

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

HELEN  
HARDT

A BELLAMY BROTHERS NOVEL

Sweet  
SIN

# SWEET SIN

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BELLAMY BROTHERS

BOOK 2

HELEN HARDT



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**SWEET SIN**  
BELLAMY BROTHERS TWO

**Helen Hardt**

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*For my BRU babes.*



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“Helen Hardt...is a master story teller.”

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## PROLOGUE

### FALCON

**E**ight years earlier...

*Dad isn't particularly happy with my plan to join the Navy right out of college. He insisted I build my house on the property, and I did, but the military has always been my dream. My buddy and I have been talking about it since our middle school days. Leif Ramsey and I went to separate colleges, but we stayed in touch, spent our summers together, chasing women and getting drunk. Talking about what we'd do once we joined up.*

*In two weeks, Mom and I leave for a wine tour of France and Italy. Then, once I'm back, Leif and I are leaving for officer training.*

*We both want to be Navy SEALs.*

*We're both crack shots, but even Leif admits I'm better than he is.*

*My brother Hawk is a close second.*

*We like to practice on the edge of the Bellamy property, where the brush of Texas forest meets our ranch land. Hunters come for the mule deer.*



*An old barn sits right on the edge of our property, built by my grandfather—hell, maybe his grandfather—years and years ago.*

*We never go in the barn. It should probably be condemned. But there's a clearing about a quarter mile away that's excellent for target practice.*

*Hawk sets up the targets while I load my pistol.*

*The clouds above us are rolling, and thunder cracks in the distance.*

*Once the targets are set, Hawk returns, also looking at the sky. "I don't know, Falcon. Looks like we might get rained on."*

*"So then we get wet."*

*I line up my target, aim, shoot three bullets in a row dead center.*

*"You're good," Hawk says. "But not as good as I am."*

*He aims, shoots three bullets the same as me, right dead center of his own target.*

*"I always beat you in contests," I say.*

*"Yeah? Nothing says I can't get better."*

*Hawk is three years younger than I am, just finished his freshman year of college. I'm not quite ready for him to be as good as I am at anything, but it's not like I have a fucking choice.*

*We continue our practice, until lightning strikes close, and thunder cracks right over our heads.*

*And then the rains come.*

*As if from nowhere, water falls from the sky, drenching us.*

*“Fuck.”*

*“I better get those targets,” he says.*

*“Leave them. The winds are picking up. This isn’t going to be any run-of-the-mill Texas rainstorm.”*

*“We’re pretty far from shelter.”*

*“There’s that old barn. We can go there.”*

*We set into a run, reaching the old barn in just a few minutes. The door is latched, which is odd.*

*“Who could have done that?” I ask Hawk once we’re inside, the rain beating like a drum on the old roof.*

*I look around. Leaks are everywhere.*

*“Damn,” Hawk says. “This is one hell of a storm.”*

*“Yeah, I wish we had a tarp.” I walk around, avoiding the leaks, looking for a dry place where we can wait out the storm. I shuffle my feet over the dirt floor, and when I finally find a place that’s pretty much dry, I shuffle my feet again.*

*“Damn. What’s this?”*

*Beneath my shoe is a tiny streak of white. I kneel, take a closer look.*

*Hawk comes up behind me. “Looks like powdered sugar or something.”*

*I look around. “Yeah...which means it’s not powdered sugar.”*

*Hawk sits down beside me. "The dirt is a little bit less compact here as well. What the fuck?"*

*"We don't have any shovels," I say.*

*"Not sure we need them. This dirt is pretty loose." Hawk begins shoveling the dirt away with his hands.*

*I join him, and once we get down about a foot, it becomes clear what that white powder was.*

*There's a bag of it, and it's got a tear in it.*

*"I'll be god damned," Hawk says.*

*Several bags lie underneath the ripped one.*

*"Is this what I think it is?" Hawk asks.*

*"Looks like cocaine to me, not that I'd know." I take a little bit of the powder on my finger, run it across my tongue.*

*"Sure isn't powdered sugar. It's bitter as shit." I spit it out.*

*"How the hell did it get here? On our property?"*

*"I don't have a clue. But I'm betting I know who does."*

*Hawk raises his eyebrows? "Eagle? No. I know he's a little rebel. Youngest kid syndrome and all. But he's not into drugs, Falcon. None of us have ever been into that."*

*"One way to find out," I say. "We bring him the fuck out here."*

*Hawk points to the stash. "What do we do with this in the meantime?"*

*"We get it the hell off our property for sure."*

*"I don't want to touch the stuff."*

*“You think I do? But what happens if some hunter is out here looking for shelter and finds this?”*

*He nods. “Yeah, you’re right. What do we do? Take it home and flush it?”*

*“Or take it to the cops.”*

*“Falcon...”*

*I shake my head. “Yeah, I know. If Eagle has anything to do with it, then we’re risking him getting arrested.”*

*Hawk shakes his head. “I still say Eagle has nothing to do with this. We’re close to the border here. Could be some mule found the spot and thought it would be a good place for a dead drop.”*

*“I suppose.”*

*“Which means... Someone will come back here looking for these damned drugs.”*

*“Shit.” I’m the oldest Bellamy kid. I’ve always taken care of my brothers and sisters. Always looked out for them, made sure no one gave them any shit. What do I do now?*

*“I say we get out of here. We’ll be in a lot more trouble if someone finds it on this property.”*

*I nod. “Yeah. We’ll get rid of it.”*

*I’m not sure it’s the right thing to do. I’m not sure of anything right now.*

*“You think we can take it all with us once we leave here?”*

*“I don’t know. Looks like there’s ten bags here at least. Each one weighs about...” I hold in my hands. “This has got to be three pounds.”*

*“We’ve got our packs. If we leave the targets out there, we can carry it all.”*

*I nod again.*

*I’m glad we found it, especially if our brother is involved.*

*But thirty pounds of coke on our property? This isn’t going to lead to anything good.*

*In slow motion, I see my future Navy career grinding to a halt.*

## FALCON

Savannah jerks against me in the hot tub, opening her eyes, the water swishing around us.

“You okay, Vannah?”

“Yeah. I’m fine. I thought I heard something.”

“Probably just the dogs playing.”

“Right. It’s not like I could hear anything over the whirring of the jets anyway.”

She snuggles back into my shoulder and I hold her against me, loving the touch of her flesh on mine, until—

She shoots her eyes open when Sydney barks.

“She’s barking, Falcon.”

“They’re just playing.”

“Right...”

But it’s not a playful bark. It’s—

I jerk away from her, standing.

You learn to sense things on the inside. You can be alone, your eyes closed, yet you know when someone is near.

Someone who means you harm. It's a sixth sense, and you can't make it in prison without it.

And now? I feel it in my fucking bones—that ache in your marrow that helped our cavemen ancestors survive in the wilderness.

Someone's here for me. My guns are inside the house in a safe. I'm not supposed to have firearms as a parolee, but that doesn't matter in this moment. How the fuck do I get there, though?

How the fuck do I protect Savannah?

I glance to the only part of the pool house that has a lock—the changing room. She'll be safe there, for now at least.

“Savannah,” I say as quietly as I can over the hot tub. “See that door by the bar? It goes to the changing room. You go over there, slowly, close the door, and lock it.”

“What?” she gasps.

“Do as I say.”

“Falcon!”

“Damn it, Savannah. Do it now.”

She trembles as she steps out of the hot tub, walks to the bar, looking only straight ahead. She opens the door and closes it behind her.

*Please remember to lock the deadbolt.* I'm too far away to hear it click over the noise.

I exit the tub quietly, grab my jeans and stumble into them, leaving the rest. I've got only my fists and my wits to protect

Vannah, and I don't need the hindrance of clothes.

My hair is dripping over my shoulders as I leave the pool area, walk into my backyard.

Sammy runs toward me, but I have no choice but to shoo him away. Sydney stands by the fence, barking like a menace. She's a mother protecting her pup, and right now that's working in my favor.

Then I see them. Two muscled men—one blond and one dark-haired, both dressed in black—enter the backyard, both armed with pistols.

I draw in a breath, will my beating heart to slow. I've faced armed men—though not with firearms—in the big house, and I managed to take them out. The trick is pull courage out of your gut and act more menacing than they are.

“What the fuck do you think you're doing here?” I snarl.

I'm composed, ready to strike at the two men. The dark-haired one points his gun at Sydney, who's still barking.

“Don't you fucking dare,” I say through clenched teeth, my hands balled into fists. “Who the fuck are you? Who sent you?”

“Nobody you know,” the blond says.

“Bullshit.” I walk closer, steeling myself. “Was it Bruno? Fletcher? It's got to be somebody from the inside. Somebody I pissed off. Somebody I put in their place. Now you've come to take it out of me.”



“We’ve got no beef with you.” From the blond again.  
“Quit threatening the dog, Abel.”

“Fine.” Abel moves his gun from Sydney back to me. He gestures to the pool house and then spits. “We’re here for *her*.”

## SAVANNAH

I turn the deadbolt and flip the light switch on.

It's a large dressing area with shelves holding fluffy towels. There's also a closet which I presume holds swimming garments and maybe robes. I don't dare open the door to check. I'm too frightened.

I knew something was off. Though I'm closed in, I still hear Sydney barking.

*Falcon? Where are you?*

But he told me to stay here.

And stay here I will.

It's not the first time I've had to cower down, fear for my life. But it's the first time I've had to do so unarmed.

And that scares the hell out of me.

Sydney's still barking, and then Falcon's voice—loud, dark, and menacing.

“What the fuck do you think you're doing here?”

I hear nothing after that.

I'm not sure how I heard Falcon over the sound of the tub and behind this locked door, but I've been in situations before where my senses have been heightened.

Where I've feared for my very life.

But now all I hear is my own heart pounding in my ears.

Falcon is out there. Alone. No weapon. Only a mother dog and her pup to protect him.

He had no weapons in prison, and no dogs either.

Those facts should relieve me, but whoever is here is most likely armed.

I dart my gaze around the changing room. What can I use for a weapon if need be? The wooden benches are secure, no loose boards. I draw in a breath, push my fear to the side, and open the closet. A hanging rod holds hangers and robes, but the hangers are all plastic. With a wire hanger, I could fashion some kind of device to at least poke an eye out, but plastic hangers give me nothing.

The changing room has separate enclosed stalls with hooks for clothes. I grasp one of the metal hooks. It's bolted solidly in place. I check each one in each stall. No luck. Nothing in the shower, either.

The lockers are equipped with combination locks. I grab one, but what can I do with it? I check each locker, but they're all empty. Not even a lone sock to make a slock—a lock you put inside a sock and swing at a target. You'd think I learned this trick from a parolee.

I didn't.

I've known about slocks since I was a kid, unfortunately.

Damn!

I hate feeling helpless!

I was determined to never feel this way again.

Then I gasp and run into one of the stalls.

An oblong mirror is attached to the back wall of each stall. I curl my fingers around the metal lock in my hand and then hurl it at the mirror.

The glass shatters with a *crash*, and I turn quickly, covering my face with my arms to avoid any flying fragments.

I turn back around. Only a few fragments are large enough to use as weapons. I grab a towel from one of the shelves and place the fragments on it.

Then I repeat the process with the mirrors in the other two stalls.

I end up with five fragments in triangle shapes that could cause significant damage if aimed right.

I sigh. I'll cut the hell out of my hands trying, though. I quickly grab another towel, and using the sharpest of the fragments very carefully, I rip through the towel and tear it into strips, which I wrap around both my hands. My dexterity will be compromised, but at least I have a better shot at not bleeding to death.

I wrap the fragments in the other towel and sit by the door.

And I wait.

## FALCON

**W** e're here for her.

The words ring in my mind as I try to make sense of them. Her? Savannah? What the hell?

But I don't have time to dwell on their meaning.

"Her *who*?" I growl.

"You know damned well." Blond hair says with a lascivious grin. "Your little slut. Savannah Gallo."

Rage torches the back of my neck. "She's not going anywhere with you."

"I got a fucking piece trained on you that says differently, friend." Abel spits on the grass.

Chills slither up my spine, but I stand firm. "Then you'd better be ready to fucking use it."

"You've got balls," the blond says.

"I'm going to take him out, Carlo." Abel spits again.

"Shut the fuck up." From Carlo, apparently. "We have our orders. We take the woman, and no one else gets hurt."

Sydney has finally stopped barking and has herded Sammy to a corner in the yard.

Good, two fewer things to worry about.

But my main worry is Savannah, and if something happens to me, they *will* get to her eventually. They can shoot the lock off the fucking door to the changing room.

Which will *not* happen on my watch.

“The two of you get the hell out of here,” I grit out. “I’ve already tripped an alarm from the pool house. The cops’ll be here any minute.”

“You’re bluffing,” Abel says.

I stare him straight in his bloodshot eyes. “You think? Do you even know who the fuck I am?”

“Do you think we care?” Blondie says.

“You should.” I gaze at the knuckle tats on my right fist. “I’ve seen the inside, and I’ve fended off scarier beasts than the two of you.”

Carlo glares at me. “You’re Falcon Bellamy.”

“Thought you said you didn’t care?” I try to ignore the racing of my pulse.

On the inside, all that matters is how you project. What’s going on inside your body doesn’t mean a damned thing.

They called me Savage, and I became Savage, even when I was as scared as a fucking rabbit being chased by wolves.

“I don’t.” Carlo meets my gaze. “We’re here for the Gallo woman. And sure, we’re not supposed to hurt anyone along the way...but Abel, here...he doesn’t like to follow orders.”

“What do you want with her?” I demand.

“None of your fucking business.” From Abel.

“I’m thinking it is, if you want me to call off the cops.”

“The cops ain’t coming,” Abel says. “You think we’re a couple of morons?”

“You really don’t want me to answer that,” I say, my voice calm with no cracks.

They won’t get anywhere near Savannah. Not while I’m alive.

And I plan to fucking stay alive. A couple assholes like these two won’t be the end of Falcon Bellamy.

Not in this lifetime. I’ve faced worse. A hell of a lot worse.

Of course, none of them had guns.

The blond, Carlo, seems to be the leader of the two. Abel looks like he may be a few bricks shy of a load.

