”

Mason got up and took my hand. “Let’s go to bed, then.” There was a glimmer of hope in his eyes. I knew he wanted to have sex, but I also knew his body wasn’t ready.

“Okay.” I followed him, fingers linked, trying to figure out how to tell him no without hurting his feelings.

As soon as the bedroom door closed, he pushed me up against it.

“Stop thinking, Gabe. I know you were right. I’m not ready, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t things we can do... that I can do. Tell me no if you have no desire to but don’t say no *for* me. That’s my right.”

I cupped his face in my hands and hoped I conveyed my feelings properly. “I’m pretty sure I’ll always want you, Mason. However you want me, that’s how I want to be.”

“In that case.” Mason slid to his knees slowly, his body still tender, and pulled my sweat pants and boxers along with him. “Hello, beautiful.”

I laughed but it turned into a moan after Mason licked over my head.

My legs quaked as Mason made love to my dick. I’d been blown my fair share of times, even by Mason, but this felt like more. He wasn’t jacking me fast or trying to push my orgasm out of me; he was cherishing me. His control, what he needed, was this.

“Baby,” I whispered, and he slowly slid my entire length into his mouth, down his throat, and I swore I whimpered.

It took all my strength for my knees not to buckle as he sucked and licked. As soon as he squeezed my balls I thought I was a goner. But it was like he had a direct line to my prostate and was dominating the shit out of it because right when I thought I’d come, I didn’t.

“You’re killing me.” I pressed the back of my head against the wooden door, fisting my hands so they wouldn’t seek out Mason’s hair and pull.

Mason chuckled, and the vibration was my endgame. I tried to warn him, but he knew and sucked harder. I practically folded in two as he swallowed my load. I didn’t pass out so much as I tuned out for a brief moment. I opened my eyes to Mason smiling at me while he took a warm washcloth to my cock.

“I’ll take this as a compliment.”

I snorted. “That was amazing.”

He leaned in and pressed his mouth to mine. My tongue dipped inside, the remnants of my come forcing a moan.

“Do you want to?” I eyed his lap.

“No, trust me, seeing you fall apart like that got me over the finish line.”

That was when I realized he was only in boxers.

“Let’s sleep.” I stood, pulling him with me.

Mason rested his head on my chest, my arms around him, and the blanket surrounding us both. It was only minutes before he was asleep. I didn’t join him for hours. My mind was racing with every scenario, good and bad, and as I stared at the ceiling, with fresh snow falling outside, I understood that no matter how this turned out, Mason, JJ, and those kids would live the best lives they could, knowing me and my brothers had slaughtered the monsters.

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“4EVERHOOKUP?” Angel was laughing. “That’s the app you found him on?”

“He wasn’t on the others, and it makes me wonder if it was because he was banned from them.” JJ tilted his head as he regarded Mason. “Can you get kicked out of a dating app?”

“I’m sure if there’s a way, Blaze found it.”

“So what’s the plan?” Shep leaned against the archway of the kitchen, scowling. “JJ shouldn’t be going anywhere.”

Ohhh, wasn’t he the possessive, overprotective bull?

“Pardon?” JJ spun on him. “Did I miss the ‘you’re the boss of me’ memo?”

“I said shouldn’t!” Shep held his hands up, but I could tell from his glare that he wasn’t backing down.

“And who do you suggest goes?”

“Not you.”

“Well, shit,” Mason whispered from beside me.

“I honestly wasn’t planning on going, but now maybe I will.”

Shep took a step closer to JJ, not threateningly, so no one moved to intercept.

“If you go, I go.”

JJ’s eyes widened, and I almost laughed when he opened his mouth a few times before actual words slipped out.

“You’re not his type.”

Shep rolled his eyes. “I don’t think he’ll be aware of that when we snatch him.”

“Thing is...” Noel held up a finger. “We do need to get Blaze to a discreet location. So yeah, he’ll need to be lured.”

“And you all think JJ is a smart choice?” Shep scoffed. “No offense, sweetheart,” he addressed JJ and...*Wow, sweetheart*. “But Blaze sort of wants to pummel him for taking the files. Won’t he run the other way?”

“Fair point,” I agreed.

“Well, then we’re screwed because he knows what we all look like.” JJ folded his arms over his chest.

Nick grinned. “Sort of. He knows what we sort of look like. Noel and I fit the physique he gravitates toward. Wigs and whatever could hide us enough.”

“What if he makes you?” JJ asked.

Nick’s smile was softer now. “Better me than you.”

“That’s stupid logic.” JJ huffed and plopped into a chair next to Mason.

“JJ, they’ve been doing this for a while. I get that you want to avenge all those wronged, but admit defeat here.” Mason patted his arm.

“Fine.”

Shep released a breath, and it didn’t go unnoticed when JJ relaxed.

“I’ll go to the store to get things to alter your appearance.” Noel stood. “Yes, I said you.” He cackled on his way out.

“Whatever.” Nick scooped up his laptop. “I’ll go hook the perv.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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### **Mason**

NICK LEFT with Angel and Gabe, looking nothing like himself and everything like a ditzy stereotype, because that was Blaze's kind of hookup. Why Blaze had thought JJ would be interested was beyond me.

Shep and Noel stayed back with the rest of us, and we were all sitting in the computer room. Nick had a mini camera on him. We could see and hear everything. These brothers were more than killing machines; they were brilliant. Whether they learned it all as they went or were already knowledgeable in how tech worked was a mystery to me.

The plan was to get Blaze away from the public, knock him out, and bring him to an abandoned store Angel had found. He'd discovered it a week ago, seen a bunch of squatters inside. They'd told him the place had shut down years ago, and no one was doing anything with it. It was perfect. We'd paid them enough, and they didn't ask questions about staying away for a while.

Heather and Andrew entered the room, a tray of cocoa and cookies in hand.

"Hey." I stood to help them. "You shouldn't be in here."

"Mason, thank you for trying to shelter my brother and me, but you don't have to. We actually want to see this to the end." Her brows furrowed. "Maybe then I'll be able to sleep again."

“Okay.” I gestured to a love seat in the room, and they both sat.

Nick, Gabe, and Angel were driving to the bar where they set up the meeting. The way they were ribbing each other, you’d never know they were possibly walking into a dangerous situation. Nick was working on his flirty airheadedness, and he had everyone cracking up.

“Okay, we’re here,” Angel said as he parked. “If he insists on driving, don’t fight him, Nick. We’ll be right behind you.”

“Got it.” He opened the door and jumped out.

“Be careful.” Gabe’s tone was stern.

“I will.” He shut the door, and we all watched the screen.

The camera was in a pendant on a necklace Nick was wearing, so it was like a police cam.

“High-class place.” JJ snorted.

It was seedy as fuck, but that surprised no one when it came to Blaze. He was in it for the sex, not some love connection.

“Bingo,” we heard Nick whisper, and sure enough Blaze came into view.

“Hello, sexy.” The slimeball practically purred, and everyone visibly shuddered in disgust.

“Hi, yourself.” Nick’s voice was higher, and he’d added some valley to his tone.

“How about a drink?” Blaze held one up to Nick.

“Oh, what is that?” Nick took it but never drank from it.

“A watermelon margarita.”

“Oh!” Nick held it away from his face. “That’s kind of you, but I’m allergic to watermelon. I’ll just grab my own, and we can have a seat.”

There was zero doubt Blaze had drugged the drink, and it was something we’d all talked about before Nick left tonight. If given the opportunity, Blaze would do it.

“I see.” Blaze’s jaw clenched, and there was no questioning what his intent had been.

They walked up to the bar; Nick handed the bartender the watermelon drink. “I’m sorry, my date had no idea I was allergic to this, can I have a regular margarita instead?”

The bartender nodded and tossed the margarita. Once he had a nonlethal beverage, they walked over to a table.

“So, tell me about yourself. Blaze, is it?”

Blaze wasn’t looking as confident as he had been when he and Nick first met. I guess as soon as you took out the only chance of fucking someone against their will, you lost that special spark that made you a psychopath.

“I’m a lawyer.” He smiled.

“A wannabe one.” JJ rolled his eyes.

“Wow! That’s so cool! I always wanted to do something smart like that.”

Blaze reached over and covered Nick’s hand with his own. “Someone as beautiful as you should never have to work a day in his life.”

JJ made gagging noises, which earned him an arm slap from Shep.

“Smart, hot, and sweet?” Nick giggled. “What the hell are you doing on an app? You can have anyone you want.”

That was exactly what Blaze needed to hear. He sat up taller and beamed at Nick. “I’m glad I used the app, otherwise I’d never have met you.”

“Oh, wow. Stop or you’ll have me on my knees right now.”

“Nah.” Blaze stood. “I want you on your knees, but for my eyes only. Let’s get out of here.”

“Don’t need to ask me twice.”

And they were on the move.

“I have my car in the lot over here.” Nick started walking toward Gabe and Angel, but Blaze stopped him.

“I used the valet.”

I wondered if Nick was as shocked as I was that a crappy place like this had valet, but he never remarked or even sounded shocked. “What about my car? Want me to follow you?”

Blaze shook his head. “I’ll drive you here when I’m done with you.”

“A regular Casanova,” I mumbled.

“Okay.” If Nick was upset or worried, I couldn’t tell. Angel and Gabe would follow Blaze’s car and as a backup, there was a GPS tracker in Nick’s shoe.

Nick and Blaze didn’t talk much; all that could really be heard was the music that was blaring through the speakers. The pendant camera on Nick’s neck was high but only barely giving us a view as to where they were going.

“Blaze lives in the heart of town. He isn’t taking him to his apartment,” JJ pronounced.

“This is the way to The Shed.” Angel spoke through the universal speaker—even Nick could hear.

“Where do you live, in a creepy cabin in the woods?” Nick giggled again.

“No, but there’s a party I know about I think you’ll enjoy.”

I peered over my shoulder to Heather and Andrew, and they were stock still.

“You two really don’t have to be here.”