Which makes him way more dangerous.

If I take him out, I can reason with Carlo—at least long enough to disarm him.

But how?

A distraction. That’s what I need. But what? They’re right. I *am* bluffing. The cops aren’t coming, and my house is too far

away from any of my siblings' homes. No one will hear me if I yell for help.

Hell, no one will even hear a gunshot.

Except for Vannah. She'll hear it.

Fuck, she's got to be scared out of her mind. I wish I could be her shield, that I could wave a fucking wand and get her far away from here, somewhere safe.

But I've done all I can. I've sequestered her away in the only locked room in the pool area.

What the hell do these assholes want with her? They'll take her over my dead body, but maybe they don't need to know that.

Maybe I should try a different strategy.

"Say I let you take the girl." The words are bitter on my tongue. "What's in it for me?"

"Not getting your head blown off." Abel spits for the third time.

I don't dare turn my back on them—though I'm tempted, so they can see the word Savage tattooed over my back.

I'll have to show them just how savage I am another way.

"I didn't ask you." I turn to Carlo. "What's in it for me?"

"Nothing." He shrugs. "We're going to get her one way or the other. I'll say it again. I got no beef with you, but Savannah Gallo is coming with us. Whether you're a help or a hindrance is up to you."



Fuck. A distraction. A diversion. What the hell can I use?

I gaze around my back yard.

My back yard that's foreign to me. Once the house was finished, I was carted off to prison. I never got to live here.

The lawn is lush and green and rolls far past the fenced in area that keeps the dogs from running off. A network of stone pathways meanders through the range, and black wrought iron lampposts surround the perimeter.

If I could get to one, pull it out of the ground...

But even if I could get there, I don't have that kind of muscle.

I stand rock solid, forcing myself to stay immune from anything that might cause me to move. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Sydney and the pup. Sydney's ears perk up.

She's going to—

Yep. A shrill bark.

Abel jerks.

It's the diversion I need, and I don't think. With Carlo's attention off me, I spring, lunging at Abel and disarming him with an elbow to his ribs and a rough squeeze to his right wrist. I grab his piece, and in a flash I've got him in a headlock with the nose of his pistol pointing at his neck.

Carlo's gun is still trained on my head.

"Back off, or your buddy gets it," I growl.

"You think I care?"

“Fuck you, Carlo,” Abel says, his voice raspy.

“You don’t talk,” I say, my voice projecting calmness, “or I blow your fucking head off, you bastard.”

Carlo refocuses his aim. “Listen, friend.”

“Do I look like a friend to you? I’m your worst nightmare.”

My heart is hammering against my sternum, so hard that this halfwit I’m holding against me can probably feel it. But no doubt his own heart is pounding. I’ve got a gun on him.

His pal’s got a gun on me.

But I can move quickly. Abel here will be dead before I am.

“You tell me what’s going on,” I say through clenched teeth, “Or I swear to God, Abel here is dead.”

“For fuck’s sake, Carlo,” Abel grits out.

“If you don’t know why we want her,” Carlo says, “it ain’t my job to tell you.”

Damn.

I wish I’d gotten that information from Lance at the tattoo shop. These two have something on Savannah, and I aim to find out what it is.

“I think it is, or you can explain to your boss why your partner’s dead, why *I’m* dead, and why you came back without the woman.”

“You think I’m stupid? I know she’s here. She’s locked up somewhere in the pool house. You kill him, I kill you, and I find her. End of story.”

He’s right at that. Savannah’s locked inside the changing room with no weapons. Hell, with no clothes. She’ll find a robe in there, probably put it on. But still, she’s unarmed.

Does she even know how to use a weapon?

So much I don’t know.

The woman’s a parole officer. She’s one of the good guys. So why the hell do these people want her?

I knew there was something I needed to find out about her. That’s why I went to Lance. On the inside, you learn to trust your intuition. There’s something about Savannah... Nothing bad, but these guys are after her for a reason.

Carlo takes a step forward.

“I don’t think so,” I say. “You keep your distance.”

“Just give me the girl, and Abel and I will be on our way.”

“At the risk of repeating myself, she’s not going anywhere with you.”

I want to kill this guy, and I may. I’ll do it to protect Savannah. I may die myself.

Except I won’t.

This is *not* how Savage’s story ends.

I didn’t get out of the joint and save my sister’s life just to have my own life cut short by a couple junior grade hitmen.

Raven may need more of my bone marrow, and if I'm dead...

I won't be. It's that simple. I need to live.

The thought of Raven draws my attention to the ache in my hip.

I steady myself. No time to think about that. Right now, my goal is to stay alive and keep Savannah safe.

"Ask your little girlfriend," Carlo says. "Ask her about the Bianchis."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Savannah Gallo. She's a member of the Bianchi crime family."

I hold myself steady, the gun still trained against Abel's head. I won't show my surprise.

"You're full of it," I say.

"What? You think just because she works for the law, she can't be a member of a crime family?"

"Her name is Gallo, asshole. She's not a Bianchi." The inside of my head starts to pound, as if my skull is launching cannonballs into my brain. "And even if she *is* a member of the family, that doesn't mean she's a criminal herself. In fact, I know she's not."

Carlo shakes his head, rolls his eyes, but I can tell he's getting tired. "None of this matters. What you think doesn't matter. We're here for her, and we don't aim to go back empty-handed."

“You get the fuck out of here.” I pause a moment. “Or your friend will no longer have a brain. Not that the one he has is anything to write home about.”

“Damn it,” Carlo draws in a breath. “You just don’t know what’s good for you, do you, Bellamy?”

“You know,” I say thoughtfully. “I don’t think you’ve seen the inside of a cell. You’d have a look about you if you had. But you’re headed there, and you’re mighty pretty.”

Carlo’s eyes widen. Only slightly, but I notice. You learn to notice every extraneous detail on the inside. Especially when you’re up against someone who’s an actual threat.

“But your friend here?” I nudge the gun into Abel’s temple. “I’m betting he’s seen the inside of a cell. Us ex-cons, we know how to recognize each other. But you didn’t recognize me, did you Blondie?”

“Just give us the girl.”

Fuck...

The door to the pool house is open. I see Savannah... Wearing a robe... She slinks out of the door to the changing room. She’s quiet, and they won’t hear her over the whir of the hot tub motor.

But Sydney and Sammy...

They will hear.

Will Sydney run to her new mistress? Or will she protect her pup?

She's known her pup longer. *Come on, girl. You stay with your pup.*

So far she hasn't moved. Good dog.

Savannah's body is wrapped in a lush terrycloth robe. It will slow her movements. But I can't blame her. She's naked underneath, and I sure as hell don't want these two degenerates seeing her body.

Swaths of terrycloth are wrapped around her palms.

She's holding something. Trying not to cut herself.

*Damn it, Vannah... Go back inside...*

But my subliminal message doesn't get to her. So now it's more important than ever that I keep Carlo trained on me.

"What'll it take to get you out of here?" I say.

"You know what it'll take. The girl."

I tighten Abel's headlock. "She's not on the table. But if you know who I am, you know I've got money."

"Do you think I need money?" He holds up his left hand that sports a gold watch. "I'm paid very handsomely by the Bianchi family."

"Yeah? The money I've got is clean. I'll even let you take Abel here with you. The two of you can take off, start a new life somewhere."

Carlo furrows his brow. "I don't think so."

I'm pretty sure Abel can see Vannah, but so far he hasn't made that clear. Maybe he's nearsighted. Or maybe he's afraid

of my gun poking into his head. Just to be sure, I whisper in his ear. “Don’t you fucking say a word, or the last thing you’ll see is your brains hitting the ground with a splat.”

He tenses against me.

Yeah, he sees her. And he’s human. He has a self-preservation instinct. He doesn’t want to die. Not here, and not today.

Vannah has inched forward. She’s almost to the screen door that surrounds the pool.

Sydney’s still in the corner of the yard with her pup. If I could hear over the hot tub, I’m sure I could hear a low growl coming from her.

*Stay. Good dog. Stay.*

Now my job is to keep Carlo occupied. Keep him talking. Don’t let him turn around for anything.

My guess is they’re supposed to bring Savannah in alive, but I can’t take that chance. And I sure as hell don’t want her going off with the two of them anyway.

“You tell me what you want with her.”

“It’s none of your goddamned business.”

“I’ve got two million in cash in the house. It’s yours. But you have to leave quietly.”

Savannah’s managed to get out the screen door now, closing it lightly behind her.

Damn... The dogs.

So far they're still sitting quietly. Sydney's a rescue. She's probably had to hide and cower in corners to stay safe. She has good instinct. At least I hope she does.

Savannah's taking silent steps toward Carlo.

"It's a lot of fucking money, right Abel?" I say.

Abel says nothing. Just nods his head slightly.

"Don't move again," I warn. "Next time you do, you'll meet your maker."

He goes rigid, and his legs start to give out. But I hold fast to his neck. He's probably pissing himself, leaking on me.

I've had worse on me.

Savannah's walking toward Carlo, and now I can see. She's got something in her hand. Something shiny.

I don't know what the hell it is, but—

"Fuck," I grit out, as Sydney runs toward her, barking.



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**SAVANNAH**

The blond man is about five feet away from me when Sydney barks and races toward me.

He turns, and I have no choice.

I lunge at him, and I plunge the sharp piece of glass into his chest.

He cries out as he falls to the ground with me on top of him.

The gun. Where's the gun?

Did it fall to the ground? I didn't hear a sound, but all I can think about is the glass embedded in his chest.

I pull it out and plunge it back in a different spot.

The squish and rip of his tissue, the quick give under the sharp edge of the glass. While humans can overcome so much, our bodies are oddly fragile... I can do significant damage with a piece of broken glass, and wrath nudges my neck.

Wrath...

My absent brother.

My dead brother.

For every other person I've lost to people like these two.

This man will pay the price.

I pull the glass out of his chest and drive it into the exposed flesh of his neck.

Blood squirts out—red and viscous—and I inhale the metallic scent of death.

“Vannah, stop!”

But I pull out the glass again, ready to plunge it back into this man's flesh.

A sliver of recognition flows through me.

I know this man. Blond hair, blue eyes...tall...

I've seen him before...

Strong hands grip my shoulders, pull me off.

“Vannah, stop it.”

“No! No! He deserves what he gets!”

“Vannah, please...”

The voice—deep and soothing—resonates with me. Calms me.

Except I don't want to be calm. I want to take this fucker out. If I take him out, maybe...just maybe...

“Vannah!”

My name is like nails spewing from his mouth. From Falcon's mouth.

He's harsh...but he gets through this time.

I swallow as I regard the havoc I've wrought. The blood...

"Where's the other one?" I demand, my voice shaking.

"Unconscious. I clocked him in the head with the pistol. This one's going to need an ambulance."

I look down at my right hand. The terrycloth is soaked with blood. Fragments of glass are stuck on the towel, on my fingers, my robe. "What have I done?"

"What you had to do." He turns me gently to face him. "Why did they want you, Savannah? What the hell have you done?"

I panic then. My breath gets caught in my throat, my skin goes cold. My chest hurts. So tight, my neck is tight too. My throat constricts. I try to swallow, but I can't.

"Can't... Can't..."

"What, Savannah? Tell me."

"Can't... Breathe..."

Sydney stands over the blond man... She licks at his wounds, growling.

"He needs a fucking ambulance. You got his carotid. Here, take off your robe. Hold it on his neck. He's going to die otherwise."

I don't care. I *want* this man to die. He came for me. He came to take me back to my family.

That only means one thing.

They need me for dirty work.

So naïve to think I could make an escape.

I got my mom and dad to agree. I didn't think I needed anyone else.

Now?

I'm going to end up like Michael.

Forced into a life I don't want, and killed when I don't do what they say.

“Jesus Fuck, Vannah, you're bleeding.”

Am I?

I can't feel anything except the tightness in my chest and my throat.

Falcon takes my robe, pushes it against the blond guy's neck.

“He'll die. You have to go inside and call 911, Vannah. Can you do that? Then you need to take care of your hand. It's bleeding.”

I fall to the ground. Crumple. Naked and ashamed.

The terrycloth wrapped around my hand is so wet, so red.

The man's blood...

It's wet. Wet and red with the man's blood.

Except it's not *all* the man's blood.

It's *my* blood. The piece of glass that I still hold has ripped through the terrycloth and into my flesh.

“Please, Savannah. We can’t let him die. Do you want that on your conscience?”

His words snap into me. And I’m back in reality.

Searing pain in my palm. The blood... God, so much blood. And I’m naked. My clothes are back at the pool.

911. Where’s my phone? In the pocket of my pants, by the pool.

Or in my purse back in the house.

I don’t know.

I don’t know.

I don’t know.

“Savannah, please!”

Yes. 911. Must call 911.

I race into the house. Where would the phone be? Does he even have a landline?

He must, or he wouldn’t have sent me back in.

The kitchen. There’s always a phone in the kitchen.

There it is, sitting on the counter. I pull it off its base. My hands shake as I tap in the numbers.

Nine. One. One.

“911. What is your emergency?”

I freeze.

“Hello? Please state your emergency.”

I force my voice to work. “Two men came to the house. Guns. One of them is unconscious. The other has been stabbed.”

“Is it your house, ma’am? Are you all right?”

“Not my house. I’m bleeding.”

“Whose house is it? What’s the address?”

“I... It’s Falcon Bellamy’s house. Somewhere on the Bellamy property. I don’t know the address.”

“That’s all right, ma’am. I can see you’re calling from a landline. We will trace the call and find you with GPS. I’ll dispatch this immediately. Leave this line open.”

“All right.” The phone receiver—slimy with blood—drops from my hand.

Now what?

Now what do I do?

I fall to the floor. But tears don’t come.

This must be what shock feels like.

Part of me is numb. Except I’m cold. So cold.

And blood. So much blood.

I don’t know what to do.

I don’t know what to—

I’m naked.

I need to at least put some clothes on.

I force myself to get up, and I unwrap my right hand.

I wash my hands. There are several punctures, but they don't look too deep, thank goodness. I force myself to walk, to open doors until I find Falcon's bedroom.