All Andrew told us was, “You need to grab Blaze now, Mason. If they’re expecting Blaze, there’ll be too many of them. Gabe and Angel won’t be enough.” Andrew was frantic and tugging on his hair.

Heather pulled her brother to her, keeping him calm, repeating “It’ll be okay,” and “They’ll get him,” over and over.

I met Shep's gaze, and he spoke into the microphone. "Intercept, Gabe. The numbers are too high."

"Fuck." Gabe growled and hit the gas.

"This means Blaze told the others he was picking someone up. Any chance of making them think Blaze was shacking up for days with a guy is gone," Noel sighed.

"Not necessarily." I hit the button so Gabe and the others could hear me. "Intercept before The Shed. We can make Blaze communicate the date was a bust."

"Got it," Gabe answered, and I sat back.

All any of us could do from here was watch it all play out and hope there would be no casualties on our end.

"If we'd known this was what Blaze intended, we could have had them all in one place." Shep slammed his hand on the desk.

"We wouldn't know the numbers, Shep." Noel stared at the screen. "We can't know what they're thinking, but one thing we learned was that Blaze is in fact plugged in, and he can make them show up."

I could hear Nick asking Blaze about the party and the vagueness in Blaze's responses were all anyone needed to hear to know the intent was never to bring Nick back to his car.

"I can see Blaze's car," Angel said.

We couldn't see what Angel and Gabe were seeing, but the second they rammed into Blaze's bumper, Nick's camera jostled.

"What was that?" Nick acted surprised.

"Shit!" Blaze shouted.

Nick was pushed, and the glove box was opened. Blaze had just reached to grab a gun when chaos ensued.

"Can't let you do that." I made out Nick's voice; then it was arms, hands, the sound of flesh and bone, and a lot of swearing.

“This is a disaster.” JJ covered his face in his hands.

“No, it’s not.” Shep pointed to the monitor, and Gabe and Angel came into view. “They got him.”

“Car is in bad shape, but I’ll drive it to the house.” Angel left no room for debating the issue.

It was far from over, but at least we’d stopped them before they reached The Shed. If not, our kidnapping operation would have turned into a rescue mission.

“Get the fuck out of there.” Noel was visibly relieved. He’d seen me after I’d been held in The Shed, and the thought of that happening to his twin brother had no doubt been suffocating.

I reached over and squeezed his shoulder. “He’s safe.”

He just nodded. It wasn’t spoken but the “for now” hung heavy in the air.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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### Gabe

“I’M GOING to enjoy killing this shitbag.” Nick stepped out of some far room; he’d changed into his regular clothes and wiped off the makeup he’d put on his face. He’d removed the camera, not wanting anyone to see what we were going to be doing to this asshole. Mason and JJ didn’t need that, and if the kids were watching, they really didn’t have to see it.

“It was a close one.” I leaned against a dirty display case while Angel secured the bindings on Blaze’s arms and legs.

Blaze was knocked out, blood dripping from his hairline where Nick had pistol-whipped him with his own gun.

“Phone.” Angel handed it over.

It required Blaze’s fingerprint, so I moved behind him and pressed his finger to the screen, successfully giving me access.

“Okay, let’s see.” I scrolled his texts and contacts. “Well, would you look at this?” Nick and Angel read over my shoulder.

“He actually has a group titled ‘Shed’?” Nick sighed. “Open it.”

The people were at least cryptic as they texted. The last message had come through five minutes ago, asking Blaze where he was.

I answered, *It was a bust. Guy threw up all over my car.*

A groan caught our attention. Blaze was lifting his head. This was a moment I'd enjoy. With squinted eyes he searched the space around him, his brain trying to catch up with his situation.

Angel, Nick, and I waited, staring silently at him. As soon as he saw us, I was happy to report, his coloring became ashen.

"The look of fear," Nick hummed. "I'm sure you see that a lot from your victims. Interesting being on the other side of it, huh?"

"Where am I?"

"Does it matter?" Angel snatched Blaze's phone from my hand. "Your buddies are likely upset their torture toy for the evening isn't happening."

"That's my phone! Give it to me."

Nick crouched in front of Blaze, head tilted. "You're not in any place to be demanding anything. However, we'll explain why it is you're still alive and go from there."

"You know who we are." I stood behind Nick, who hadn't moved. He loved making people feel uneasy.

"You're monsters."

Angel's booming laugh startled Blaze enough that he jolted against the chair.

"Funny how you're sitting there calling us the monsters." He moved behind Blaze, gripped his hair, and yanked it back until his neck was strained. "I suppose it's true, though. Monsters live in all of us, and what we do with the beasts tells the world who we really are. In your case, that would be a perverted and deplorable bag of bones. And sorry to break it to you, Blaze, no one would miss you."

"That's where you're wrong." Blaze was struggling to breathe, but he forced out the words. "They'll all notice. You all think you keep winning, but you're not. Ever stop and think, you're playing right into their hands?"



“Ha!” Nick stood and squeezed Blaze’s face, forcing Angel to relinquish control to him. “You can’t manipulate us. We know exactly what we’re doing.” He inched so close to Blaze’s face I swore he was about to kiss him. “Do you?”

“They’ll kill you,” Blaze wheezed.

“They’ll certainly try.” Then Nick released him.

“If you think I’ll help any of you, you’re wasting your time.” He probably thought he was acting tough, but to me he was a puny pawn in a big man’s game.

“You will.” I reached into my small black duffel bag and pulled out my knife roll. “We have time.” I opened the roll on the display case and took out my scalpel. “Think I can cut your clothes off without hitting skin?”

“Now look who’s trying to manipulate who?” Blaze scoffed, but the fear was evident in his expression.

“Weird.” Nick cocked his head. “You’ve seen what we’ve done to people already. What makes you think we aren’t going to do the same to you? What makes you think this isn’t exactly how it all went down with them?”

I approached Blaze, and he tried desperately to break free of his binds.

“Look, Blaze,” I said as I hovered. “It doesn’t matter to me if I cut you, but I think you care, so maybe stay still.” The second I started slicing, he froze. Yeah, he’d be easy to break.

Nick pulled up a rickety chair and sat close enough to Blaze but stayed out of my way.

“Let me understand this. Anytime one of you sickos snags a date, you share them with your pervy posse?”

Blaze sneered but kept his mouth shut.

“Here’s how I see it.” Angel was spinning a ball peen hammer in his hand. “You’re probably not responsible for the torture and murder of our sister, and maybe you didn’t know Mason was taken, but you’re trying to work your way into their inner circle, and to do that you’re offering up little morsels you catch.” Angel grinned. “Am I close?”

“*Hmm.*” I stepped back. His shirt was sliced open and the front of his pants, exposing enough skin to cause harm. “Seems he doesn’t want to talk.”

“Then we make him.” Angel swung, and I flinched at the sound of Blaze’s kneecap shattering. This wasn’t the first time he’d done this, but I always cringed.

“Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuck!” Blaze shouted and promptly vomited all over himself.

“That’s gross, and honestly, I thought he’d last longer before the bodily fluids started spewing.” Nick shrugged and rose from his chair. “My turn.” He snagged the icepick from my roll.

Blaze was still screaming, and we all knew this would be pointless if we kept hurting him without getting answers. Nick held the tip of the icepick to Blaze’s other knee.

“Blaze!” he shouted. “You need to stop yelling, or you’ll never hear what I have to say.”

Blaze’s face was red, tear-stained, and covered in puke. He met Nick’s gaze, but the pain was surely making it hard for him to focus.

“Good, now answer this question, and I won’t stab you with my pointy friend.” Nick smiled. “Who are all the people that you invited to The Shed today?”

That was one thing we had to know. The reason it had taken us so long to kill each person in that picture was because some weren’t identified, others not in the picture, and we had to locate them all.

“I...I don’t know. I sent the text to Billy, and he handled it.”

Nick hummed. “Yeah, but there’s a whole chat group on your phone labeled ‘Shed.’ ”

Blaze shook his head. “No...the names, I don’t know them, they use aliases.”

“And you’re not big enough to know them all, so you’d have showed up tonight and only known the DA, the senator,

and Gilly, right?” Angel snorted.

“Please let me go.” Blaze’s pleas were falling on deaf ears.

“Answer him.” Nick pushed the icepick in, and a drip of blood slid along the length of Blaze’s leg, forcing a bloodcurdling scream from him.

“Okay, okay, okay!” Snot had joined the mess on his face. “Daly too, Gilly’s partner. Their wives. That’s all I know. I don’t know who else Billy invites.”

“And who’s Billy?” I asked.

“Runs the hardware store on State Street.”

“William Whiston?” The man was close to eighty.

Blaze was shaking his head. “No, Junior, his son.”

“Fucking Junior. Never liked that son of a bitch.” Nick removed the icepick and sat back down in his chair.

“If he organizes things, he has the connections.” I returned the scalpel to my roll and grabbed the hunter’s knife.

“Will you let me go?” Blaze was frantically looking at each of us.

“You don’t get how this works, do you?” I slowly walked over to him. “You were never leaving this place alive. None of you will. You chose this life, and now, you’ll die for it.”

Blaze opened his mouth to protest but before a sound could be heard, I slit his throat with my knife.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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### **Mason**

ALL ANY OF US knew at the house was that Gabe, Nick, and Angel were safe, and they had Blaze. They'd made it to the abandoned shop and were questioning him.

It was a helpless feeling, one I wasn't handling well.

"Cookie?" JJ placed a plate with chocolate chip cookies on the table in front of me.

"How much longer?"

JJ sighed and sat beside me. "When they're done." He chuckled and I smacked him. "Ow, why'd you hit me?"

"You're laughing at me."

"Fair. I just find it funny. You never liked people, hanging around them and all. Me being the exception. Hell, getting you out to a club was near impossible half the time. Now, you want everyone back here...maybe one person in particular more than the others."

"Oh, you want to talk about this, because if you open the can of feelings, I will bring up you and a certain Viking chef."

"Shep?"

"Don't do that." I swirled my finger in his face.

"Do what?"

“That ‘I’m going to pretend I have no idea what you’re talking about’ thing.”

“Mason.”