A wrinkled T-shirt lies on the floor. I pull it over my head. Thankfully it covers my privates. But I still need something else.

I open the top drawer of his chest of drawers and find a pair of boxer briefs. I slide them on over my ass.

Then I find some socks. I ball one up in my fist and hold onto it tightly to try to stop my bleeding.

Now what?

I want to crawl into a fetal position, forget about all of this. Because this is all so familiar to me.

I've seen it before.

And I don't want to go through it again.

**FALCON**

**D**amn it, Savannah. Where are you?

“Savannah!” I yell.

This man is bleeding like a mother fucker. “Come on, you degenerate. Clot, won’t you?”

He has two puncture wounds in his chest, which seem to be clotting up well. I have no idea if there’s any damage done. The piece of glass Vannah used wasn’t that big. It couldn’t have gone in too far.

The more important thing right now is the carotid. It’s not like I can put a tourniquet around his neck.

His pulse is faint.

I’d just as soon let the motherfucker die, but I can’t. It’s bad enough I had to cop to a murder I didn’t commit.

I can’t let this happen to Vannah.

Savannah Gallo is a sweet and wonderful woman. If she’s indeed related to the Bianchi family, she’s one of the good guys. I know it in my soul.

And I’ve learned to trust my gut.



Carlo's eyes open but only slightly.

"You stay with me, motherfucker," I demand.

I check the wound on his neck.

"Thank God," I say on a sigh.

Finally, he's starting to clot.

"If you die on me, I'll kill you."

The ridiculousness of my words isn't lost on me. But damn it, I will not have this happen to Savannah.

Not my sweet Savannah.

My sweet sin.

"Savannah!"

This time she emerges, dressed in one of my old white T-shirts and what appears to be my underwear.

And I hate to say it, but she looks hot.

Her right hand is balled in a fist, and she's holding something. A rag maybe. Clearly trying to stop her bleeding.

"Did you call?"

She nods. "They're coming," she squeaks out.

"I think he's going to make it, but he's on borrowed time. I hope they get here quick."

"I know him," she says.

"Who the hell is he?"

"I mean, I don't *know* him. But he's a waiter. A waiter at Mario and Luigi's."

“He is?”

“Yeah. He waited on me and the girls the other night. That night you came in to get takeout. He said he knew me. Thought we had met before.”

“Had you seen him before that?”

“No. I swear. I didn’t think he knew what he was talking about.”

“Well, he sure as hell knows who you are, Savannah. You’re a member of the Bianchi family?”

She nods, shaking. “My mother is a Bianchi. My father is Vincent Gallo. He’s...”

“Doesn’t matter. None of it matters to me, Savannah. But why did they want you?” I grab her hand. It’s still bleeding, but I don’t let go.

“There’s only one reason they could want me, Falcon. They need me to do some dirty work in one way or another.”

“So that’s what you did for them in Austin?”

“Only when they made me. I swear. I begged my mom and dad to let me out. They agreed, so I came here.” Her face twists into a grimace. “I should have left the fucking country.”

“Savannah—”

“You’ve been through way too much, Falcon. First prison, and now you have to deal with these guys? I’m so sorry.”

I cup both her cheeks, my knuckle tats apparent.

Family.

Family is everything.

And I'm still fucking Savage.

"You could've leveled with me, you know."

She swallows, gulping audibly. "I didn't think I had to. I thought I was out."

"Oh, Vannah." I draw my gaze to my knuckle tats again, and the truth hits me like a fucking truck. "You're never fucking out."

Her face is white as fallen snow.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"How could you even think I'm okay?"

"I mean your bleeding."

"The cut seems to be shallow." She unfists her hand, and one of my socks falls out. "Looks like it's clotting."

"Thank God," I say.

"You think that guy will stay out?"

"I don't know. If he comes to, I'll clock him again."

"I think we should go, Falcon."

"Honestly, I had that same thought. But if this guy starts bleeding again, he won't make it."

"Yeah... Besides, this is your house. They already know that. I told them your name."

I can't be angry with her. I'm the one who told her to call 911, and once they got here they'd know whose house this is.

This isn't going to look good. Me. Out on parole for a week, and my parole officer here.

With me.

At my house.

Wearing my underwear.

“Savannah, I want you to go to the pool and put on your clothes.”

She nods.

“Throw those things you're wearing in the changing room.”

“Shouldn't we burn them or something?”

“You didn't do anything wrong, Savannah. Burning them will just make it look like you think you did. And bring me my phone. Or yours. It doesn't matter.”

She nods again, and she walks, a little unsteady on her feet, but she makes it back into the pool's screened area.

Only one guy can help me, and it's someone I swore I'd never talk to again.

But I need him.

My best pal for my whole life until I went to prison.

Leif Ramsey, an ex-Navy SEAL who's been to a real war.

I need him on my side.

## SAVANNAH

*S*everal months earlier...

*“You know what to do,” my father’s associate, Gunnar, says as he shoves the folder at me.*

*I simply nod.*

*I know better than to reject this proposal. I’ve been here before. And others have paid the price.*

*They won’t hurt me.*

*They wouldn’t dare hurt the granddaughter of the boss.*

*I open the file folder.*

*“Sasha Munoz,” I say, more to myself than to Gunnar.*

*“Yeah. She gets out on parole next week. You go to the prison to meet with her today.”*

*I scan her file. “Moving a controlled substance. Possession of a controlled substance.”*

*“Yup. We need her back at work. So you’ll be signing off on her documents, no matter what.”*

*I draw a breath and nod. “Whatever you say.”*

*“Good.”*

*“This is only the second woman I’ve seen working for you in the organization.”*

*“She’s good. She keeps her emotions at bay. Most women can’t do that.”*

*I can.*

*But I don’t say the words.*

*If I let my emotions rule me, I’d be throwing a tantrum right now. Letting my anger out and telling Gunnar what he can do with Sasha Munoz and her file.*

*I close the file folder. “Consider it done.”*

*Miles nods, but he says nothing. Not even a quick thank you. He leaves my cubicle.*

*Another day in the life of Savannah Gallo, parole officer.*

*Most days I go about my job, helping new parolees get back on their feet, see that they become productive members of society.*

*Until Gunnar, or someone else from my father’s organization, walks in with a file.*

*Then I bend the rules.*

*I turn a blind eye, look the other way.*

*I’ll meet Sasha Munoz today at the prison, and then I’ll never see her again. Someone else will come to the appointments. Someone else will sit in my office for the hour-*

*long conversation. Someone else will go to her therapy appointments.*

*Until she gets sent away again and then gets out on parole.*

*Which probably won't happen. My father allows one fuck up, but never two.*

*If she ends up behind bars again, she won't see the light of day ever again.*

*And I'm not talking about being in solitary.*

*Someone on the inside will take care of her.*

*I've seen it happen.*

*And no matter how much I put on an act, pretend it doesn't matter.*

*I can't shake the thought that what I'm doing is wrong.*

*And I hate it.*

*A week later...*

*A little girl is buried. She was four years old, blond with vibrant green eyes. Her mother's heart, her father's pride. Her big sister's baby.*

*Caught in the crossfire.*

*The gunman?*

*Sasha Munoz.*

*"I'm out," I say out loud when I hear the news. "I'm so fucking out."*



TO MY SURPRISE, my mother and father allowed me to leave. I don't know whatever happened to Sasha. I never looked into it because I don't care. She may not have meant to kill a small child, but she did.

She fucking did.

If I'd done my job—if I hadn't looked the other way—Sasha wouldn't have had access to a firearm. Wouldn't have been back at work.

And that sweet little girl would be alive today.

In the long run, though, does it matter? The organization found someone to fill my shoes. To let criminals slide through the system.

Before Sasha, I hadn't received a visit from Gunnar or anyone else for nearly a year. I complained to my parents on more than one occasion, asking them to let me out of it. When so much time went by, I thought maybe they'd finally relented.

Until Gunnar came sauntering in, telling me about Sasha Munoz.

My mind is finally working again.

None of this should've surprised me. But it did. I was actually going to try to be happy here in the small town. Although screwing one of my parolees the first week on the job was a big mistake.



But damn. Falcon Bellamy makes me happy. He says he's innocent, and I believe him.

I should know better.

After what I've seen in my lifetime, I know the word *innocent* has many meanings.

I don't know what these guys think they're going to do with me. My grandfather is their boss. Or is he? Surely he can't be behind this.

He would never let them touch me.

The image of my brother's body lying in a pool of blood is seared into my head for eternity.

It's not my grandfather.

They're not coming after me to do more dirty work. How could I have thought that? They can find hundreds of mercenaries who will be happy to look the other way.

No.

It's a rival family who's doing this. A rival organization.

It could be one of many, but already I'm sure who must be behind it.

Miles McAllister.

The man I was supposed to marry.

Our marriage would have created an alliance between the Bianchis and the McAllisters.

But I said no.

And they let me say no. Twice.

I hastily get into my clothes and do as Falcon requested, throwing his T-shirt and underwear into the changing room. I grab both of our phones and head back to Falcon, where he's still sitting with Giancarlo.

The other one—the dark-haired one—is still out cold.

I hand him his phone. “Here you go.”

He looks at it. “Shit. I’m out of juice. Let me see yours.”

I hand him mine. “Who are you going to call?”

“The only person who I know will help us.”

“Your dad?”

“God no. I can’t bother my father with this. He needs to be focused on Raven. Just an old friend. At least I thought he was at one time.” He looks at my phone. “Shit. I don’t even know how to get hold of him. I hope he has the same number.”

“You remember his number?”

“I’ve known his cell number since he and I both got phones when we were twelve. I can only hope he still has the same one.”

Falcon taps some numbers into the phone.

Then, in the distance, the wail of sirens—like a wolf howling at the moon before he attacks.

These sirens will save the two men...but Falcon and I? We’ll be...

I can’t even think about it, but we have no choice. We have to face what we’ve done.

“Shit.” Falcon stands. “Let’s go.”

I grab his hand, wincing at the pain from my cuts. “They’ll come after us.”

He sighs. “I know. You’re right. But damn it, Vannah, I’m not going back in the slammer.”

“You haven’t done anything. This is all me.”

“This isn’t on you. This is all self-defense. But I’m an ex-con, Vannah. They’re going to presume I’m guilty.”

“I’ll tell them you’re not.” I point to Giancarlo on the ground. “All you did was knock that other guy out. I’m the one who did...*this*.”

“Savannah, you tell *me* then. Do we need to leave? For *your* safety?”

My lips tremble. “To be honest, Falcon, I don’t know.”

“Do you think this is someone from your family?”

“No. They may be mad at me for leaving, but they would never see me harmed.”

“A rival gang then,” Falcon says.

“Gang?”

“Family. Whatever you call yourselves. This isn’t much different from how it was on the inside, Vannah. You take care of your own, and you take out anyone who fucks with your own. Seems you and I have a lot in common.”

I say nothing.

I don't talk about my family or their business. To this day, Gert and Jordan have no idea. I was good at my job as a parole officer. I looked the other way when I had to, and with luck, I didn't have to do it that often.

Falcon meets my gaze head on, his eyes full of dark fire. "All right. Then you tell me, Vannah. Do we stay? Or do we hightail it out of here?"

I don't even have to think about it. I vow to protect Falcon. He won't go back down on my watch.

"We get the fuck out of here, Falcon."

**FALCON**

**T**hat's all I need to hear.

I don't have time to go into my house and get cash out of my safe, I don't even have time to get my car and hightail it out of here.

But luckily, I know this land. I know it better than I know the back of my own hand.

My brother Hawk would help me, but I won't drag him into this.

But I don't have any qualms about dragging Leif Ramsey into it.

Fucker didn't even visit me in prison.

But he'll help me now. He has to.

I grab both guns, make sure Carlo is still breathing, and then I take Vannah. We head out of the yard, the dogs following.

"What are we going to do with them?" she asks.

"There's a safe house about three miles from here."

"A safe house?"

“Yeah. Hawk built it after I was sent away. Just in case.”

“Just in case... What?”

“Does it matter? Can you walk three miles?”

“Yeah, I can do it.”

“Good. We’ll be going through some wet areas, but you’ll be all right. We’ll take the dogs with us, and I’ll make arrangements for them once we get there.”

“Falcon...”

“Yeah?”

Her face is so pale, as if all the blood has drained out of it through the cuts on her hand. “Are we going on the run?”

“I hope not. But if we have to, then yeah.”

“I have to call my friend Jordan.”

“What for?”

“The blond guy. She’s dating him.”

“For fuck’s sake.” I rub my hand over my forehead. There’s a fucking bulldozer inside my brain. What the hell am I thinking?

“What?” Savannah asks.

“We’re going back. We’re going to wait. We’re going to talk to the paramedics and to the police when they get here. We’re going to tell the truth, Savannah.”

“But my family... Your family. You can’t go back. And I...”

“I’ll make sure you’re protected. But this is insane. I was raised to respect authority. You may not think so, but when I told you I was innocent, I wasn’t lying.”

“Then why did you—”

I hold up my hand to stop her. “We’re not getting into this right now. Right now, we’re going back to the house.”

The sirens are louder now.

“They’re here, Vannah.”

I take her hand and lead her back in the house. I’m still wearing nothing but jeans, but at least she’s fully dressed. I head to my room, pull on a clean T-shirt, and shove on a pair of slippers.

And then the commotion starts. A fire rescue truck, an ambulance, and three police cars pull up.

Pounding on the door.

I open it. “Thanks for coming. The injured are in the back.”

Officers and paramedics enter carrying two stretchers. They walk through my house, and then out the back door into the yard where the two men still lie.

“You know who they are?” someone asks.

I shake my head. “Don’t have a clue. They came out here brandishing two weapons.”

“All right, sir. We’ll get your statement later.” He gestures to the others.” Let’s see these guys first.”

“Tend to the blond one first,” I say. “He’s lost a lot of blood.”

Two paramedics rush toward him, get him on a stretcher, and head back out to the ambulance.

“What about this one?” another officer asks.

“I clocked him in the head with his own gun. He’s got a pulse.”

“Probably a concussion.”

Two more paramedics get Abel onto a stretcher.

Once the two men are on the ambulance, three police officers remain.