“Now you’re using a mom voice on me?”

“What are you two talking about?” Shep pulled out a chair, grabbed a cookie, and joined us.

“Nothing,” JJ said at the same time I answered, “You.”

Shep arched a brow and his gaze shifted between us. “Okaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaay.”

“Mason, don’t you need to go do something right now?” JJ narrowed his eyes at me.

“Nope. I’m comfy right here.”

A smile slowly formed on Shep’s face as he regarded JJ, and soon he was showing his pearly whites. “You were talking about me?”

“No.” JJ shoved a cookie into his mouth.

Whatever was going to be said after that was forgotten when the front door opened and Gabe, Nick, and Angel entered.

“Saved by the heathens,” JJ murmured.

“No, you are not.” Shep stood and winked at JJ before he went to his brothers.

Not waiting to hear what JJ would say to me, I rushed over to Gabe as fast as I could—which was more like a quick limp.

“How’d it go?”

Nick snorted. “You ask like we were off for a job interview.” He smacked Gabe’s shoulder. “You’re a bad influence.”

“Go away, Nick.” Gabe pulled me close, and with my ear pressed to his chest, I listened to his heart. He could have been killed, could have been taken.

“I’m okay, Mason.” He pulled back but kept me close. “Not a scratch on me.”

Smirking I said, “I should see the other guy, right?”

Gabe’s smile disappeared. “No, you wouldn’t want that.”

So Blaze was dead, and it wasn’t an easy death at that. I understood this was how it had to happen, but not all that long ago my biggest worries had been getting to work on time and avoiding social interaction.

“Did you get any information out of him?” Noel was sitting in the living room, laptop open.

“A name. One we didn’t have, and while not high in the ranks in the political world, he seems to be the ringleader...or organizer of all things The Shed.” Nick sat beside his brother.

“Who?” Heather asked.

“William Whiston Junior.”

“Billy.” Andrew inched closer to his sister as if the name alone invoked nightmares.

“Hold up.” Noel shook his head. “Junior, who works at the hardware store with his dad and always mansplains everything to everyone...even to other men?”

“The one and only.” Angel grabbed the cookie in Shep’s hand and ate it.

“Asshole.” Shep turned and went into the kitchen.

“Mason, do you remember hearing that name?” I hadn’t left Gabe’s side, but I felt far away.

“I heard the name Junior but never put two and two together. I know Billy, though. I’ve bought things from him...I never...”

“How’d you hear his name but not see him at The Shed?” Angel wondered.

“There were brief moments when no one was paying me any attention. Two of the guys who were always there, always hitting me and...talking. They mentioned a guy named Junior, said he was planning something later, and then another time they said they had to check with Junior to see if the place would be available.”

“Andrew?” Gabe was so careful with him. “You recognized the name too?”

“Yeah, he was there a lot...all the times I was.”

“Sounds like we found our next guy and by the looks of it, he has a shit-ton of information.” Noel started typing.

“It’ll be trickier.” Shep entered the living room with a tray of cookies and muffins. “It sounds like Junior is vital to their operation. How will we grab him?”

“He lives alone,” Heather whispered. “He...has a house about a mile from the hardware store.”

I moved to her and rested my hand on her shoulder. She didn’t have to tell any of us how she knew that—it was obvious, and any conflict I’d had with this plan went out the window.

“He lives alone; this should be easy.”

“We can get what we need out of him there, maybe make it look like a suicide so we don’t have any cleanup, or a horrible accident.” Nick waggled his brows.

There was a screw loose with that one.

“If he’s important, we have to be sure to do this on a day he doesn’t have anything else or isn’t expected somewhere. Last thing anyone needs is to make a plan, only to get interrupted by a knock on the door.” Everyone agreed with me.

“Sundays are free days.” Andrew cleared his throat. “Nothing ever happens on Sundays. It was my favorite day of the week.”

I nodded. “Okay, we have a day. Can you arrange it so quickly?”

All five brothers scoffed. “You insult us.” Noel snorted. “We set up a team to stay back and a team to go to the house. Observe and see if he settles in...then we have all night.”

“More should go to Junior’s house just in case,” I said. “We’re safe here, and you were good at the shop, but you almost didn’t get there.”

“I’ll go, I sat out the last one.” Shep glanced at JJ as he spoke. “Me and Noel for sure.”

“Agreed. I can stay here and keep an eye on the little darlings.” Nick shot me a thumbs-up like a dork.

“We don’t need any more than Nick. He knows the security, and I may be banged up and JJ not a very good fighter—”

“Hey!” JJ yelled but I continued.

“We can hold our own, but nothing is happening here. It’s smarter you all have the numbers, not us.”

I could tell Gabe wasn’t thrilled with my plan, but he had to see it held merit. He clenched his jaw as he met my challenging glare.

“If anyone gets in here you all listen to Nick, follow the evacuation plan.”

“We’re solid, bro.” Nick winked.

“Okay.” Gabe nodded curtly. “Let’s strategize.”



## CHAPTER THIRTY

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### **Gabe**

JUNIOR'S HOUSE was exactly where Heather said it was, one mile from the hardware store. It was a two-story cream-colored Victorian farmhouse.

"He's in the master bedroom, wearing a robe. I think it's safe to say he's not going anywhere tonight." Angel was watching the house through binoculars.

"It doesn't mean no one else is coming over, though." Shep had tucked the car far enough away and in the shadows so that even if Junior looked out the window, he'd see nothing but darkness.

"We get in the house and secure the inside. I'd rather be in there and surprise them instead of the other way around." Noel slipped on his gloves and opened the car door.

"Agreed." I followed behind Noel, Shep and Angel bringing up the rear.

The land surrounding the house was quiet; this was almost too perfect. They had to know Blaze was missing by now, that we were closing in. Were they so cocky they thought themselves invincible?

"There's a covered porch. We can enter that way." Noel pointed, and I pushed the crazy thoughts from my head and focused on getting answers out of Junior.

I peeked through the window and saw the alarm box was visible. “He hasn’t activated the alarm yet.”

“He’s an idiot.” Angel pulled away the designer tarp that covered the porch.

“Or he thinks he’s untouchable.” Noel took out his lockpicking kit as he echoed the thoughts in my head.

Once inside there was silence, some footfalls upstairs, and the low timbre of voices on Junior’s television. Our plan was to grab, subdue, and secure him. When he was tied up, we’d proceed. None of us needed to talk; we all knew our jobs.

There were two ways to get to the second floor—stairs from the kitchen and by the living room. Noel and I would go up through the living room, and Shep and Angel had the kitchen. That way if Junior saw one of us, the others would flank him.

It was frighteningly easy to obtain blueprints of someone’s home, and if it wasn’t to me and my brothers’ advantage, I’d be appalled.

Noel and I reached the floor and could see Angel and Shep on the other end. The master bedroom door was slightly ajar and the voices on the television were louder now. Moaning, grunting...*Oh, great he’s watching porn. Please don’t be jacking off...please don’t be jacking off.*

When we were on either side of his door, I held up my hand and counted one, two, and on three I pushed the door open. He was wearing a robe and was facing away from us and...fuck, he was jacking off.

Angel stood by the bedroom door—lucky bastard—Shep and I were in front of him on opposite sides while Noel readied the sedative.

Junior was oblivious to our presence, and we took advantage of the moment. I nodded, and Shep and I grabbed him.

“What the fuck!”

Once he was on the ground, I held his arms, Shep his legs, and Noel injected him.

“Nighty night,” Noel said and pressed the juice inside his body.

“Shit,” was the last thing Junior muttered before falling asleep.

“Okay, that was a low dose. It won’t last more than about fifteen, twenty minutes. Let’s get the room set up.” Noel capped the needle and put it in his bag.

Setting up the room consisted of a tarp on the ground, a chair, rope, and duct tape.

We worked quickly and efficiently. Not long after, we were ready for this piece of shit to wake up.

“Can we shut the TV off, or at least change the channel?” Shep grimaced at the porn currently playing, and I laughed.

“Shut it off.”

I’d never seen Shep move so fast. None of us were prudes and we didn’t like to yuck someone’s yum, but knowing the deviant acts Junior had been part of made anything he enjoyed gross.

I watched Junior while my brothers searched the house for anything and everything. Noel was grabbing laptops and searching Junior’s desktop. As soon as Junior began to stir, I spoke into my transceiver.

“He’s waking up.”

Shep entered first, since he’d been checking out the upstairs, and positioned himself behind Junior. Noel would be longer as he was responsible for collecting as much data as he could. Angel was walking the house to make sure we weren’t surprised by visitors.

Junior’s eyes fluttered, his head bobbed back and forth, and it took him close to five minutes to clear the cobwebs the sedative had caused.

“Good morning.” I smiled when he locked eyes with me.

“Fuck,” he grumbled. “I wished you were a dream.”

“Aww, sorry, this is far from a dream, Junior. Is it clichéd to say, ‘Welcome to your nightmare’?” I cocked my head and shrugged. “Whatever, makes no difference to me how you view this. We’re here for a reason, and how long of a night you have will greatly depend on how you assist us.”

Junior lifted his head more, regaining strength only for it to fall back and hit Shep’s stomach. Junior tried to get up and realized he couldn’t.

“Take a look around.” Shep moved to his side so Junior could see him. “Tied to a chair, a tarp below you, pissed-off killers in your bedroom, and”—he gestured to the television—“we shut off your porn before you got to finish. This is not your night.”

“I could play dumb and pretend I have no idea why you’re here, but I’m gonna take a guess.”

I shrugged, interested by what Junior would say that might help us.

“Someone squealed but all you got out of them was my name, and now you’re hoping to torture more info out of me?”

Shep nodded. “Close. We got more than your name, and the person who talked is dead now. We will torture you if we have to, and regardless of how fearless you’re feeling in this moment, I promise it will end with you pissing yourself and telling us all we want to know...hence the tarp.”

As if just realizing it, Junior’s eyes widened as he took in the room and pulled on the ropes securely immobilizing him.

“We’re torturing ourselves too, here.” Shep moved beside me. “I mean we have to look at your nakedness.”

We’d left the robe on but had opened it. “Naked, tied up, and vulnerable.” I moved closer and bent down to make eye contact; then I flicked his nipple. “That fear, all those emotions swirling inside you, that’s how your victims have felt.”

As sweat beaded along his forehead I stepped back so he could see Shep taping up his own hands.

“You like to tenderize people don’t you?” I motioned toward Shep. “Let’s do that first; afterward we’ll see how talkative you feel.”

They’d beat Mason without asking questions for a long time; Junior would receive the same treatment. We’d leave him wondering if we’d say anything other than words to shatter his mind. This was for Mason, and from the look in Shep’s eyes, he understood that.

With a dark grin, Shep landed the first blow.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

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### **Mason**

THE SUN WAS JUST COMING UP when the front door opened and Gabe, Noel, Shep, and Angel returned.

They all looked tired but unscathed, and for the first time in many hours, I breathed a sigh of relief.

All of us were camping out in the living room on the large couches, nobody able to sleep, worried not for ourselves but for the brothers. So when they entered the room we all scrambled to get up.

“Thank God you’re back,” Nick said. “A bunch of worriers these people you left me with are.”

“They were the same when you were gone last time.” Shep sidled up next to JJ, who offered him a bottle of water, then one to everyone else.

“Thanks.” Gabe opened his and chugged half the bottle before letting me be engulfed in a hug.

“How’d it go?” Nick was still on the couch, laptop close by. “I got what you sent over from Junior’s computers.”

“It was successful.” Angel plopped himself into the overstuffed chair. “It took a while, but he started singing eventually.”

“You all must be exhausted. Why don’t you sleep, and we can talk about it in a few hours.” JJ motioned for Heather and

Andrew. “You guys can go to your rooms and rest too. Might be good for all of us to recharge.”

No one argued and once everyone dispersed, I followed Gabe to the bedroom. I tossed his empty water bottle into the trash and leaned against the closed door.

“I’m gonna shower first.”

I was about to offer to go with him, but something in the way he looked at me said he needed to be alone.

“Okay.”

I pulled the bedding down and slipped under the covers. As I listened to the shower, I couldn’t help but remember being in The Shed. At some point it had rained, and the sound of it hitting the roof had reminded me of being in the shower. I’d tried to force my mind to that peaceful place. Now, the shower reminded me of The Shed, and I hated that in such a short time they had shifted my world.

“Where’d you go?” I’d been so lost in my head, I hadn’t heard Gabe get out of the shower. He was leaning against the doorjamb, a towel wrapped around his waist. He was so beautiful, and not for the first time I wished my skin wasn’t a kaleidoscope of nightmares.

“Just thinking.” I forced a smile and patted the mattress. “Come on, you have to be exhausted.”

He tossed the towel, and I shamelessly ogled his naked body all the way to the bed.

“Keep looking at me like that, and sleep will be the furthest thing from my mind.” He chuckled as he gently lay on top of me, his arms barriers next to my head, the weight of his body a protective blanket from the monsters. This man, someone I’d once feared, was now the person I most cherished, needed, and very much wanted.

“I was worried about you, which is stupid since before I even met you there was a body count attached to your name. I know you can take care of yourself.”

His grin was small, the darkness I saw in his eyes earlier gone. “It’s nice to have someone worry about me that isn’t one of my brothers.”

Tenderly I traced his cheek with my fingertips. “It’s so weird how our worlds collided.”

Gabe leaned into my touch. “If I could redo how we met, I would.”

I snorted, remembering his lack of suaveness at the nightclub. “You mean you wouldn’t just buy me a drink and tell me you wanted to fuck me?”

He snorted, his beaming face sending warmth through my body. “No, I’d probably still do that.”

“Such a charmer.”

He leaned down and, as soft as an angel’s wings, he kissed me. Hands never moved, no pressing, this was a kiss created to tell a story, to meld emotions together. This was Gabe saying all the things he didn’t know how to.

“As soon as this is over, what happens?” I asked after he moved from my lips to my neck.

His dark eyes sparkled with joy when he gazed at me. “Then we live, Mason. However we damn well choose, we live.”

“Together?” Shit, was I moving too fast?

“Oh, baby, if you think after all of this I’m ever letting you go, you’re insane.” He rolled off but took me with him until I rested my head on his chest.

“Gabe?”

“*Hmm?*”

“Seriously though...what was the vote?”

He sniggered and kissed my hair. “No one wanted to kill you. I was all talk.”

I wasn’t sure how true that was, but I’d take it.



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HAVING SLEPT enough while Gabe and the others were gone, I woke before him and went to the kitchen to start making food. No doubt everyone would wake up hungry.

JJ was already stirring something in a bowl, and the coffee aroma in the air beckoned me closer.

“Couldn’t sleep?” he asked as he poured honey into whatever he was making.

“Slept enough. How long have you been awake?”

He shrugged. “Pretty much the entire time. You need to see something.” He placed the bowl on the counter and gestured for me to follow him to the living room.

“What’s wrong?”

He woke up one of the tablets, and I sat beside him. “While everyone slept I was watching news feeds, wanted to see if there was anything that would hurt the brothers.”

“You found something?”

“Not anything leading to them, but look.” He hit play and I watched, a house ablaze and a reporter in front of the camera.

*“Authorities aren’t saying how the fire started, but they have found a body on the second floor. William Whiston Jr was pronounced dead at the hospital but whether the fire, smoke, or something else caused his death, nobody seems to know at this time.”*

“They burned it down...huh.” It was quite smart.

“Crispin and Gilly and I’m sure everyone else involved are going to know who did this, Mason.”

“I know, JJ, but we also know what they’ve done. And don’t fool yourself into thinking they haven’t been aware of everything else we’ve been doing.”

JJ placed the tablet on the table. “I think we’re smart, and we are taking these guys apart but, Mason, I have a bad

feeling. Crispin and his cronies have been doing this for years, longer than we've legally been allowed to drink. There's no way they aren't planning something to retaliate."

"You're saying what exactly, JJ?"

"That maybe we're not the ten steps ahead of them that we think we are."

I stared at the frozen image of Junior's house ablaze. "What choice do we have but to keep going, keep working toward the goal, and pray we are going to win this?"

"None, and that's what scares me."

I gripped JJ's hand in mine. "You don't need to be here, JJ. You can run and hide. Take care of your parents."

"I'm not leaving. What kind of life do you think I'd live if I knew all of you died? My parents are fine and very much enjoying the trip you gave them for Christmas. It was a happy coincidence they were already away and safe."

"Keeping them safe is important, JJ."

"I know, Mason."

I pulled him closer and hugged with as much strength as I could. "I can't promise you we'll be okay, but I can promise that no matter what happens, they'll pay."

He didn't say anything; he didn't have to. Hope was all we had right now.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

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### **Gabe**

AFTER A LATE-LUNCH-SLASH-EARLY-DINNER, everyone was awake and full, so we all went into the living room to talk about the next steps.

“Junior told us exactly how we can get Crispin and the others.”

“Um, I don’t mean to burst your bubble, Gabe, but with Junior’s very public death, don’t you think everything he told you about how to find everyone is moot?” JJ said.

“Yes, JJ, we’ve thought about that, and it’s why Shep suggested we gather them all in one place. We’ll get one shot at this, and while I’d love to have my time with each asshole, it’s not likely.”

“Okay.” Mason smiled encouragingly. “How do we make that plan happen?”

I motioned toward Shep, who stood and explained.

“We will gather the senator, Gilly, Crispin, and a few other higher-ups. Their muscle is always nearby, so we’ll have to lose them, but we’ll deal with them and any stragglers that scatter, later.”

“Yeah, and how do you plan to get everyone together and...I’m sorry, this doesn’t really seem like a very solid plan.” JJ bit his lip, his gaze traveling to each person.

“That’s the tricky part.” Shep moved closer to JJ and gripped his shoulders as if he were ready for the fight. “The five of us will need to separate, take one each, kidnap them, and bring them to the location.”

JJ’s eyes widened. “No backup?”

“What location?” Mason asked at the same time.

“I’m going to dismantle the senator’s security at his house, and that will be the hub for all of this.” Nick spoke quickly, but Mason and JJ were already scrambling.

“Are you insane?” JJ yelled.

“To my...well, where I used to sort of live?” Mason jerked away when I tried to touch him. “No, why? I don’t need some symbol or grand gesture.”

“That’s not what this is about,” Noel argued. “Grabbing the senator would be harder than getting everyone there. We sedate him and get the others in. Angel had an idea to smoke the place with sleeping gas, you know, halothane.” He shrugged.

Listening to them say all of this out loud sounded insane. “I know what you’re thinking.”

“No, Gabe, I don’t think you do.” Mason was shaking his head and shifting closer to JJ. “It’s a death sentence for all of you. Last time you were there, you said it was bustling with security. And before you say there was a chance we’d all die in this mission, I knew that. I thought maybe you’d give it a fighting chance. This guarantees it, though. You’ll die.”

“If we do, so be it.” Angel narrowed his eyes. “But they go with us.”

“Gilly was supposed to take the fall, go to jail, die there. That was the plan.” JJ folded his arms over his chest.

“And that’s still the plan.” I glared at Angel. “But there’s always a chance, you both knew that.”

“And if you all die, what do Mason, Heather, Andrew, and I do?”

“What we were always going to do, run and hide until the all-clear from the mayor, then live. All the info and paperwork are in your bags.” I’d known Mason and JJ would hate this, but this was the only way. There was a Plan A and a Plan B.

“I see.” Mason turned and walked into the kitchen.

When I made to go talk to him, JJ held up his hands. “I’ll go. You just told us you’re going on a suicide mission and after everything he’s been through, what those kids have gone through for years, we most likely will spend the rest of our days on the run, not having a clue how to survive. But you know what’s worse?”

I couldn’t answer, so I just shook my head.

“The one good thing, the one bright light out of his suffocating darkness would be gone. You, Gabe, you are the hope he was clinging to, and without you he’s afraid he’ll lose himself to the nightmares that scream at him while he sleeps, that whisper in his ear when he’s awake. He’s going to drift.”