Officer Bandy, according to his name tag, takes out a small tablet. “All right, sir. Time to get to the bottom of this.”

I shrug. I can play it cool as a fucking alley cat even though my insides are in panic mode. “There’s not much to get to the bottom of. The lady and I were in the hot tub, and those two jokers came into the backyard.”

“Did you hear them?”

“Not at first. The dogs started barking.”

“I see.” Bandy makes some notes. “Mr. Bellamy, we know you just got out of prison.”

“Yeah, I figured you’d know that. Everyone does. I’m an innocent man.”

“You pleaded guilty to manslaughter.”



“I did. For my reasons. None of which are up for discussion at this point.”

“Very well then. Let’s sit down, and I’ll get your full statement.”

Another one of the officers is talking to Savannah. She’s got her game face on, and I’m not sure where it came from. She was freaked out as anybody when she stabbed that man. But now? It’s as if she were sitting at her desk in her office, talking to a new parolee.

Nerves of steel and everything.

Somehow, she got ice to fill her veins.

“I’d like to be with her,” I say, nodding to Savannah.

“She’s doing fine, Mr. Bellamy. You have a seat.”

I rake my fingers through my hair.

Carlo’s blood is all over me. I could use a shower. I could use ten showers.

I lead the officer to my kitchen table and gesture him to take a seat. I open the refrigerator and grab a bottle of water. “You want one?”

“Yeah, sure. Thanks.”

I grab another, unscrew both caps, and hand one to him.

He takes a long drink. “All right. Full name.”

“Falcon Cooper Bellamy.”

“All right. Tell me, from the beginning, exactly what happened.” He clicks on the recorder.

I take him through everything, but when I get to the part where Savannah comes out of the pool area, I stop.

“Is that the end of your story?”

“For now.”

Bandy frowns. “Look. I get that you’re trying to protect your lady friend.”

“I’m not protecting anyone. I just think you need to get the rest of the story from her.”

“Jack over there will get it from her. I need to get it from *you*, Mr. Bellamy.”

“What if I say I want an attorney?”

He looks up from his tablet. “You got something to hide?”

“Nope. I’m just not sure I want to say anything more without an attorney. You know, since I’m an ex-con and all.”

He sighs. “Just tell us what went on, Mr. Bellamy.”

I blink. “I’m the one who stabbed him.”

“You think you can help her by lying?”

“Christ.”

He’s right. What am I doing? I spent eight years of my life locked up because I lied about something I didn’t do. I just hope to God Carlo pulls through. Savannah can’t have a death on her conscience.

I pour out the rest of the story.

“How many times did she stab him?”

“Three. Twice in the chest, and once in the neck.”

“And was he incapacitated by the time she stabbed him the third time?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t see all of it. I was busy dealing with the other asshole. Once all the commotion started, he tried to get away from me. I didn’t want to kill him, so I pistol-whipped him and knocked him unconscious.”

“All right. So how can you be sure she only stabbed him three times?”

“Because there were three open wounds.”

Bandy make some notes. “Okay. Then what did you do?”

“She was wearing a robe because she had been in the changing room in the pool house. I told her to take off the robe, and I used it to try to stop the bleeding from his neck. The other two wounds on his chest seemed shallow, and they were starting to clot. I was really worried about the one on his neck because I thought she might have pierced his carotid. But thankfully it finally started to clot up. I hope he makes it.”

Bandy raises an eyebrow. “Do you?”

“What the hell? She was defending herself and me. Those two were trespassing and holding us at gunpoint. But yeah, I hope he pulls through. You think I want her to go through that? Knowing she caused a person’s death? She didn’t break any of your goddamned laws, but I don’t want her to deal with having inadvertently taken a life, even if the son of a bitch fucking deserved it.”

The officer tries to stare me down. “You of all people should know what it feels like to take a life.”

I stare right back at him, silently daring him to push this. “We’ve been through this, *sir*. As a matter of fact, I *don’t* know what it feels like to take a life. I’m innocent of that crime.”

“Yet you pleaded guilty.”

“Right. And I’m sure that’s the first time that’s ever happened.”

Bandy narrows his gaze. “Who are you protecting?”

“Doesn’t matter. That case is cold and closed, and it’s not what you’re here to investigate.”

“Yet your first instinct was to protect your girlfriend today.”

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

“But you were in the hot tub together?”

“What we were doing—what two consenting adults were doing—before those two shitheads trespassed on my property and held us at gunpoint is not anyone’s business.”

The officer draws in a breath. “Good enough. Anything else you need to tell me?”

“I did the best I could to stop his bleeding. I hope it was enough.”

“I hope so too.” He rises. “I’m going to go check on Jack and your lady friend there.”

Savannah and the other officer are out on the deck.

I follow Officer Bandy.

“Jack, I’m done with Mr. Bellamy here. How are you doing?”

Jack taps on his tablet. “We’re just wrapping it up. I think Ms. Gallo here may need a doctor’s attention.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Savannah? You okay?”

She nods. “I think I was in shock for a while, though.”

“Perfectly understandable,” Jack says, “considering what you’ve been through.”

Jack grins at Savannah, and I don’t like the way he’s looking at her. My hackles rise.

But I know better than to mouth off to an officer. Not at this point in my life. And not under these circumstances.

“We’re going to need to get forensics over here to brush for fingerprints and other evidence.”

“Why do you need to brush for fingerprints?” I ask. “You’ve got the two guys in custody.”

“Sorry. Fingerprints and other evidence is just what we say. Other evidence.”

“*What* other evidence? You’ve got the two weapons. You’ve even got the piece of glass Savannah used. You know who we are. You’ve already got *my* fingerprints on file somewhere.”

“Standard procedure, Mr. Bellamy,” Jack says.

Savannah gives me a weak smile. “Falcon, it’s okay.”

“Fine.” I let out an exasperated sigh. “Vannah, let’s get you to the doctor.”

She nods. “All right.”

Jack hands a card to Savannah. “You need anything at all, you just call me.”

“Thank you.”

*Over my dead body.*

“I’d say welcome to the area,” Jack says, “but this has been a harrowing first week for you. A new job, the death of a friend, and now this.”

What all did Savannah tell him?

The officers both rise. “We’ve got all we need for now. Like I said, forensics will be over—”

I raise my hand to stop him, but he continues to talk over me.

“—yes, I know you think we have all the information we need. But you’re an ex-con, Mr. Bellamy, and Ms. Gallo here works for the law. So we’ll be out here on investigation. Just leave everything as it is. Good day.”

## SAVANNAH

*“We’ve got all we need for now. Like I said, forensics will be over—yes I know you think we have all the information. But you’re an ex-con, Mr. Bellamy, and Ms. Gallo here works for the law. So we’ll be out here on investigation. Just leave everything as it is. Good day.”*

Right.

I won’t be working for the law much longer. Once Bridget finds out I was at my parolee’s house, in the freaking hot tub, while two criminals assaulted us, I’ll be fired for sure.

I let out a breath once they’re gone.

Falcon meets my gaze. “You okay?”

I breathe in gradually, trying to slow my heartbeat. “Not even slightly.”

“I know, Vannah. I’m sorry.”

“I’ll be unemployed by tomorrow.”

“Not necessarily.”

I scoff, though my heart’s not in it. “Are you kidding me? This will be all over the news, and once my boss finds out I

was here with you, I can kiss my job goodbye.”

“It won’t be all over the news.”

“Sure it will be.”

“It won’t. I’ll make a few calls. Are you forgetting that my old man kept most news outlets from reporting on my situation eight years ago? This is nothing compared to that. I’ll call my father, and he’ll work his magic.”

“You think he can?”

“I know he can.” He stares into my eyes. “But Vannah, do you still want to be a parole officer? Seems like your family wants you back.”

I shake my head. “I don’t think so, Falcon. I mean, that was my first thought, but then I dug deeper. My own family wouldn’t send armed gunmen to take me. I don’t know why I didn’t see it earlier. I was just so freaked out.”

“What was this all about then?”

“I’m pretty sure the McAllister family was behind it.”

“The McAllisters?”

“I guess you’re not up on organized crime in Texas.”

“I met up with a few hit men while I was in the slammer, but they tended to keep to themselves.”

“That’s because they’re told to stay out of trouble so we can get them sprung as soon as possible.”

“Savannah...” He shakes his head. “I knew there was something about you, but I never pegged you for a gun maul.”



“Because I’m not a gun maul!” I curl my hands into fists. “I wanted out of this. But the problem is I’m family. I was supposed to...”

I can’t say the words. This was right after college, and I honestly thought it was over.

But the McAllisters have other ideas.

“So this isn’t the Bianchis,” he says.

“No. My grandfather is the head of the organization. He’d never let anything happen to me.”

“What problems do the McAllisters have with you?”

I pause. I hate to even say the words, especially to Falcon, but I have no choice. “I was supposed to marry Miles McAllister.”

Falcon’s jaw goes rigid. “What?” he demands through gritted teeth.

“It was five years ago, after I got out of school. They wanted me when I turned eighteen, but my father said no. He figured they’d find someone else to marry Miles to in the meantime, but come college graduation, there was Declan McAllister, ready to collect.”

“And you said no.”

“Of course I did. I want out of this business forever, and if I marry into a rival family, I’ll never be free. Plus, I hate Miles McAllister. He’s a horrible human being.”

Falcon draws in a breath and lets it out slowly.

“But this is all speculation,” I continue. “Maybe it’s not the McAllisters.”

Except I know it is.

The McAllisters are the only other family in Texas as powerful as my own.

And they’re into drugs big time. Drugs and human trafficking.

I suppose it should be a consolation that my family’s *only* into drugs.

It’s not.

“I thought they were after me. I made many enemies on the inside, and I should have been more prepared.”

“They weren’t here for you.”

“I know. Still, if I’d been more prepared, we wouldn’t be in this situation. I don’t have any weapons stocked in the pool house. That changes today.”

“You’re not supposed to have any—”

“Because I’m a parolee, I know. I’m pretty sure that ship has sailed, Vannah. I’m going to protect you. I’m going to protect my family. And damn it, I’m going to protect myself. I didn’t survive eight years of hell just to be taken out by some derelict.” His gaze falls on a cabinet above the refrigerator. “I’m also thinking the no-drinking thing stops today too. I could use a fucking bourbon.”

I close my eyes and inhale. “So could I, Falcon. I can’t believe this just happened.”

“Before we do anything, though, we’re getting you to a doctor.”

“I’m fine now. The bleeding’s stopped.”

“Still, you don’t want to get an infection. That needs to be dressed up proper.” He grabs my hands, careful to avoid the cuts. “But that’s not the only reason. You were in shock.”

“I’m not anymore.”

“I don’t care. That cop making eyes at you was right.”

“Making eyes at me?”

“You didn’t see it?”

“Falcon, I wouldn’t be able to pick either of them out of a lineup. They were blurs to me. Everything is a blur to me. Everything except you. Here. Now.” I melt against him.

He kisses the top of my head. “Come on. We’re going to the ER.”

“No. Please.” I reach up, caress his cheek with my left hand. “I want to stay here with you. Take me to bed. Please.”

“As tempting as that is, neither of us is in the right headspace for it.”

“Please,” I say again, murmuring into his chest.

“Fuck,” he growls, and then he crushes our mouths together.

In the next moment, I’m swept into his arms, our lips still fused, his tongue devouring me. A moment later, we’re in his

bedroom, our clothes strewn on the floor. He's on me, thrusting, thrusting, thrusting...

He fills me, completes me, and gives me what I need. A good hard fuck. A fuck that says we're both strong. We're both here.

We're both *alive*.

This wasn't the first time I've experienced being held at gunpoint, and it no doubt won't be the last. It *was* the first time, though, that I went on the attack for someone else.

And I'd do it again.

He pistons his hips, moving them up, down, around, and with each thrust, his cock melds farther into my body, farther into my soul.

It's a fuck. A basic fuck.

Yet it's so much more than that. With each plunge of his dick into my pussy, part of this horrid day gets washed away.

But only part.

He pushes into me harder and harder, and when his pubic hair grazes my clit, I erupt into a shattering climax.

He growls against my neck, the perspiration on his chest making us slide together as if we were drenched in oil, and then he releases, coming with me.

We lie there for a moment, and then he rolls off me.

I unscrunch my hand from around his white sheets, and—

“I'm sorry.”

“About what?” he murmurs.

“My hand. I grabbed the sheet, and there are a few streaks of blood.”

Falcon laughs softly. “You think I care? I can afford to buy a new sheet every day for the rest of my life, Savannah. Fuck.”

“Okay. I’m still sorry.”

“I’m not.” He stretches his arms above his head. “I know I originally told you no, but it turns out that was exactly what I needed.”

“Told you so.”

“Yeah.” He rubs his forehead. “You did. But you’re not getting off that easily. Come on. Get up. We’re going to the ER.”

“I don’t want to explain everything to them.”

“Who says you have to?”

“Of course I have to. How else will I explain how I went into shock? Normal people don’t just go into shock at the drop of a hat.”

He sighs. “Yeah. I didn’t think of that.”

“I’m fine. I swear I am. But...”

“But what?”

I look around the room, at our clothes strewn on the floor, at what this place—Falcon’s place—now represents. “I need to call my parents. I need to speak to my father about this. He’ll want to retaliate.”

“Is that what *you* want?”

I snuggle next to him, place my leg over his. “Yes...and no.”

He nods. “I get it.”

And he does. He had to retaliate in prison to keep his status as a leader. As Savage. But he probably would’ve rather stayed under the radar and done his time.

They don’t let you do that in prison, though. I’ve known about prison long before I became a parole officer. I understand the unwritten rules. You’re either strong or weak inside, and you’d best decide at the outset.

“Tell you what,” Falcon says. “We’ll go to the pharmacy and get some decent bandages and antibacterial ointment. But if that shows any bit of infection in the next day or two—or if you feel like you’re going into shock again—we’re getting your pretty ass to a doctor, you got it?”

I nod.

“When do you want to call your folks?”

“I need to do it now, while everything’s fresh in my mind. They’re going to want to know the police are involved.”

What I don’t tell Falcon is that my folks—or at least my grandfather—most likely already know.

And they’re either plotting their revenge...

Or they’re in on it.

**FALCON**

**N**ine p.m.

Savannah and I were supposed to have dinner. I'm sure neither of us could stomach food now, but we have to eat at some point. Sustenance is necessary for strength. I forced the shitty prison food down my gullet, taking seconds when I could, just so I had the fuel I needed to keep myself—body and mind—strong.

I leave the bedroom to give Savannah some privacy to talk to her parents. I head straight to the basement, which is still unfinished since I wasn't here to supervise anything. Against the wall, though, is my metal gun safe. A few of these pieces are going to the pool house. When Savannah's feeling up to it, I want to take her to the safe house as well, just to check it out.

We may need to use it.

And now...what I've been putting off.

A call to Leif Ramsey.

But only if he has the same number he's always had. Who knows? He's been overseas, had several tours of duty. He may be a completely different person.

He probably is.

Then again, so am I.

I grab my phone when it buzzes in my hand.

It's Lance from the tattoo place.

"Hey, Lance," I say into the phone. "What are you calling at this hour for?"

"Falcon, I got some more information."

"Let me guess. Savannah Gallo is related to the Bianchi crime family."

Silence for a moment. Then, "You're still going to pay me, right?"

I let out a scoff. "I ordered the information. It's not your fault I got it before you did."

"Isn't it? What sources do you have?"

"Savannah herself. But I want everything you found anyway. Send it to me in an encrypted file."

"You got it. It's on its way."

"In the meantime, give me the basics."

"This line safe?"

"It's a brand new phone, but hell if I know."

"I'd feel better if you came to the shop."

I sigh. "Fine. Tell me this much, if you can. Did the name Miles McAllister come up in your research?"

Again, silence.



All the answer I need.

“I’ll be there as soon as I can in the morning.” I end the call.

If Lance won’t talk over the phone, this must be information that’s dangerous to have.

I’m pretty sure my phone isn’t tapped. It’s brand new, but from now on, I’ll be using burners just in case.

Damn.

I’m out of prison, but I don’t feel any safer than I did on the inside.

That’s not how it’s supposed to be.

I got involved with my parole officer.

Sure, it doesn’t say a lot for our ethics, but man...who should be safer?

She’s works in law enforcement. She should be clean as anything. Certainly not any reason why someone would come after either of us.

Should have kept my dick in my pants for sure.

But I didn’t, and I can’t bring myself to regret it.

Savannah Gallo has the tightest little cunt I’ve ever been in, and I’m not in any mood to give up fucking her.

What if I’d gotten the info from Lance sooner?

Nope.

I’d still be fucking her.

And I'd still be enjoying the hell out of it.

I head into the bedroom. Savannah is still on the phone, and her eyes are sunken and sad but still dry. I don't want to disturb her, so I whisper, "I'm going to take a shower."

She nods and continues her conversation.

I step into my huge master bathroom and turn on my shower, twisting the knob for water and then for steam.

A steam shower sounds like heaven after what went down earlier.

I need to cleanse every bit of this day from my pores.

Except fucking Savannah, of course. But I'll do that again soon.

I still wish she'd let me take her to the ER, but I understand her reluctance. I don't want to recount this story either.

Which reminds me. I need to call my father.

I pick the phone up from where I tossed it on top of the toilet and dial him.

"Falcon?"

"Yeah. You got a minute?"

"Sure."

"Raven doing okay?"

"She is. She's looking real good too."

"Good. Glad to hear it. Because I need a favor."

“Sure, son.”

“I need you to quash a story that may be going to the local newspapers, and because it’s us, it might be going to the national outlets.”

“For God’s sake, Falcon—”

“It’s not me. I swear.” I relay what happened as my father listens intently on the other side of the line.

“Criminy,” he says.

“I know, right?”

“Your parole officer, Fal? Really?”

I huff into the phone. “That’s what you got out of the story? We could have both been killed, Dad.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know. Believe me, I came close to losing one child, and I’m not in the mood to lose any of you.” His voice cracks, and he clears his throat. “This isn’t your fault, Falcon, and I’m sorry I assumed it was. I’ll take care of it.”

“Thanks, Dad. I owe you.”

“Not a problem. Are you okay, though? You and she both?”

“We’re handling it. The cops were here, and they’ll be sniffing around because of who I am. I’m not sure they know who she is yet, but it won’t take long.”

“You’re right about that. I’m on it, so ease your mind.”

“Thanks,” I say again before ending the call.

My shower's been running for ten minutes, and it's good and steamy.

I step in and inhale, waiting for all the problems to release from my shoulders.

They don't.

But at least the water feels good as it pelts my sore muscles.

## SAVANNAH

“**Y**ou sure it was the McAllisters?” Dad asks me for the tenth time.

“No. I’m not a hundred percent sure, but who else could it be?”

“You didn’t recognize either of the men?”

“Only the one, but just because I saw him waiting tables at a local Italian place.”

Shit. I have to call Jordan next.

“All right. I’m going to get in touch with your grandfather right away. This won’t be tolerated, Savannah.”

“Just don’t hurt anyone.”

He sighs. “You know I can’t make that promise.”

“Yeah, but you can’t blame me for trying.”

“I think you should come home, Sav,” he says.

I knew that was coming.

It would be so easy for me to go running home to Daddy. I did it before, the only other time something like this happened.

It was Miles himself that time, and he didn't have a gun.

What's different about this time?

Why does he care?

Or...was it even Miles or the McAllisters?

Does my grandfather have other enemies?

What a dumbass question. Of course he does. He's a fucking mob boss.

"I can't," I say. "You know that's not the answer."

"Your mother and I understand how you're feeling. I got into this of my own volition, but your mother—and you—were born into it. I'm sorry for that, Savannah. We've already lost so much."

He's thinking about my two brothers.

Vincent Junior, who left the country ten years ago and is living under an alias somewhere to avoid the family's wrath.

And Michael.

Michael, who was killed by rival gunfire.

To prove some kind of ridiculous point.

They say it's not personal. It's business.

But when you kill a young man, how can that *not* be personal?

Michael did what Grandpa asked of him. He married Elizabeth McAllister, Miles's cousin. He wasn't in love with her, nor she with him.

And he still ended up as a casualty.

“I miss Vinny and Mike,” I say softly.

“We all do, Sav,” Dad says. “And I will *not* allow you to end up like the two of them.”

“At least Vinny’s alive,” I say.

“As far as we know. We don’t even know what country he’s in.”

“Italy or Spain. Those are the languages he speaks.”

“Maybe. You don’t think I’ve scoured every Italian- and Spanish-speaking country trying to find him? He disappeared into thin air, Sav. It guts me. In a way it’s worse than Mikey. At least we *know* he’s gone. At peace.”

Yeah.

That doesn’t make me feel any better at all. To me, they’re both gone, and I sure as hell don’t want to be next.

I don’t want to live in a foreign country, constantly wondering if a rival family will find me. Never talking to anyone I know again.

And I don’t want to leave here.

I don’t want to leave...

I don’t want to leave Falcon Bellamy.

I’m not in love with him. That’s impossible. And even if I were, he’s certainly not in love with me.

We’ve known each other for a week.

And what a week.

He gave his sister a bone marrow donation.

I lost a friend.

Not a great friend, but still a friend.

And another friend is dating a man I almost killed.

“I’ve got to go, Dad.”

“Okay, sweetie. I’m going to get some security for you.”

“I told you, I don’t want—”

“Yeah. I know you’ve told me. And I let my love for you cloud my judgment. If you’d had security, today wouldn’t have happened, Savannah. So yeah, there’s going to be security. The detail will be unintrusive. You won’t even know they’re there. But I’ll know, and it will ease my mind.”

I sigh. “Fine, Daddy.”

Because he’s ultimately right. If I hadn’t been so hardheaded about accepting security in the first place, today probably *wouldn’t* have happened.

I wouldn’t have come close to killing a man.

A bad man, but still a person, and I don’t know how I could live with that.

“Goodbye, sweetheart.”

“Bye.” I end the call and pull up Jordan’s information.

Here goes.

“Sav?” Jordan says, sounding breathless.

“Yeah, it’s me. You okay?”



“I’m getting ready to go to bed. I’ve got an early meeting. What’s up?”

I have no idea what time it is, but Falcon and I were supposed to eat dinner. It’s dark now. I should wait until morning.

But no.

This has to be done, and it has to be done now.

“Sorry, I need to talk to you now.”

“Yeah, sure,” she says through the squeak of a yawn.

“How are you holding up?” I ask.

“Not great. I miss her.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Life goes on. What do you need?”

Jordan just lost her best friend, and now I’m about to tell her that her new boyfriend is lying in the hospital somewhere possibly fighting for his life. Oh...and he held Falcon and me at gunpoint, demanded I go with him to God knows where.

Somehow I’ve managed to keep the family business from Gert and Jordan. They still think I’m part of the Gallo wine empire.

If only...

“I just... Are you still seeing Giancarlo?”

“Yeah. I just talked to him last night. He’s supposed to call tonight.”

Yeah. That’s not going to happen.

“I think...you should stop seeing him.”

There. I said it.

“Why? Do you want him?”

“God, no.”

Not only no, but *hell* no.

“Then why do you care?”

I pause. What to say? What not to say? I finally settle on an amorphous answer. “He’s bad news.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Jordan, I’m going to ask you to trust me on this one. I can’t tell you why.”

“Oh...” She sighs through the phone. “It’s your job, isn’t it? Is he an ex-con or something?”

Good. This is fortuitous. I didn’t see it coming but I should have. Easy out.

“Like I said, I can’t tell you anything more.”

“What did he do?”

“Jordy...”

“Right, right. I respect your ethics, Sav. But I wish you could tell me. He’s been a perfect gentleman.”

“He has?”

“Well...we slept together. But he didn’t do anything I didn’t want him to do.”

That's a gentleman in Jordan's book. In mine as well, I guess. I just know a lot more about Giancarlo that she does, and he's definitely *not* a gentleman.

"I see. It's best if you nip this in the bud, Jordy."

"Shoot. I really liked him. But I'm sure you have a good reason that you can't tell me."

"I do. You know what I do for a living. I'm bound by ethics."

Which I've thrown out the window for Falcon Bellamy, but Jordan doesn't know that.

"Yeah, I know. I guess I'll tell him tonight when he calls."

Except Giancarlo won't be calling anyone tonight. "I think it's for the best. I know this comes at a rotten time, but I felt I had to say something."

"No. I appreciate it. You mean well. I know you're just looking out for me."

"Right. You'd do the same for me."

"Except *I'd* be able to tell you why," she says, her tone a bit pissy.

I suppose I can't blame her. "Maybe. Or maybe not. It would depend on the circumstances."

"I don't want to talk about this anymore." She sighs. Now I have *two* things I need to try to get off my mind."

"Sorry, Jordy."

"It's okay. It's better that I know. Talk soon, Sav."

“Bye.

Now I can only hope Giancarlo makes it. I’m hanging on by a thread, and if I find out I accidentally killed someone?

I’m liable to leap into nothingness.

## FALCON

My eyes are closed, and I'm rinsing the soap from my hair when the shower door slides open and Savannah's soft body melts against mine.

I open my eyes. "Hey, baby."

"I called Jordan. Told her that her new boyfriend is a criminal."

"You what?"

"I didn't tell her anything. Just told her I had information that I couldn't divulge. She assumed it had something to do with my job, so I let her think that."

"Good call."

"It was a good excuse. Then she waxed poetic about how she admired my ethics. What a farce."

"You *are* ethical, Savannah."

"Says the parolee who's in the shower with me."

I touch her cheek. "Hey. Neither of us expected this to happen. We met before—"

"I know. I know. But now I've dragged you into my mess."

“And I’ve dragged you into mine.”

“What’s yours?”

“I’m an ex-con, Vannah. Or did you forget for a minute?”

“I know that. You also say you’re innocent, so what’s the mess?”

So much I wish I could spill. It’s been difficult keeping it inside for so long, but Hawk, Eagle, and I swore an oath to each other as brothers.

I won’t break it.

“I made a lot of enemies on the inside. When those two assholes came here, I figured they were coming for me.”

“Honestly, I thought so too,” she says. “I should have known the organization wouldn’t give up one of its own.”

“You never worked for them.”

“Never intentionally, anyway. But you know as well as I do that I did what I was told on the few occasions they requested my services.”

“But this is a rival organization who’s after you.”

“It’s all the same thing. The way my family and the McAllisters see it, I’m an asset. There’s to do with what they please. I don’t know for sure it’s the McAllisters. My father and grandfather will check things out.”

“All right. We’ll do what we must to keep you safe. You hear me? No one’s taking you on my watch.”

She melts against my chest, kissing one of my nipples.

And I'm hard again.

This woman affects me like no other has. Granted, I was a mere twenty-two when I went away, but I'd had a decent amount of experience with the ladies. I knew my way around a pussy.

I lift her, taking care not to drop her slick body, push her against the warm shower wall, and shove my cock up into her.

She moans, closing her eyes, and I don't tell her to open them. She needs an escape, and I aim to give it to her. Another quick fuck, this one in the steam.

I thrust, thrust, thrust, and she gasps out breaths until—

“God, yes, Falcon!” She clamps around my cock.

I continue fucking her, harder and faster, until I join her in release.

She slides down the shower wall until her feet touch the floor. I'm tempted to wash her, stay with her, but she grabs the shower pouf and starts scrubbing herself.

Best for me to leave.

I have a phone call to make anyway.

“Vannah,” I say, after I've toweled off. “I'm going to the pool house. If you need anything, that's where I'll be.”

“No!” She opens the shower door.

“Okay, okay.”

“Don't leave me. Please.”

“I won’t. I’ll stay here. I was going to take some weapons out to the pool house and get them secured, but I’ll wait until you’re done.”

“Thanks. I’ll go with you.”

“You know how to shoot a pistol, Vannah?”

“Are you kidding me? You don’t grow up in my family and not learn how to handle a weapon. I can shoot a nine millimeter and a twenty-two. I’m pretty good with a shotgun too.”

“Good.”

One less thing I have to worry about. “You have a piece?”

“At my place. It’s in a safe under my bed.”