JJ looked at each of us, and not one of my brothers could meet his eyes. “However you all crashed into our lives doesn’t matter. You became family, and in one fell swoop you’re going to take it away. Don’t ask us to be fine with it, to just be okay with you dying.” That last part was directed at Angel. “That will never happen.”

JJ spun on his heels and followed after Mason, leaving me and my brothers to question our mission for the first time ever.

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WHEN HEATHER and Andrew joined us, there was no hiding the tension in the air.

“What happened?” Heather gripped her brother’s hand.

“Mason and JJ don’t like our plan because it could get us killed.” Noel shrugged, but there wasn’t an ounce of cockiness in it—if anything, he appeared guilty.

“What? I mean, yeah.” She sighed. “Hang on.” She turned her head in the direction of the kitchen. “Mason, JJ, I know you’re both in there. Can you come here, please.” She wasn’t asking, more like ordering, and she seemed older than her years right then. She reminded me of my mom.

Mason and JJ rushed out and ran over to her. “What’s wrong?” JJ was eyeing her, likely searching for the reason she’d be yelling.

“Sit.” She pointed to the couch. “All of you sit, please.” She softened her words at the end, and sure enough the two men did as they were asked. My brothers joined after they were settled.

Heather nodded to her brother, released his hand, and stepped forward.

“Andrew and I don’t talk about the things we’ve been through. How we’ve been forced to grow up and survive every day. I don’t really want to do that right now either, but somewhere in the middle of all of this some of you, maybe all, have forgotten why we are fighting back.”

She motioned toward me. “Vengeance, for some. That’s one reason all of us can justify. I could sit here and say it would be therapy, but that’s a lie. All I want is to heal and live my life without wondering if today I’ll hurt. If today I’ll cry. If today I’ll watch a piece of my childhood get ripped away. They are monsters and Andrew and I could disappear right now and sure, our father would be mad but they’d find other kids, more people to hurt, and move on.”

A single tear slipped down Heather’s cheek. “If any of you thought for one second that your death wasn’t on the table when we started, you were fooling yourselves. Andrew and I talk about it at night and we decided we’d rather die than to ever go through another moment in The Shed.”

She moved closer to Mason and sat. “What about you? Even an hour in their hands is enough to make you want to die. I know that because I’ve often closed my eyes when I was held there, wishing death would take me. If I was willing to want it bad enough when they were hurting me, I’d want even

more to make sure it never happens to me again or anyone else.”

Mason reached out and cupped her face. “You’re wiser than you should be.”

“I know, and I hate it.”

JJ sighed and his shoulders slumped. “We just don’t want to lose anyone.”

“Of course you don’t.” Heather scoffed. “But the possibility was always there, JJ.” She stood and fanned her arms out. “All of us have something to live for and to fight for. That makes us strong. Andrew and I were terrified and alone until you rescued us. We believe in all of you. How this ends isn’t determined, but we sure as hell can take those assholes with us.”

“Damn, girl,” Angel said. “After this is over, you better make your voice lead people to greener pastures.”

“Give me that chance, and I will.”

Mason stood up and faced me. “I’m sorry, Gabe. I shouldn’t have yelled at you. I know none of you want to get killed. It all just felt very real in that moment, and I’m not sure living without you is something I want to do.”

Gently, I gripped Mason’s face and kissed him with so much passion I hoped he understood this is where I always wanted to be.

“I don’t want to do life without you either, and I’m going to do everything in my power to come back to you.” I looked at each person in the room. “We all will.”

Shep was hugging JJ, and Heather was mighty proud of herself, judging by her smile. I wanted this forever, and I’d fight like hell for it.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

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### **Mason**

“CAN I ASK YOU A QUESTION?” I turned onto my side in bed and faced Gabe. We’d had a long day of emotions, and then the brothers went over all the details Junior had told them as well as the files Noel had sent over to Nick. Plans were in place, and in two days’ time the brothers would set off to finish this.

“Sure.” He lifted his head and rested it on his hand.

“You didn’t get into detail about what you did to Junior. I know it was for the kids’ sake, but would you tell me?”

Gabe’s brows shot to his hairline. “I don’t think you want to know. Why would you?”

“He was the emcee of The Shed. I’m wondering if hearing what you did will help me quiet all the shouting in my head.”

Gabe sighed and in the next breath I was wrapped in his arms, his cheek resting on the top of my head while his heartbeat thumped in my ear.

“Mason, hearing what Junior went through won’t help you. You’ve read the stories about what my brothers and I have done. Telling you, it doesn’t feel right.”

I raised my head, my chin on his chest. “You don’t want to say it out loud.”



Gabe pursed his lips a moment before he spoke. “I don’t enjoy hurting anyone, Mason. My brothers don’t either. It’s not a career choice, but at the same time, it’s the language they speak. They deserve the same justice they gave my sister, both of our parents, Heather, Andrew, you, and the countless others who no longer have a voice. The system failed them because it’s corrupt. None of us should be in the position we’re in but we are, and we’ll end it. Don’t make me tell you what Junior endured, just know it was enough for him to tell us everything he knew and beg us for death.”

He was right, that was enough. “Okay.”

I pressed my ear once again to his heart and listened. The repetition and Gabe running his fingers through my hair lulled me right to sleep.

*“You’re a slut, look at you. Are you getting hard?” Pain radiated through my body as another blow struck my stomach.*

*“Look at his tiny pathetic dick. He must be the catcher in the relationship, not like that little prick could accomplish anything.” Someone squeezed my penis tightly, and I tried not to cry out but I knew I’d failed when laughter filled the room.*

*“No friends, but one man who probably felt obligated to take you in because you were an orphan. You gave them money, so they tolerated you. But look at you, who could love this? What could you possibly have to offer? You work in a bookstore that serves coffee. Not sure if that’s the definition of a loser, but it sure sounds like it.” A sharp pain erupted over my cheekbone, and I literally saw stars.*

*“We’re doing the world a favor getting rid of you. You take up space, use oxygen real people need.”*

*More pain, more screams.*

“Mason!”

I opened my eyes and gasped. I could feel the sweat coating my skin. Gabe hovered over me with wild eyes.

“Gabe?”

“Baby.” He pulled me into his arms. “You’re not there, you’re here with me. You’re amazing and loved and whatever they said to you were lies.”

*How’d he know...?*

“I spoke in my sleep?”

“Mason, look at me.” He pulled away and I saw so much sincerity and love in his eyes. “You are loved. You’re a strong son of a bitch, you’re hot, smart, and nicer than I deserve. I’ll tell you every day if it erases the lies they spewed at you, but know it’s all true. Every word I say.”

“I know that in my heart, I do. But when I’m back there in my mind, it’s so hard to remember who I am.”

He didn’t respond to that, just held me for hours whispering how amazing I was and I wept until my eyes drooped and I fell into a dreamless sleep.

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“THE SENATOR WILL BE at his house. They’re planning their annual charity benefit—they host it shortly after New Year’s—so tomorrow there will be people in and out setting up. Junior told us that while there will be security, with so many bodies it’s hard to see everyone. This is where we end up.” Gabe pointed to a spot on the blueprint of the house. When my land was sold, and the senator built on it, there were prints and as we’d discovered, getting blueprints to someone’s home is ridiculously easy.

“The garage is where we’ll meet up, make sure your person—or in your case, Noel, people—are out cold and tied. We will bring them in wrapped to look like the drooping cherry blossoms the senator’s wife ordered to line the foyer into the living room. If asked, that’s what they are, and you were ordered to place them in the garage.”

JJ raised his hand. “Yeah, and what if someone says they already arrived, or the real order does arrive while you’re camped out?”

Angel grinned. “We intercepted the order. Noel got fancy, and we are supposedly the new delivery guys.”

“The trees are about six feet each, so carrying a body won’t be suspicious.” Gabe grabbed the tablet.

“Nick, you got Daly. He gets off work at noon after doing a night shift. You grab him in his driveway. He has a cottage far in the woods. No one will see you.”

“Got it.”

“Angel, the superintendent, Hank Wilson. School is on break, but he will be working to get ready for school to resume after the holiday. He takes his lunch at twelve thirty. Has a standing order at Lacy’s Diner. Wait for him to pick up the food; Junior said he eats in the park no matter the weather. That’s where you grab him.”

“No problem.”

“How did Junior know all this?” I questioned.

“Crispin liked knowing where everyone was and made sure Junior informed him of everyone’s schedules and habits. Junior, believe it or not, kept tabs on Crispin too, and that’s how I know he’ll be home awaiting a massage.”

“Let me guess.” I smirked. “You intercepted that?”

“Bingo.”

“I’ve got Gilly and his wife. Her parents have been in town and have a morning flight out. I’ll be waiting for them to return from the airport and grab them when they get home.” Noel mock saluted.

“How do you know none of this changed since Junior’s death?” I asked.

“We don’t, but if anything, they all pride themselves on being too stubborn to hide. They want us to think we’ll never get close enough to them. We’ll be careful.” He pointed to Shep.

“The harbor master?”

Shep nodded. “Yeah, Stan Ritchies is working until five, but I’m going to call him pretending to be a worker on the dock and basically have him walk right to me. Grab and go.”

“All these people are powerhouses. They all manage something vital.” JJ sighed.

“It’s how they got away with it for so long.” I squeezed his shoulder.

“Mason and JJ, the house is locked up. You two watch the kids. Pack everything and when we arrive, we have to be ready to bail.”

“Understood.” JJ and I had a system down for cleaning everything. Heather and Andrew were glad to help.

“I still can’t believe Gilly and his wife celebrated Christmas without their kids. Not even a missing persons report. Wonder what they told their grandparents.” JJ sneered. “Horrible.”

“Well, we’re almost done, and all of this will be over.” Gabe placed the tablet on the table.

I didn’t speak, just silently hoped that with the end of all this, all of us were in one piece.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

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### **Gabe**

I WAS SITTING on the bed, going over the final details, when the door to the attached bathroom opened and Mason stepped out, completely naked.