“All right. We’ll need to get it. You need to keep it on you.”

She sighs. “I moved here to get away from all this.”

“Oh, sweetheart, you can’t outrun your past. I wish you could, but you can’t.”

She finishes in the shower, steps out, and I wrap a dry towel around her dripping body. She takes another and squeezes the water out of her hair.

“I wish I had some clean clothes.”

“We’re going to your place tomorrow. We’ll get you some. Then I think it’s best if you stay here with me.”

She nods and then slams her hand against her mouth. “Oh God...”



“What?”

“I just thought of something.” Her voice shakes. “I bet they looked at my place first.”

Fuck.

She’s right.

“We need to go,” I say. “Now.”

## SAVANNAH

**D**arkness has completely fallen by the time we get to my place.

It's trashed.

My heart drops as I take what's left of my beautiful living room.

It's a disheveled nightmare.

The couch and chairs are overturned, cushions ripped open, and my magazines and candles strewn across the floor. The TV screen has been smashed, and it leaves a trail of broken glass and electronic pieces I don't recognize. My bookshelves are empty, their contents scattered and torn apart. Pages and pages of my beloved classics...ruined.

Robotically, I walk past the travesty and into the kitchen.

Cabinets are flung open, and canned goods have been flung at the walls, leaving dents. My dishes are smashed, leaving porcelain fragments on the tile floor. The refrigerator door hangs ajar, but since I still haven't been grocery shopping, nothing but a quart of milk was inside. The milk has been poured over the floor.

Falcon says nothing. Simply rubs my back, but nothing will ease the tension between my shoulders.

“Do I dare look in my bedroom?” I ask.

“Up to you.”

But it’s a train wreck. I can’t *not* look.

The door to my bedroom hangs on only one hinge as I walk through. My mattress is overturned and slashed open, and my sheets and comforter are ripped. All the drawers to my dresser are open, and my clothing scattered. My closet is ransacked, clothes torn and cut.

Then the bathroom...

My shampoo and conditioner has been squirted on the walls, and the mirror above the sink is shattered.

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to ignore the flashback of shattering the mirror in the changing room at Falcon’s. Then plunging, plunging, plunging the jagged glass into a man’s flesh.

I breathe in, out, in again...but my heart...

My fucking heart....

It’s racing like a freight train... Racing...

Falcon’s fingers. Massaging my shoulders.

It helps.

And it doesn’t.

“Come on.” He leads me out of the bathroom.

And my gaze falls on—

“No!” I cry.

I didn’t see it before.

My photo of my brothers and me as kids that I keep on my bedtable.

The glass is cracked, the photo torn...

This wasn’t business.

This was personal.

They want *me*, and they’ll destroy everything I love to get me. But why? What do I represent, other than some convoluted alliance with my family?

“It’s personal,” I gasp out, choking back sobs. “It’s a message.”

Falcon nods. “I know, sweetheart. I know.” He turns me so I’m facing the door. “We need to get you out of here. The Shaws live next door, right? Let’s check and see if they heard anything.”

My heart is hammering as we head next door and knock.

No answer.

“Mrs. Shaw?” I yell. “Mr. Shaw? It’s Savannah.”

Falcon pounds on their door harder.

Still no response.

I open the screen door and check the doorknob. To my surprise, it opens.

“Why would they leave this unlocked?” I ask.

“A lot of people in small towns do that. It’s one of the benefits of living in such a place.”

I open the door and step in. “Mr. Shaw? Mrs. Shaw?”

Then a groan, and it seems to be coming from—

“No!” I gasp.

I run into the kitchen. Mrs. Shaw lies there, her face bloody. The groan came from her. How long has she been lying here? Hours... Hours...

“Mrs. Shaw! Are you all right?”

Stupid question. Of course she’s not all right. “Falcon, help me!”

Falcon doesn’t answer, but he appears a moment later. “I found Mr. Shaw. He’s in the bathtub.”

“Taking a bath?”

But already I know that’s not the case.

“Call 911,” I say. “She needs help.”

Falcon kneels and checks the pulse in Mrs. Shaw’s neck. “She’s alive. Man, we’re giving the paramedics a workout today.”

He doesn’t mean to take this lightly. The look on his face is one of pure remorse.

But this isn’t his fault.

It’s mine and mine alone.

He pulls out his phone and dials while I go to the sink, wet a washcloth, and wipe the blood from Mrs. Shaw’s face with

my left hand. "Can you hear me? It's Savannah."

She groans again. "They were looking for you."

"I know, and I'm so sorry." I continue wiping. "The paramedics will be here soon."

At least we're in town and we won't have to wait as long.

"Fred?"

"Just hush. You need to rest. Conserve your strength." I look her over. She doesn't seem to have any other injuries. Just a few blows to her face. She must have been unconscious for a while.

Who would hit an old woman?

Giancarlo, apparently. Or the other one, Abel.

Jordan can't dump his ass fast enough. He won't call her tonight. Unless he's conscious and memorized her phone number, which I doubt.

Falcon leaves the kitchen while I continue to try to sooth Mrs. Shaw.

He returns holding a Glock wrapped in a towel. "Is this yours?"

I widen my eyes. "I don't know. It could be. It's the same as mine."

"Did you happen to look for the safe under your bed when we were at your place?"

"I... I wasn't thinking. I was just overwhelmed by the damage they caused." My safe. Under my bed. They'd have to

get it open... How? Why do I even ask that question? These are professional criminals.

“I have a feeling you won’t find your gun, Vannah.”

“You mean...” I rise and leave Mrs. Shaw for a moment as I follow Falcon into the living room.

“Mr. Shaw was shot...most likely with this gun. His body’s in the tub.”

Without thinking, I begin to walk toward the bathroom, but Falcon yanks me back. “You don’t want to see that.”

“Are they really going to try to frame me? Shooting him with my gun?”

“You have an ironclad alibi,” Falcon says. “You were with me.”

“An ex-con,” I mutter.

“Hey.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. It’s a valid point. But the two assholes knew you were with me. I don’t know how they knew if they came here first. I may be an ex-con, but we can prove you weren’t anywhere near your place at the time of Shaw’s death.”

“I know....” I bury my head in my hands. “I came here to get away from all this, and now I’ve dragged you into it. Jordan. The Shaws. God, the poor Shaws.”

“You didn’t drag me into anything, Vannah. I came willingly.”

“Without knowing what you were getting into.”

“I’d have found out eventually.”

“What’s that mean?”

He pauses a moment, frowns. “I...uh...had some people look into you. I got the information today.”

“So you knew?”

“No. Not until afterward. My source called me after—”

“Oh, my God... How could you not trust me?”

“For Christ’s sake, Vannah. I just believe in checking things out.”

“Would you have let me go if you had found out about my family before all this went down?”

I regret my words immediately. Mr. Shaw is dead, and Mrs. Shaw was attacked. I nearly killed a man, and Falcon was dragged into this. Why am I being so petty? Clearly, Falcon shouldn’t have trusted me.

*I shouldn’t have trusted that my family could keep me out of danger.*

But he looks into my eyes, his own on fire. “Not a chance, Savannah. I don’t know how it happened, but somehow, I’ve fallen hard.”

Part of me melts, even in this aftermath. It’s not an admission of love, but it’s something. And the truth is? I feel the same way.

I open my mouth to say so, when—



“Help!” Mrs. Shaw shrieks from the kitchen.

I rush to her side. “Mrs. Shaw?”

“It hurts. It hurts so bad!”

“I know. I know. Help is coming.” I rise and look through her cupboards for some aspirin or ibuprofen. “Can you check the bathroom, Falcon? See if there’s something for her pain?”

He nods and walks to the bathroom. Good, because he’s right. I don’t want to see what’s in there. Especially if it was done with my gun.

Falcon returns. “Nothing over the counter, but I found these. Percocet.”

“I can’t give her a narcotic.”

“It says they’re for Mr. Shaw, anyway.”

“We’ll just have to wait.” I place a cool cloth on Mrs. Shaw’s forehead, smoothing back her gray hair. “I’m so sorry.”

Then the sirens.

And God, the cops.

Again.

Again I’ll have to tell a story to the cops.

“They’re coming,” Falcon says. “What do you want me to do with your gun?”

“I don’t know. Give it to them, I guess. It’s clearly the murder weapon.” I rise and pace around the Shaws’ kitchen.

“This is so fucked up! I’m an officer of the court, Falcon. A parole officer. I’m supposed to be one of the good guys.”

Falcon wraps his arms around me. “You are, Vannah. You are. But being a good guy doesn’t mean you don’t sometimes get mixed up with bad guys. I should fucking know.”

A few moments later, Falcon open the door and lets the EMTs in.

They gather around Mrs. Shaw.

“You know how old she is?” one of them asks me.

“I don’t. I’d guess mid-sixties.”

“Has she taken anything?”

“Not that I know of. She says it hurts though.”

“I’m sure it does.” He touches Mrs. Shaw’s neck. “We’ve got you, ma’am.”

Once Mrs. Shaw is on the stretcher and out the door, the police arrive.

“What happened here?” one officer asks.

Thankfully, the officers aren’t the same ones who were at Falcon’s.

I breathe in, try to get my pulse under control. “I live in the other side of the duplex. I rent it from the Shaws. I came home about a half hour ago to find my place trashed. When we knocked on the Shaws’ door, there was no answer. The door was unlocked so we came in.”

“And you found Mrs. Shaw in the kitchen.”

“Yeah. It looked like she’d been punched in the face several times. Probably in the stomach too. She was lying here, and her face was bloody, but her pulse was strong. I cleaned her face up.”

“And her husband?”

I gulp. “I haven’t seen him, but Falcon says he was shot. His body’s in the tub.”

“Officer Denny is talking to your friend now about Mr. Shaw.”

“I should tell you. I think it may be my gun that was used.”

The officer’s eyebrows shoot up. “Oh?”

“Yeah. I wasn’t even here. I’ve been at Falcon’s all day. God, this day!” I rub my forehead against the jackhammer inside.

“Is there any reason why anyone would want to frame you?”

I can think of about a dozen, but I’m not saying them. “No. I haven’t done anything. I just started a new job as a parole officer for the county last week. I haven’t even lived here for two full weeks yet.”

“I see.” He makes notes on his tablet. “How close were you to the Shaws?”

“Not very. Like I said, I’ve only lived here for a short time. They’re my landlords.”

Or they were.

Mr. Shaw is gone, and Mrs. Shaw isn't going to want to be anywhere near me after she finds out what went down.

"All right. Was your gun locked up?"

"Yes, sir. In a safe under my bed."

"Who else had the combination?"

"Only me."

Uh-oh. I probably shouldn't have said that.

"You sure?"

"I think so. I don't recall telling anyone else. I don't have a roommate, so..."

"All right. Good enough. These home safes are easy to crack for someone who knows what he's doing. We may want to speak to you again." He hands me a card.

"Of course. Whatever you need"—I regard the card—"Officer Swanson."

Falcon finishes up with Officer Denny, and the two of them appear in the Shaws' kitchen.

"Can one of you wait for the coroner? And then forensics?"

"With all due respect," Falcon says, "it's late, and Ms. Gallo isn't safe here."

Officer Denny nods. "Mr. Bellamy here told me what happened earlier, and I agree with him. I don't think Ms. Gallo should stay here. Once the coroner and forensics are done, we'll need to rope all this off anyway. It's a crime scene."

“I’ll stay,” Falcon says.

“Oh, no you won’t.” I shake my head. “I can’t leave you. I’m frightened.”

Officer Denny nods. “We’ll get someone to stay. You two go...wherever you’re going.”

“Thank you,” Falcon says. “She’ll be at my place. You have my information.”

“I need to see if any of my personals are salvageable,” I say. “And then we’ll be on the way.”

Falcon and I leave the Shaws’ side of the duplex and head into mine.

Everything is ruined. Even the carpeting has been ripped up and shredded.

I gather some underwear and salvage what I can of my clothes, along with some personal items that are still in one piece, and then I leave with Falcon.

I say nothing on the drive back to his place. At least his house isn’t a crime scene. Only his backyard.

How did my life come to this?

How?

**FALCON**

**E**ight Years Earlier...

*I flush the powder. Nothing like seeing hundreds of thousands of dollars go down the toilet, but the Bellamys don't fuck with drugs.*

*Hawk and I both swore to keep it a secret, and we made plans to have that old barn razed.*

*But before we could do it —*

*Eagle came to my room. I was living in my old room while my house was being built. I'd just graduated college, and in a few weeks Mom and I were supposed to leave on a wine tour. Then Leif and I were going to join the Navy.*

*Except none of that will happen. I haven't talked to Leif yet, but no way can I leave my family. No wine tour, and no Navy. Not until this drug shit is put to bed.*

*How did I not notice what was going on with Eagle? I was in my last year of college and Hawk in his first, Robin and Raven in their third, so Eagle was the only kid at home this past school year.*

*He seemed fine during winter break, and I didn't go home for spring break. Leif and I went to Fort Lauderdale and partied it up.*

*But I look at my youngest brother now, as he stands in my doorway, trembling slightly, and I realize he's lost weight.*

*I've seen the way he eats, and I know how hard Dad works him here on the ranch, so he should be all muscle.*

*He's tall and lanky. Why didn't I notice?*

*Was I not looking?*

*"Eagle?"*

*Eagle scratches his arm. "I need to talk to you."*

*"Sure. Come on in."*

*He enters and closes the door behind him.*

*"Have a seat." I gesture to my desk chair, and then I take a seat on the bed. "What's up?"*

*"I've got a problem. A big assed problem."*

*"You don't look good, E."*

*"I'm not."*

*"What the fuck is going on? You look like you need a hit."*

*He rakes his fingers through his hair, stares down at his lap.*

*Looks like I fucking nailed it.*

*Anger laces through my veins. "What the hell, Eagle? Drugs?"*

*He looks up, his eyes wide...and kind of bloodshot.  
“Falcon, I’m in big trouble.”*

*“If you’re on drugs, I’d say you are. But we’ll get you  
detoxed. Mom and Dad—”*

*“Mom and Dad can’t know anything about this.”*

*“You know they’d do anything for any of us. We have  
plenty of money to get you the best help available. So we’re  
going to—”*

*He rises then, and he has a look on his face that I’m not  
sure I’ve ever seen before. Fear, agony, and...torment. “No.  
No Mom and Dad,” he says through gritted teeth.*

*“All right.”*

*Clearly I need to tread carefully. I’m twenty-two, and when  
I turned twenty-one, I gained access to my trust fund. Robin  
and Raven are both twenty-one, so they have access to theirs  
as well.*

*But already I know Eagle won’t go to either of our sisters  
with this issue.*

*This is a brother thing.*

*“How much do you need?”*

*“I can’t fucking believe this.”*

*“Just tell me how much money you need, Eagle. We’ll get  
you something to take the edge off, and then you’re going  
straight to rehab.”*

*“It’s not that simple, Falcon.”*



*“How is it not that simple?”*

*He sighs. “It’s a long fucking story.”*

*“Then you’d better start talking. Because if you want my help, I need every single detail.”*

*He stays silent for moment.*

*“Eagle...”*

*“All right, all right. You got anything to drink in here?”*

*“No. I don’t keep liquor in my bedroom. I need you to focus.”*

*“That’s just the reality of the situation, Falcon. I can’t focus. I need a hit.”*

*Jesus Christ. What the hell has my littlest brother gotten into?*

*“What are you doing? Meth?”*

*“These days, whatever I can get my fucking hands on.”*

*“For fuck’s...” I inhale, rub at my forehead. “You better start at the beginning.”*

*He clears his throat, rubs his hand over his face, his lips trembling. “Got in with some bad stuff. Some bad people at school this year.”*

*“And no one was home to take care of it.”*

*“Well... You speak the truth. You, Hawk, the girls. All at the university.”*

*Anger again... “You really want to blame this on us?”*

*“No. I mean...” His hands tremble as he rakes his fingers through his hair. “That’s not what I mean.”*

*I’m tempted to berate him further, but I need him to tell me what’s going on. I can’t help him otherwise. So all I say is, “Go on. Take your time.”*

*He closes his eyes and rubs his temples. Then he opens his eyes again. “It started innocently enough. Smoking a little dope. But then Rod and Marco—”*

*“Who the hell are Rod and Marco?”*

*“Rod Johnson and Mark Rodriguez. The guys I started hanging out with. Rod’s brother got some coke, and we tried that.”*

*“All right.” Anger wells within me for the third time, but I’m determined to stay calm. “So... coke.”*

*“Yeah, man, and it was such an incredible high. I can’t even tell you. I had so much energy, but it can feel like normal energy, you know?”*

*“You can spare me the details, Eagle. I’ve never touched the stuff, and I never will. I don’t give a rat’s ass how it felt to be high.”*

*He clears his throat, and it sounds like he’s been smoking four packs a day. “Fair enough. So anyway. I was buying a gram here and there, with my allowance and all. But then I got cocky.”*

*Shocking. My little brother has always been the most arrogant of all of us. With his good looks and jovial demeanor,*

*he's the most popular of the Bellamy siblings. The rest of us are kind of introverts.*

*"Go on."*

*"The housekeeper found some in my bedroom, and of course she went straight to Mom and Dad."*

*"As she should."*

*Another throat clear. "Yeah. So no more allowance for me."*

*"That's why you're coming to me? For money for drugs?"*

*He lets out a sarcastic chuckle. "Jesus Christ, Falcon, it's so much more than that."*

*I draw in a deep breath, gather my wits. Christ almighty.*

*"Keep talking," I say.*

*"So Mom and Dad cut me off. And of course I don't have access to my own money yet because I'm not twenty-one."*

*"If you think I'm giving you money for drugs, you can—"*

*He holds his hand up, still shaking. "Falcon, please."*

*I draw in another breath and count to ten. "Fine. Continue."*

*"So Rod and Marco, they don't come from the kind of wealth I come from. So I asked them how they got the drugs."*

*"And?"*

*"Marco works in town at the feed and seed part-time, but Rod..."*

*“Yeah?”*

*“He deals on the side. Turns out? The drugs Rod gets? He doesn’t just buy them and then we pay him back. He’s dealing them, and he gets a fucking cut.”*

*“I thought dealers didn’t use the stuff?”*

*“For Christ sake, Falcon. Don’t be so fucking naïve. Course they do. Why the hell do you think they get into dealing?”*

*He’s probably right. I’m thinking of the higher-ups. The ones who are too smart to use the shit.*

*“Don’t tell me you...” I shake my head.*

*“Yeah. It was a way to get the drugs I wanted. I started dealing.”*

*“And you’ve got a debt you need to pay?”*

*“God... If only it were that simple.”*

*My mind goes to the bags of cocaine Hawk and I found on our property.*

*The puzzle pieces are starting to fit together, and I don’t like it. Not one fucking bit.*

*“Go on...” I say, my voice sounding like a growl.*

*“So yeah. I was dealing, and one of the big bosses found out about who I was.”*

*“Meaning?”*

*“A Bellamy. With access to property right on the border.”*

*“Oh my fucking God.” I wipe the perspiration off my forehead. My heart is stampeding. I really don't like where this is going.*

*“Yeah. So the big guy, Vega, offered me a bigger cut...if I let them use our land.”*

*“Which property?” I say through gritted teeth.*

*“That old barn next to the woods. It's only a couple miles from the border. Easy access. Through the brush.”*

*Already I know the ending to this story. It ends in the coke that Hawk and I flushed into the septic tank.*

*“Continue...”*

*“One of Diego's thugs called me today, asked me to meet him at the drop. And when I did...”*

*I shake my head. “The stash was gone.”*

*Eagle cocks his head. “Yeah. How the fuck did you know?”*

*“Hawk and I were out there doing target practice couple days ago. We got caught in that rainstorm, so we sought shelter in the old barn.”*

*“I don't get it. They buried the shit.”*

*“Not well enough. The dirt was soft, one of the bags had broken, and there was some white powder on the ground. It didn't take Hawk and me long to dig it up and figure out what it was.”*

*Eagle leaps to his feet.. “Jesus, Falcon. This is great news! I need that stuff, man. I need to give it back or they're going to*

*fucking kill me.”*

*Jesus Christ. Hawk and I did what we thought was right. How were we to know our little brother was involved?*

*“Where’d you stash it? All I need is the stuff. Then they’ll get the hell off my back.”*

*“I don’t have it, E.”*

*His face goes pale, his jaw drops, and his eyes seem even more sunken than they did before.*

*“What the fuck?”*

*“All Hawk and I knew was there were illegal drugs on our property. So we did what anyone would’ve done. We destroyed it.”*

*Eagle paces around my bed, and this time his whole body trembles. “Christ, Falcon. They’re going to kill me.”*

*My brotherly protective instincts kick in big time.. “Slow down, slow down. I will never let anyone hurt you.”*

*“You don’t understand these people, man. They’re bad news.”*

*“Uh...yeah, they’re bad news. They’re fucking drug dealers, Eagle. Not Sunday school teachers.”*

*Eagle leans down and grabs me by my collar. “You just signed my death certificate, brother.”*

*I stand and break Eagle’s hold, grabbing his arms. Fuck it all. They’re skinny. I force him to sit down on the bed. “You shut the fuck up. And you listen to me and you listen good. No one is going to harm you. I will die before I let that happen.*

*But damn you, Eagle. Damn you for putting me in this position. Damn you for putting Hawk in this position. What the hell did you think we would do? We found drugs on our property. If the cops had found it before we did, our whole family would be in trouble. Is that what you wanted?"*

*Eagle's face falls into his hands. "No. I didn't want any of this. I just..."*

*I yank him up by his hair, forcing him to look at me. "You just wanted to get fucking high. It's a damned good thing Mom and Dad cut you off."*

*Then I rethink those words that just came out of my mouth. If Mom and Dad hadn't cut him off, he wouldn't be in this dilemma.*

*But I can't think that way.*

*We grew up on a ranch, working hard. Sure, Mom and Dad have a drink every now and then. So do I. But no one ever touches the hard stuff. That was drilled into our heads from day one.*

*Seems my youngest brother was the only one who didn't get it.*

*Still... The thought of him being in danger gets my protective instincts boiling.*

*"I fucked up, Fal. I don't know what else to say."*

*I sit down next to him on my bed. "Settle down. How much were those drugs worth?"*

*"How the hell should I know?"*

*“Can you find out?”*

*“I don’t know. They’ve given me forty-eight hours to produce the product.”*

*For a moment, I think about bagging up some powdered sugar, but this isn’t a damned cartoon.*

*This is real life.*

*“Will they take cash instead?”*

*“I don’t know.”*

*“You need to find out. And you need to find out how much.”*

*“You’d give it to me?”*

*“Yeah, I’ll give it to you. I’ll charge you twenty-five percent interest, and the day you turn twenty-one, you’ll pay me back.”*

*His jaw drops. “Twenty-five percent? That’s extortion.”*

*“Talk to Robin and Raven then. Maybe one of them will give you a better deal. Hawk doesn’t have access to his yet.”*

*He closes his mouth.*

*“Yeah, I thought you wouldn’t have an argument. You expect to get out of this scot-free? Hell no. You did something really stupid, Eagle. It was bad enough to get involved with drugs. Then to start selling them?”*

*“That part wasn’t my fault, I—”*

*I let out a loud scoff. “You really want to go there? Not your fault? Do you hear yourself? Mom and Dad were right to*



*cut you off.”*

*“No.” He shakes his head and stands.. “That’s not what I mean.”*

*“Then what the fuck do you mean?”*

*“It’s not my fault that Vega found out who I was, that I had land on the border.”*

*“Last I checked, this isn’t your land. It’s Mom and Dad’s.”*

*“For fuck’s sake, Falcon, you know what I mean.”*

*“You watch your tone.”*

*He trembles then, and his legs give out as he falls to the ground.*

*Man, he really is in a bad way.*

*I help him to his feet, a wave of brotherly love enveloping me. How could he be so stupid?*

*And how could I have not seen this coming?*

*I’ve been here every summer, working the ranch.*

*Except for last summer. Leif and I backpacked through Europe.*

*Hawk was here.*

*No...Hawk wasn’t here. He left for college early for his football scholarship.*

*But Robin and Raven...*

*No... Robin took summer classes, and Raven went to Australia to work as an au pair for the summer.*

*Damn.*

*Not one of us was here last summer.*

*Eagle was all alone the summer between his sophomore and junior years of high school, at an impressionable age.*

*I'm the oldest. I have to take some of the blame here.*

*It's my job to protect my siblings. Especially Eagle, the baby.*

*I help Eagle lie down on my bed. "We'll figure this out."*

*"Promise?"*

*"I promise."*



THAT WAS a promise I'd grow to regret.

Savannah hasn't said anything on the drive to my place, so I've been alone with my thoughts.

All this time, I figured my life would be better from here.

Sure, I'd always be an ex-con, and people would probably treat me as such, but I could throw myself into work on the ranch. Make myself as invaluable as I had been before I got put away.

And then I met Savannah Gallo.

My fucking parole officer.

I couldn't keep my hands to myself, and neither could she.

Then again...

What if I *had* kept my hands to myself? Savannah would've been home when those two goons went to her place. They would've taken her.

Mr. Shaw might still be alive though.

But when Savannah was not at her place, and they traced her to mine, I was there.

I was there to make sure they couldn't take her.

But I was unarmed, and I couldn't stop Savannah from leaving the changing room, even when I told her not to.

If she hadn't done it though, Carlo and I would still be in a standoff. Eventually, I would've had to either shoot Abel or let him go. My legs would've given out as I was holding us both up.

But I'm willing to bet I have way more stamina than Carlo. That blond pretty boy has probably never been behind bars like I have.

I stop the car in my driveway, and I turn to Savannah. "Come on. Let's go."

She nods, opens the door of the passenger side, and gets out.

I grab her stuff out of the trunk and take it inside. The dogs greet us, and I give them both some loves.

Savannah seems to ignore them. But then she finally kneels, pets Sydney's soft head, and picks up Sammy, cradling him in her arms.

Thank God for dogs.

They help.

I remember the day I got the original Sammy—the one Raven kept while I was in prison. I'd already figured I wouldn't be going on my wine tour or joining the Navy, not after Hawk and I found drugs on our property, and especially not after Eagle's problems came to light. So I got a dog. A pup.

It helped. For a time, anyway.

But Savannah's going to need more than puppy love to get through the fact that she nearly killed a man.

"Tomorrow," I say to her. "Tomorrow we'll go to the hospital. We'll get all the information we need. On Mrs. Shaw, and on the other two."

She simply nods.

"Vannah, what do you need? Are you hungry?"

"No."

"You have to eat something. I was going to make burgers for our dinner."

Dinner. Seems so long ago. It's after midnight now.

"Not hungry."

"I understand. I'm not really either. But you have to eat. I've got a loaf of bread, and peanut butter and jelly. Can you get something like that down?"

She doesn't respond.

“Eggs? I’ve got eggs. I can fry up the burgers. Make some potatoes.”

She rubs her belly. “I... I don’t want any beef. Just doesn’t sound good.”

“All right. Some fruit? I have apples. Some toast?”

“Scrambled eggs,” she says.

“Sure. Scrambled eggs then. You want some toast with it?”

“No. Just the eggs. They’re my comfort food.”

“Coming up.”

When is the last time I even cooked? Since I moved in, I’ve been living on sandwiches. I’m out of deli meat, so I couldn’t offer that to Vannah.

I look around my cupboards to find a skillet, and when I do, I realize I don’t have butter.

I find a can of nonstick cooking spray. Thank God.

I whisk the eggs, throw them in the pan, and once they’re done, I plate them. Then I pour two glasses of water.

I set Savannah’s plate on the table and hand her a fork. “Eat,” I say.

She takes her fork and spears a piece of scrambled egg, brings it to her mouth.

She swallows audibly.

“You okay?”

“Feel kind of nauseated.”

“That’s because of what you’ve been through today. But your body still needs fuel. So please, Savannah. Please eat your eggs.”

## SAVANNAH

The eggs are flavorless. Yellow globules that feel gross in my mouth.

Scrambled eggs are no longer my comfort food.