“Well, well, well, isn’t this a wonderful late Christmas gift.”

His bruises were fading but still on display. Anger fought with desire as I traveled the path of his body.

“We’re having sex, Gabe.” Mason walked over to the bed, got onto all fours, and crawled over to me.

“Demanding. I thought I was the one who went all caveman in the sex department.”

He pressed a finger to my lips. “I don’t know what tomorrow brings, so I want you to fuck me. Make me feel you when you’re not here.”

“Mason, I—”

“Don’t give me the ‘I’m too fragile’ speech. I know my body, Gabe. You need to trust me.”

He was right. “I do trust you.”

Mason inched away. “Unless you don’t want to. I know my body doesn’t look great right now and—”

“Do not finish that sentence. Mason, you’re gorgeous. Do I hate the marks they left on you? Yes. But when you walked out of that bathroom, my cock was standing at attention.”

He chuckled, and I was glad to see the storm behind his eyes clear away.

“I want this, Gabe. I want you.” He took my tablet and placed it on the bedside table.

I danced my fingers up his arm, loving how his breathing picked up. When I reached his chin, I pulled him closer until our mouths fused and my tongue dipped inside. The time for words were long past. I’d show Mason I trusted him and that I desperately wanted him.

I lay him on his back, following the motion with my body so I hovered over him. Mason gripped my tank top and was yanking at it.

“Okay, I think you want me naked.”

I sniggered when he nodded enthusiastically.

I tossed my shirt and boxers somewhere across the room and returned to Mason. His hands were all over the place, and his needy moans were telling a story.

“Hey.” I lifted myself up so I could see him better. “We’re not in a rush. I’m gonna fuck you long and hard, I promise.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.” I pecked his lips and then moved down his body, licking, sucking, and tenderly nibbling along his skin. By the time I reached his cock, it was dripping and hard as stone.

“I want to come with you inside me, Gabe, and I know that if you even breathe hard on my dick I’ll explode.”

A laugh burst out of me, and it took me a minute to get myself under control. When I glanced up he was wiping happy tears from his eyes.

“I’m gonna get you ready, baby.”

I spread his legs and lifted him just enough so that his pretty hole was in view.

“Fuck,” he hissed a second before I dragged my tongue over the sensitive area. “I won’t last, Gabe.”

I wasn’t letting up. There was no way I was hurting Mason so I lapped at his hole, pushed my tongue in, ignoring his pleas for me to fuck him. No, he was playing by my rules here.

Suddenly something hit my forehead. I jerked back and looked at the condom wrapper on the bedspread.

“Suit up,” Mason said, and I chuckled.

“So impatient.” Gently, I released his legs and snatched the condom.

His body was vibrating, and I swore he didn’t blink as he watched me roll it on.

“Ready?”

He curled his finger beckoning me. I kissed up his leg, over his groin, and belly, until I was face-to-face with the man who took my breath away.

As I slid inside Mason, nothing had ever felt better. I’d heard people say their soul mate was made for them and rolled my eyes at their ridiculous antics. But I got it now. Mason was made for me, and I was going to fight to live through tomorrow and every day so that I could feel this all the time.

“So good.” Mason’s neck arched, and I licked over his Adam’s apple as I thrust inside of him faster and faster.

His nails were cutting into my back, and I didn’t give a shit. I’d bleed every drop for this man’s pleasure.

“Gabe,” he shouted, and white stripes of come coated his stomach.

I plunged my tongue into his mouth, and he devoured my cries as I came.

“Holy shit,” I mumbled into his damp skin, loving how he laughed with so much ease.

“I’ll feel you for days.”

I lifted my head and met his shining eyes.

“I’ll come home to you, Mason. Tomorrow, the next day, and forever after that.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

I didn’t know if he believed me any more than I believed myself, but I’d do everything to return to him.

---

FINDING five vehicles was the trickiest part. We had a van and a car which we’d use. The other three, Angel, Shep, and Noel had gone out early in the morning to jack. By nine, we were all ready to leave the house.

“If anything happens—”

“I know.” Mason smiled. “We have plans B, C, and D.”

With one last kiss, I started the car and drove away. I couldn’t look in the rearview mirror, I needed to focus. I was responsible for getting Crispin, the leader of the fucked-up brigade. We’d have the others, and it would be a huge win, but we needed the head of the snake.

“Check in.” We each had transmitters and would be able to hear each other and speak.

Four voices responded, “Check.”

“Mason and JJ, you both need to check in too, so we know we’re all hearing each other.”

“Oh,” JJ said. “Will we be able to hear you all when you’re so far away?”

“Typically, no,” Noel answered. “But these are sort of like cell phones, high quality. Expensive, so don’t drop them in batter or the toilet. Like cells, reception could be an issue, but we can reconnect.”



“So not a transmitter or transceiver, then?” Mason snorted.

“Mason, can we maybe not worry about what these devices are called?” Noel was getting snippy, but it was in good fun.

“Sure, sure.” Mason chuckled. “These walkie-talkies are great.”

“I’m going to hurt you,” Noel joked, and the air felt lighter for a moment.

For the remainder of the ride we were all pretty quiet. The first to speak was Shep.

“I’m in position and waiting.”

We’d timed it so we were all reaching our targets around the same time.

Noel and Nick were next, followed by Angel.

Once Crispin’s house came into view, I gritted my teeth. “I’m on site.”

I grabbed the ball cap and placed sunglasses over my eyes before I got to the gate.

“Who are you?” security asked.

“I’m the masseuse, Mr. Broderick made an appointment.”

The man eyed me and looked in the back window. “Where’s your table?”

“Trunk.” *Fuck, don’t open the trunk.*

“Yeah, okay, go ahead.” He waved me on, and I sighed in relief. Crispin would be leaving in my trunk by the time any of his idiots knew he was gone. I’d deal with each of them later.

I drove to the carport, grabbed my duffel bag, and exited the car. The door opened, and a slender-looking man in a business suit opened the door.

“Good afternoon.” He smiled. “I’m Gerard, Mr. Broderick’s butler. Shall I show you to the room?”

“Hey, yeah, thanks.”

I followed through the kitchen and living room and up the stairs. We reached a dark-green door and Gerard opened it.

“You can set up in here, I’ll let Mr. Broderick know you’ve arrived.” He furrowed his brows. “Where’s your table?”

“I have clients who like to use their bed. I wanted to ask Mr. Broderick which he preferred.”

“Interesting. Very well, he’ll be in shortly.”

He closed the door behind himself, and I took in the room. Clearly the master bedroom. Ostentatious and very fitting of a man like Crispin.

I placed the bag on the bed, unzipped the side, and took the syringe out. Getting him out of here was going to be harder than I’d thought, but according to the building plans there was a dumbwaiter at the end of the hallway that led to the kitchen. As long as I could make it there without any issues before someone opened it, I’d be good since my car was right outside in the carport off from the kitchen.

*Fuck, this better go according to plan.*

After about ten minutes, I lost patience. I went to the door, gripped the knob, ready to open it and find someone to help me, when I realized it was locked.

“Hey!” I shouted and banged on the door. “Someone locked this.”

I threw my body at it, but it didn’t budge. A short time later, the lock clicked, and Gerard walked in. His expression was stern, and he handed me a small black envelope.

“For you.” He left but the door remained open.

I sliced the envelope open, and pulled out a cream-colored card and read:

*I rather like the games you play,*

*I think it will be a splendid day.*

*You’ve gathered up every player,*

*You, your brothers, and the mayor.*

*You overlooked just one thing,  
In this game of chess, I'm the king.  
At this point I'm no longer here,  
I've gathered my pawns and will disappear.  
Good game, Gabe, I bid you farewell,  
We'll meet again one day in Hell.  
Crispin.*

“Motherfucker.”

I grabbed my duffel and raced out the door, noticing the house was now empty of all people.

“Crispin figured it out,” I shouted into the transmitter. “He’s gone, he knew. Mason, JJ, get the kids and get out of the house. He’s coming for you!”

“Gabe?” Mason said. “What...” There was static, and the communication died.

“Fuck! Shep, Angel, Noel, Nick, you hear me?”

“What’s the call, Gabe?” Angel asked.

“Finish what we started here. I have to get to the house. I have to try and beat him there.”

“I’m coming with you.” Shep sounded like hellfire.

“Finish this, Shep. I’ll get there...I will.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

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### **Mason**

ONCE GABE and the others left, JJ whisked me off to the porch to enjoy coffee overlooking the water.

“It’s freezing.” I shivered.

“Pretend it’s not.”

Heather and Andrew had gone back to sleep when the brothers left, and I was glad. I really didn’t want them worrying and if they slept, time would go by faster for them.

“So why are you forcing me to die of hypothermia?” I sat on one of the deck chairs, bundled as much as I could while still being able to drink coffee.

“Things will get stressful soon, and I thought some peace and time together would be good.”

“*Mhmm.*” I sipped my coffee that was getting colder by the second. “Not buying it. You don’t want Heather and Andrew to hear, so spill.”

He sighed and I watched the misty vapors of his breath disappear in the icy wind.

“Mason, you’ve been through a lot in a short period of time.”

I’d thought about it. From the assault outside of Scheherazade, to being kidnapped by the brothers, then

kidnapped again and beaten and psychologically tortured. Yes, it was a lot.

“I know.”

“Most people wouldn’t be standing if one of the things that happened to you happened to them. But minus the few breaks, you’re putting on a good show.”

“I’ll fall apart later.”

“Mason.”

“What do you want me to say, JJ? I’m sorry I’m not a pessimistic puddle on the floor of the shower cradling a bottle of wine and hoping the drain sucks me down?”

“Wow.” JJ’s brows rose. “That was oddly specific.”

I cocked my head at my best friend and smiled. “The fact that I broke at all upsets me. Look, I know there is a hefty therapy bill in my future and I promise, when this is over I’m absolutely getting all the help I can. I don’t want demons living rent-free in my mind.”

“Check in.” I heard Gabe in the small earpiece and the others all answered.

JJ sat comfortably and opened his mouth to say something when Gabe spoke once more.

“Mason and JJ, you both need to check in too, so we know we’re all hearing each other.”

“Oh,” JJ said. “Will we be able to hear you all when you’re so far away?”

“Typically, no,” Noel answered. “But these are sort of like cell phones, high quality. Expensive, so don’t drop them in batter or the toilet. Like cells, reception could be an issue, but we can reconnect.”

I shot JJ a look. “So not a transmitter or transceiver, then?” I asked.

“Mason, can we maybe not worry about what these devices are called?” A sarcastic Noel was my favorite.

“Sure, sure.” I chuckled. “These walkie-talkies are great.”

“I’m going to hurt you,” Noel joked, and whatever heavy conversation JJ and I were having lifted.

After that it was quiet. JJ and I were freezing our butts off, so we went inside and started making some chili to put in the Crock-Pot. As soon as they all returned, they’d be hungry. We had to bolt once they did, but JJ was getting meals together so we could get far without stopping.

“That’ll be ready in a couple of hours. Let’s finish packing.” JJ turned the Crock-Pot dial to high, and I followed him out of the room.

“Nick packed up most of the equipment. Just one laptop left so we could see what was going on outside.” I tapped the finger pad to wake up the screen.

“Who is that?” There was a town car parked on the street, engine on.

JJ peeked over my shoulder. “Neighbor, likely, or someone is lost and pulled over. Come help me with the sheets. I have five sets left to fold and pack.”

“Yeah, okay.” I grabbed the laptop and joined JJ in the laundry room.

The car didn’t move, but I wasn’t seeing smoke coming from the tailpipe anymore.

“They shut the car off.”

“Huh?” JJ pulled the comforter out of the dryer.

“The town car.”

“Probably—”

Gabe’s voice crackled in my ear.

“Crispin figured it out,” Gabe shouted. “He’s gone, he knew. Mason, JJ, get the kids and get out of the house. He’s coming for you!”

“Gabe? What—”

Suddenly the power cut and the house was jolted into that eerie silence, when the hums of electricity hush and you can hear people breathing in the next room.

“Gabe?” I tapped the earpiece. “Shit.”

“Did he say get out?” JJ had dropped the comforter.

“Yes. Get Heather and Andrew, get them to the garage.”

“And what are you going to do?”

I stared at the town car on the road. “Make sure there’s no way they can get in while we get out.”

“Be quick, Mason.”

He rushed to get the kids while I moved to the front door. Every door and window was secure. I walked through the kitchen and grabbed the butcher’s knife out of the block.

I held the laptop open on my arm as I worked my way to the end of the house toward the door that led to the garage. Clearly, someone cut the power and used some sort of a jammer, but I remembered Nick telling Angel about a failsafe. Apparently jammers would work on the wireless systems but have very little effect on wired security cameras, so they were still working and had been synched directly to the laptop. Thank God Nick was an IT genius.

I was just beginning to agree that the town car had nothing to do with us when the door opened and a large man stood between me and the garage.

I gasped and stumbled away. I knew this man. He was one of the men who’d called me horrible things and had beaten me repeatedly.

“Hi, Princess.” He winked, and I dropped the laptop.

I turned to run, but someone else was there. I didn’t know this person but judging by his cruel grin, he wasn’t a friend.

“Let Mason through.”

The man moved, and Crispin came into view.

“Were you going to leave without shutting off the chili?” Crispin asked. “That’s how fires start.”

I held up the knife and pointed it at Crispin. “You shouldn’t have come here.”

He threw his head back and laughed. “Is that supposed to be threatening?” Crispin gestured to the man beside him, and he pulled out a gun. “Do you think you can stick me with that before Jagger’s bullet tears through you?”

“Mason!”

I spun and saw JJ, Heather, and Andrew behind the large man in the garage.

“Barney, please grab them, would you?” Crispin said.

“No!” As soon as Barney moved to grab them, I charged the two feet and sank the butcher’s knife into his back. “JJ, run, get them out of here.”

“Mason, I can’t.” He was crying. I could hear him, but I was on top of Barney as he struggled to get up.

“Get them out of here. Do it!”

He had mere seconds. I lifted my head and met his terrified eyes. Andrew was shaking, Heather’s sobs deafening.

“Please, JJ, go!”

He pulled on the kids’ arms, and they rushed into the car.

“Don’t let them leave!” Crispin shouted.

I stood and faced Jagger, his gun raised to shoot the vehicle.

I heard the screeching tires the same moment he pulled the trigger...the same moment my shoulder felt like it was on fire.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

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### **Gabe**

WHEN I TURNED onto the road, there was a town car outside the house, engine off. I parked in the neighbor's driveway, grabbed my gun from the glovebox, and moved quickly and quietly to the door.

How the fuck had they gotten in? It was slightly ajar. As I stepped in, I smelled chili and blood. I scanned the living room, but it was empty.

Crouching as I walked, I moved to the kitchen. Empty. I exited the kitchen and turned down the hallway, stopping in my tracks.

A large man lay in a pool of blood, a butcher's knife lodged in his back. A few feet from him, there was more blood and a trail leading toward the mudroom.

*Please be alive, Mason.*

I leaned against the wall and peeked inside. Mason was on the floor, some guy wrapping him up in a sheet while Crispin talked on the phone.

“What's the update?” He listened and when his profile came into view, the calm cool expression that he normally had was completely gone. “Barney's dead, and my insurance policy is bleeding out. With Stan probably dead too, I need to get out of the country.”

“Gabe?” JJ’s voice was in my ear. “Can you hear me, Gabe?” Whatever jammer they’d used had to be turned off in order for Crispin to make his phone call, which activated the earpieces again.

I couldn’t speak—they’d hear me. I tapped the earpiece, hoping he’d hear it.

“Good. Mason told us to run, we’re outside. We drove around the block...we couldn’t leave him. I know you’re in there. They can’t die in that house. We need to get Crispin to the senator’s. Shep said they’re waiting. They’ll dose them all as long as they have to until you arrive. Get him there.”

I tapped twice more and entered the mudroom.

“I’m not one for rhymes, Crispin, but how about roses are red, violets are blue, put the fucking phone away, or I’ll beat the living shit out of you.”

“That’s horrible poetry.” Mason coughed; he sounded awful, but I was relieved to hear his voice.

“Your plan was to always kill me, wasn’t it, Gabe?” Crispin slid his phone into his pocket.

“No, you don’t get to decide how you die.”

The man who’d been wrapping Mason aimed his gun at me, and Crispin chuckled.

“Looks like you don’t either.”

Behind the two men, I could see out the window. JJ was in view, and he was holding a large rock. He held up his other hand and counted off. One, two...

“That’s where you’re wrong, Crispin.” On three, JJ threw the rock, glass shattered, and it afforded me the perfect opportunity. I shot the man in the head, and he collapsed on top of Mason.

I couldn’t worry about that as I aimed my gun at Crispin.

“Get moving.” I stepped to the side and gestured with the gun.

“I got Mason, go finish this,” JJ shouted through the broken window.

Mason nodded to me and, with a gun pressed to Crispin’s back, I walked him to my car.

“Sit.” I opened the car door. With one hand I reached in the duffel and grabbed the syringe.

Crispin glanced at the needle and then met my gaze.

“People like me never die, Gabriel. I live in the nightmares of every person I touch. I’ll dwell in yours as well.”

I snorted. “No, your death will be what dreams are made of.” With that, I stabbed him with the syringe, injecting him with everything.

It took a moment, but he passed out. That would last until I got him to the senator’s.

---

THE SENATOR’S house wasn’t buzzing with the type of activity you’d assume it would be for the day before a party. If anything, it was sparse. My brothers’ vehicles were nowhere to be seen, but I knew they were inside.

I drove around back to where they did have their cars, and I killed the engine. There was no need at this point to wrap him up, so I gathered Crispin in my arms and brought him inside.

The kitchen was in disarray as if everyone had dropped what they were doing and run. Decorations hung partially on the walls confirmed that people had scattered.

The dining room was on the right. I entered, and the sight in front of me was what me and my brothers had worked hard for.

In every chair sat the rest of the people responsible for our sister’s brutal murder. For Heather’s and Andrew’s torment. For Mason’s parents’ slaughter, for our parents’ deaths. Every person was a monster, and today they’d be held accountable.

“How are they?” Shep asked from behind the harbor master.

“I had to go. Mason’s hurt but JJ has him, the kids are fine. I’d like to finish this so I can return to them. Unfortunately, that means we can’t take our time.”

The seat at the head of the table was the only vacant one. I dropped Crispin into it and stepped away.

“These two should be waking up very soon.” Noel gestured to the Gillys.

“Then we wait. Keep the others sedated.”

It took about ten minutes, but soon enough they started to arise.

Sabrina Gilly woke up first, blinking and disoriented. She tried to lift her arm only to meet resistance.

“What?”

“Hello, Mrs. Gilly.” I smiled and her eyes widened. “It should all be coming back to you now.” I motioned to Noel. “My brother, he brought you and your husband here. As soon as he’s awake, I’ll explain more.”

“Let me go this instant, you can’t...” She froze when she realized all the people who were in attendance.

“Friends of yours?” I tilted my head. “I’m sure you recognize most of them, if not all.”

Gilly lifted his head with a moan, and I waited until he was fully with us.

“You are all so dead.” His words were slightly slurred due to the drugs in his system.

“Not today, Gilly. But your future isn’t looking too bright.”

His head lobbed to the right, and his eyes locked in on Crispin at the head of the table. He slowly panned the room, his skin becoming paler and paler as he realized who was here.

“Allow me to explain.” I pointed toward Crispin. “He was running this shit show. You two were offering up your children

for entertainment, money, power, coupons?" I shrugged. "It doesn't matter, really. You're monsters."

"Where are my kids?" Sabrina shouted.

"Safe. For the first time in their lives, they are safe, happy, and taken care of. You'll never see them again." I motioned around the table with my finger. "Everyone dies today but you, Gilly. See, someone has to take the fall, and you're the lucky bastard."

"No one will believe you." He sneered.

"Oh, that's where you're wrong." Noel slapped the photos of our sister's murder onto the table in front of them. "This is just the beginning of the proof the mayor has in her possession. When we walk away from you today, the FBI will have files and files on you, this operation, all of it. And I've doctored the files enough so that as soon as they want someone to blame, your fingerprints will be over everything."

"I'll talk, I'm respected!"

"No." Shep slammed his fist on the table. "No one respected you, not even the deviants at this table. We made sure there wasn't a way you could talk your way out of this."

Angel stepped forward. "Every one of your victims will get their justice. Our sister will be at peace. Your torment is only beginning."

Sabrina started sobbing, obviously realizing there was nothing she could do.

"Here's how it will happen. Gilly, you'll come with us. A tragic fire will engulf this house and all inside of it. All of you were having a meeting about your next event that was set to take place tomorrow." I motioned to the chandelier. "These houses aren't made how they used to be, faulty wiring and all."

"Please," she begged.

Noel gripped her hair and pulled her head back. "My sister begged, Mason begged, your fucking children begged. You did nothing. Beg all you want, it changes nothing."

I nodded to Angel and he moved closer to Gilly with a syringe. “Once you wake up, your nightmare begins.” Angel injected Gilly before he could protest.

“Make sure no one is tied down. Inject them once more, and let’s get out of here,” I ordered.

Sabrina screamed when Noel held her arm, needle an inch from skin. He leaned in and said, “Mothers are supposed to protect their children with their lives. You failed them at every turn. I think you might be the worst out of everyone here. Enjoy Hell.” Then he stuck her.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

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### **Mason**

THE BULLET WENT clean through my shoulder. I was lucky, the doctor told me, as shoulder wounds were far more dangerous than the movies led people to believe. He wanted me to stay overnight, but I couldn't. I sneaked as many medical supplies and painkillers as I could.

As soon as the doctor left, I met JJ in the parking lot, and he drove us to the location we'd been instructed to go to.

"The rental?" I asked JJ.

"It wasn't easy. Shep told me to wrap the bodies best I could, and he'd take care of everything. I didn't ask any questions."

"Probably for the best."

Heather and Andrew were in the back seat, so quiet.

"Hey, you two."

"Hi." Andrew gave me a tiny smile. "Do you guys know what's going on? Did Gabe and the others take care of everything?"

"I'm sure we'll find out soon." I was right.

The location we were driving to was almost four hours away—another rental, but this one deep in the woods.

JJ helped me get comfortable in a recliner, and once I was settled I turned on the television. Nothing had hit nationally, so I asked for the tablet.

“News outlets may not all be in the loop yet.” I searched the local news of the area.

*“More fire and more devastation in this once quiet town. We’re learning the senator was having a gathering when the fire broke out, but details are sketchy at this time. I’ve seen a total of four bodies being removed from the residence, none of them survived. I’ll have more news as it unfolds.”*

“Guess that answers your question huh?”

“Not really.” Andrew sighed. “I thought my dad was going to go to jail and then...you know.”

“You heard the reporter; they don’t have a lot of information. It’s too new.”

I knew he wasn’t going to rest easy until his father was dead, and the threat of him finding them was over.

“I just heard from Shep.” JJ shut the front door with the last of the luggage. “Angel is staying behind to uphold the deal with Gilly. The others are on their way here.”

“And the proof, files, all of it?”

JJ smiled. “Nick made sure the mayor and FBI got everything. Elaine spoke with the chief, who wasn’t in on any of this, and Gilly was arrested. He’s making a stink, saying he was framed, yadda-yadda, but the proof is too much.”

I looked at Andrew and Heather, and for the first time I saw relief.

It was the middle of the night by the time Gabe, Shep, Nick, and Noel arrived. None of us could sleep...well, okay, I did—thanks to the painkillers I was on.

That night we all slept in the living room. I hadn’t let Gabe go since he returned, and it seemed nobody wanted to venture far.



The only thing left was to handle Gilly; then we could all begin to heal. That might be harder to do than seek revenge. When the life you've led so long is gone, how do you restart?

At least we all had each other, and we'd figure it out together.

---

EIGHT DAYS LATER, Gilly was found hanging in his cell. Ruled a suicide, it was over.

Angel arrived, and Shep made sure to make a huge dinner. As we gathered around the table, eating amazing food, the strain that had been a permanent fixture on everyone's faces, was gone. Hope had settled in.

"I don't understand something," JJ said once the kids had gone to bed and we were hanging out in the living room.

"What's that?" Shep smiled as he ran his fingers through JJ's hair.

"It wasn't human trafficking in the sense that they were selling people and bringing them from all over the world. So what exactly was this?"

"While Nick and I were organizing the files, we found a lot of trails. Crispin would bring people to The Shed to engage in all the hellish fantasies they desired. They'd pay with whatever was needed. Money, rigged elections, guns, drugs," Noel answered. "Merchandise came through the harbor, so Stan Ritchies was vital to the operation. Hank Wilson, the superintendent, made sure Heather's and Andrew's grades never slipped, that their absences were explainable. And there were a couple of other children we found out had visited The Shed. I haven't located them."

"Seems they got tired of making kids disappear, so Gilly offered his own." Nick grimaced. "For that the Gillys received paid vacations, new cars, their house paid off."

"I'm not sure I want to know any more." JJ rubbed his eyes. "I'm going to bed."

“What happens now? With us, with life?” I asked once everyone was about to leave the room.

“Whatever we want.” Angel shrugged. “But I gotta be honest, we’re a pretty kickass team. There’s money in vengeance. Maybe we should consider that.”

He walked down the hall, and none of us moved.

“Is he serious?” I snorted. “I’m not sure my body could survive a business in vengeance, Gabe.”

Gabe chuckled and wrapped me in his arms, tenderly. “Angel is always serious.”

That night the sounds of snow falling against the house put me to sleep. Warm and safe in Gabe’s arms, I dreamed of hope, of love, and a future.

I didn’t know what that future looked like but it wouldn’t be lonely. It would have more people in it than I generally liked, but they weren’t just any people, they were my family.

# EPILOGUE

## *ONE YEAR LATER*

### **Gabe**

IT TOOK A YEAR, a long stressful year, to finally breathe. Elaine had come through for us, had made sure all charges or suspicions about my brothers and me being involved in any killings were squashed. Some of the wives of the men we captured got away, and the FBI had warrants out for their arrests. Most had been caught. We were now free to truly move on.

Thanks to Mason, we all had a home. He'd bought a plot of land and we'd built a large house. One where we were together but not on top of each other.

We'd very much wanted Heather and Andrew to stay, but Elaine had explained that they needed a stable life. There was no chance we would make them wards of the state, so Noel had tracked down an aunt. She had left home at sixteen and didn't speak to her family anymore. She'd made a life for herself and when she'd been notified about her niece and nephew and what they'd endured at the hands of her brother, she'd come running.

We still talked to them, and from what I was told they were in therapy and happy. That was all any of us had ever wanted for them.

Elaine had been elected officially, and the town was returning to the wonderful place it once was. She'd asked us to return and to help rebuild it, but we were set on moving on. We'd stayed there to balance the scales, but all the good memories we made there were overshadowed by the bad.

Our home was clear on the other side of the country, where nobody knew us, and that was exactly how I liked it.

JJ's parents had left town too, once they'd learned of all the corruption and horrors so many people they loved had gone through. While they weren't living near us, they were a little over an hour away, and they had pretty much decided we were all their sons. It was nice to feel like I had parents again.

Angel was serious about seeking vengeance for those unable to find justice and it wasn't a bad idea, but we voted and while the majority said yes, we all agreed to take our time and make it right.

Shep and JJ were working on whatever it was they were. They had a lot of ups and downs, and I did my utmost to stay the hell out of it. Mason did too.

Mason did what he'd promised and got help. A lot of it. In the beginning, he was with a therapist every day. I sat in on a few sessions, mostly talking about the night I saved him from being raped and how that was the foundation our relationship was built on. I still didn't know if that was a good thing.

Mason and I...were solid. I was currently sitting on a float in the indoor pool we had. It was chilly in December but not too bad where we lived. I didn't feel like freezing my nuts off, so I was inside.

Mason was swimming laps as I floated and got in his way.

"You're making this difficult," he said once he popped up.

"Then come float with me and do your exercise later." I wagged my brows. "I'll blow you."

He snorted. "I'm covered in chlorine...*eww*."

"I'm only not arguing with you because Heather, Andrew, and their Aunt Tessa will be here soon but mark my words,

Mason Daws, I'm sucking you dry tonight."

His smile was dangerous. I should've tried to paddle away as he swam up to me, but I was also addicted and desperately in love with the man.

"I'll hold you to that, Gabriel Saint." Then he dunked under the water and the next second I was flipped.

"You're evil," I sputtered, wiping water from my face.

He wrapped his arms around my neck and tenderly kissed me.

"I'm the right amount of everything. That's what my therapist said."

"Well, she's right."

I was kissing him breathless when JJ's shouts echoed through the entire house.

"They're here, they're here!"

Mason chuckled. "Come on, let's ring in this new year with our entire family."

We walked hand in hand out of the pool area and into our future.

**THE END**

## CLOSING NOTE

Thank you for reading Slay Ride and entering the dark world the Saint inhabit. If you want to find some free short stories and exclusive material join my Facebook reader's group:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/DavidsonKingsCourt/>

Also, keep up with my new releases and info on book, translations, audios, and more by joining my newsletter:

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Just For Tonight

The Button Man



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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Davidson King always had a hope that someday her daydreams would become real-life stories. As a child, you would often find her in her own world, thinking up the most insane situations. It may have taken her awhile, but she made her dream come true with her first published work, *Snow Falling*.

She managed to wrangle herself a husband who matched her crazy and they hatched three wonderful children.

If you were to ask her what gave her the courage to finally publish, she'd tell you it was her amazing family and friends. Support is vital in all things and when you're afraid of your dreams, it will be your cheering section that will lift you up.

Check out my Linktree for all links:

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