Nothing can comfort me right now.

This day is surreal.

I can't get Mr. Shaw off my mind.

And when I do manage to get past him, all I can see is Giancarlo, lying on his back, blood spurting from his neck.

Is he even alive?

Are the police going to come after me, charge me with his murder?

No.

I have a degree in criminal justice, and I've worked in the system for the last five years. What happened was pure self-defense. He had a gun trained on Falcon.

I stare at my plate as images form in my mind, and I find myself rolling back through time.



*WAS THERE a reason why we moved? Why I had to finish my senior year of high school away from my friends? Away from everything I knew?*

*There was.*

*And that reason's name was Michael.*

*He just got married, but he's not happy. He was forced into marriage at the young age of twenty.*

*And now, here I am in Austin at a new high school where I don't know anybody. Great. Not a fun senior year.*

*Back in New York I went to private school. But here? Mom and Dad decided to have me finish out in the public school system.*

*Mom and Dad think I don't know. But how can I not? I know why my oldest brother left the country. He didn't want to get into Dad's and Grandpa's business.*

*I'm not naïve, and certainly not ignorant.*

*You learn things after a while, after you see some of the things I've seen.*

*I'm a girl, so they try to shield me.*

*But I know what my future holds.*

*After I finish high school, they're going to try to marry me off. Like Mom was married off at eighteen.*

*It all sucks.*



*If I knew where Vinny was, I'd contact him. Go to him.*

*He could be dead for all I know. Dead seems to happen a lot around this family.*

*I'm not getting married at eighteen. I'm going to college to study criminal justice and then go to law school. Then I'm going to devote my entire life to taking out people like my father and grandfather.*

*And I hate to even think that. I love them both very much, and I know they love me.*

*But I'm not stupid. I know what's going on.*

*And I'm pretty sure that their work is related to why we had to move suddenly.*

*But I will make it happen.*

*I'll get through this senior year. And then I can do what I want. I have a trust fund, but I don't get access to it until I'm twenty-one.*

*I'm not sure I want to access it. I know it's ill-gotten gains. Oh, I'm sure the money itself has been laundered as clean as the driven snow, but it comes from nefarious sources.*

*Drugs.*

*My family moves drugs.*

*And I want out.*



“PLEASE EAT, SAVANNAH.” Falcon gestures to my plate full of cold and congealed scrambled eggs.

“I’ll throw up if I do.”

“You won’t. You’ll feel better. Believe me.” He rises, stands behind me, and rubs my shoulders again. “You think I don’t want to toss my guts right now? I just got the fuck out of prison, I’m finally watching my sister get well, and all this shit goes down.”

I push the eggs around on my plate with my fork. “This has nothing to do with you. This is my doing. My family’s doing.”

“It’s not your fault, Vannah.”

“Isn’t it? “ I toss my fork onto the table with a clatter. “I was so naïve to think I could come here. To think it was all over. That they could find somebody else in Austin to do their dirty work.”

“Why do they want you to marry that guy?”

“I don’t know. Alliances or something. I said no at eighteen, and I said no at twenty-one after I finished college. I tried to throw my father a bone by putting off going to law school and getting a job as a parole officer. I did my job and I did it well. They didn’t come to me often. Only occasionally, and I violated my ethics and looked the other way. It was only once or twice a year. But even that was too much for me, and I found I could no longer live with it. But I should’ve. I should’ve stayed. Mr. Shaw would still be alive.”

The tears come then—the ones I’ve tried to hold back. I bury my head in my hands.

Falcon steadies my shoulders. “Don’t do this to yourself. Don’t take the blame that’s not yours to take. Trust me. I learned that lesson the hard way.”

I look over my shoulders, meet his gaze. “Do you regret it?”

“No,” he says flatly.

There’s still so much I don’t know about Falcon and why he copped to the manslaughter charge. And I want to know. I want to know everything about him. But right now? All I can think about is the havoc that I’ve wreaked on this lovely small town. This lovely small town that I should’ve stayed far away from.

“Will you ever tell me the truth?” I ask.

“I can’t, Vannah.”

I wipe at my eyes. “Why not?”

“Because I swore I’d never tell. And I will not break that promise.”

I sniffle. “I understand.”

“Have you ever made a promise like that?”

“You have no idea. All those times I looked the other way on the parole thing.”

“Because you promised.”

I pause a moment, think. “Actually, not in so many words. It was just expected of me, my lot in life.”

“That’s what you wanted to escape by coming here.”

“Yeah. I really thought they’d let me go. I don’t know why I’m so important to Miles McAllister. He doesn’t need me. There are plenty of other women he could force himself on.”

Falcon grips my shoulder again, this time hard. “You’re not marrying Miles McAllister.”

“Damned right I’m not.”

“No, Vannah.” His grip tightens further. “You’re not marrying Miles McAllister...because you’re going to marry me.”

FALCON

**D**id those words just come out of my mouth?

It must be my hunger. Or the late hour. It's after one a.m.

I don't want to get married.

I'm completely fucked up.

I'm Falcon Bellamy again—not Savage—but there's part of Savage in Falcon now. He'll always be there, gripping at me, keeping me from being whole.

Her jaw drops.

“Falcon, I don't think—”

“I'm not proposing, Savannah. I mean, I guess it sounded like I was, but you're not marrying anyone you don't want to marry. Certainly not Miles McAllister.”

She nods, her lips trembling.

“I've got a phone call to make. To my buddy—well, ex-buddy—the one I was supposed to join the Navy with before... Well, before everything.”

“All right, Falcon.”

I look at the time on my phone. “But it will have to wait until morning now. Let’s go to bed.”



THE SUN STREAMS in through my window, and I stretch my arms. My stomach growls. Scrambled eggs don’t last long, and despite the shit that’s brewing, I’ve got to eat.

Savannah still sleeps, her face serene. She seems at peace, so I don’t want to disturb her. I rise, walk to the kitchen, shove a few pieces of bread into the toaster, and then type Leif Ramsey’s number into my cell phone.

Four rings, and then— “Yeah? This is Ramsey.”

I clear my throat. “Hello, Leif.”

“Who is—” A pause for a few seconds. It seems like an eternity. “Falcon? Is that you?”

“It is.”

“Yeah, my dad said you were getting out.”

Leif’s father, Krister Ramsey, visited me in prison quite a few times. But Leif never did.

“Where are you? You still in New York?”

“As a matter of fact, I’m here. Home.”

My jaw drops. “You are?”

“Yeah. I just got married.”

Leif Ramsey got married? Not too big of a shock. His blond good looks always had the ladies in a twitter. He and I

were like night and day, literally.

“I suppose you’re wondering why I’m calling,” I say.

“No congratulations?”

Is he fucking serious? He didn’t get in touch with me at all while I was in prison.

“Sure, whatever. Listen, I—”

“Look, I should’ve visited, man. I was overseas a lot of that time, and—”

“I don’t want your apologies, Leif. I can’t take it right now anyway. What I need is your help.”

Another pregnant pause, and then, “I’m listening.”

“I—”

“Wait, wait. Before you say anything more, I just want to tell you how sorry I was to hear about Raven.”

Man, I really can’t go there now. “Raven’s going to be fine.”

“Yeah. I hope so. I heard you donated bone marrow.”

This line of conversation has to end. If I let myself think about Raven, I’ll go soft. “Listen, there’s a lot we could talk about. Like I could try to find out why Eagle’s hanging around Scarlett.”

“Eagle’s hanging around Scarlett?”

“Damn, do you know what your family’s doing, Ramsey?”

“Hey, you just—”

“Save it. This isn’t what any of this is about. I’m going to need some help. I know you’ve been doing security and investigative work for the Wolfe family in New York. I’m thinking I need to hire you.”

“What for?”

“There’re some things I need to tell you, but I can’t say them over the phone. Can you come to my place? We’ll talk outside.”

“You don’t think your place is safe?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. But I want you to have a look. You’re trained in detecting surveillance, right?”

“Yeah.”

“How quickly can you get here?”

“Kelly and I are free tonight.”

“Kelly? I assume that’s your wife?”

“She is. She’s been through some shit as well.”

“Welcome to the fucking club. All right. I’ll text you the address.”

“Falcon, you don’t need to text me the address. I was there when the house was being built, remember?”

Despite myself, I crack a smile at the memory. “Yeah. I remember. Nix it, though. Meet me at the hospital instead. I have to check on some people there.”

“Oh? Is Raven...”



Just the thought slices into me like a knife. “No. Some others.”

“Got it. Just text me where.” A short pause. “Maybe one day you’ll trust me enough to tell me what happened. Why you bagged on all our plans.”

I don’t answer.

Because that day will never come.

## SAVANNAH

I think I'm awake.

But I'm not sure. The sun is streaming in from a window, hitting my face.

My mind is a haze, and I don't feel like I can move my body.

It's like one of those dreams you have in that semi-awake state. Where you know what's going on around you, but you can't move.

I'm not even sure where I am.

But I know something bad went down.

I close my eyes, turn, and inhale the scent of woods and musk.

Falcon.

I'm in Falcon's bed.

And then I remember...

All the bad things...

How I may have—

I stifle the thought.

But it forces itself into my brain anyway.

I may have killed a man.

I guess I'll find out today.

I jerk upward in bed.

I'm supposed to be at work. It's a Wednesday.

I scramble out of bed and fumble around for my phone. It's nowhere to be found, but Falcon does have a clock on his night table. I gasp out loud.

Eleven thirty!

I'm fired for sure now.

First I have to retrieve my phone, where I'm sure I'll find a million messages from Bridget wondering where the hell I am. I started the job less than three weeks ago, and I've already taken one day of PTO for Ashley's funeral, and now I haven't bothered calling in.

And God... I can't tell her why.

I'm going to have to leave the job.

That at least will suffuse my ethical dilemma where Falcon is concerned.

But I've got way more dilemmas now.

How I wish I could go back to the time where my only ethical dilemma was about dating Falcon.

Dating?

We've known each other for a week, but what we're doing goes so far beyond dating.

He even kind of proposed last night, if I recall correctly.

Except then he said it wasn't a proposal.

I shake my head, trying to clear it. I don't trust my own memory right now. Maybe I'm making things up.

Where is Falcon? And where are the dogs?

Falcon can't let them outside because it's a crime scene.

Then I hear some scratching at the bedroom door.

I walk to the door and open it. Sydney sits there like a good girl, but Sammy falls from his hind legs into a soft furball on the floor.

It was him, little puppy scratches on my door.

I pick him up and cradle him, kissing his sweet head. Then I kneel and give Sydney lots of scratches behind her soft ears.

"Where's Falcon, guys?"

This house is so big. He could be anywhere.

I'm wearing a tank top and a pair of panties, but what the heck? He's seen everything. Still holding Sammy, I walk with Sydney down the hallway toward the kitchen, where I finally hear Falcon's voice.

He's on the phone.

He looks up when he hears me enter the kitchen, but he waves me away.

He wants privacy. Maybe he's talking to that friend he told me about, Leif something or other.

I can do without coffee, and if Falcon wants privacy, he deserves that much. I've already turned his life upside down.

I'm not in the least bit hungry. I think I ate a few bites of scrambled eggs last night, but Falcon and I were supposed to have dinner.

But before that... We went for a dip in the hot tub... And

---

The rest is a blur.

Except it's a blur in exact detail.

I can't explain it any better than that.

I walk back to the bedroom. I don't need a shower since I had one last night. Falcon and I went straight to bed. We didn't make love. Or have sex. Whatever it is that the two of us do.

We were both just too damned exhausted.

I can't believe I slept so long, but I did. I don't exactly feel refreshed, but I at least feel rested.

It was a good escape.

In fact... I lie back down on the bed, bringing Sammy with me, and inviting Sydney to join us. She jumps on the bed and snuggles up next to me. Sammy snuggles into her body.

The warmth of the dogs relaxes me—at least a little bit.

I close my eyes.

If I could only go back to sleep...

Then I jerk upward in bed.

Bridget. I was supposed to call Bridget. I was supposed to find my phone.

Then I lean back anyway.

I'm fired. That's pretty clear. I couldn't go to work today if I wanted to.

I'll find my phone eventually, and I'll call. I'll explain what happened, and then I'll resign.

Likely she'll be glad to be rid of me.

I don't know how much time passes before Falcon enters the room. Both dogs perk up their ears.

"Vannah?"

"Yeah?"

"How are you doing, baby? You okay?"

What a loaded question. Of course I'm not okay. I nearly killed a man yesterday, and because of me, my sweet landlord is dead, and his sweet wife is in the hospital.

My life is a big ball of shit.

Still, I nod. "Yeah."

"My pal Leif Ramsey is meeting me at the hospital. I'll check on Abel and Carlo and Mrs. Shaw."

"I'm coming along."

"You sure you don't want to stay here with the dogs? You need to keep resting."

“I should really be at work, Falcon. Why didn’t you wake me?”

He wrinkles his forehead. “Are you serious? I only got up about a half hour before you did. Besides, there’s no way you could’ve gone into work today.”

“I’m not arguing that point, but I should’ve at least called.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“First of all, I didn’t wake up until eleven thirty, and second, I have no idea where my phone is.”

“It’s in the kitchen on the counter.”

I sigh. “All right. I guess I need to get this over with.” I walk to the door and then turn around. “And I *am* going with you today.”

“I figured you’d insist. I don’t blame you. I wouldn’t want to stay alone here either if I were you.”

“It’s not staying alone that’s the problem, Falcon.” I push my hair out of my eyes. “Do you think this is the first time I’ve ever seen gunfire? Knife wounds?”

He doesn’t respond.

“I need to go because I need to see firsthand the devastation I’ve caused. Mrs. Shaw is a widow because of me. And I may be a killer.”

**FALCON**

Leif Ramsey is still tall, blond, blue-eyed. It's only been eight years, but the two of us of have aged for sure. After a couple tours in Afghanistan, he's probably seen as much or more than I saw in prison.

"Falcon," he says, holding out his hand.

I take it. We shake hands firmly.

We're not the hugging type, although after all this time, I almost want to embrace him.

I'm still kind of pissed at him.

I nod to Savannah. "This is Savannah Gallo."

"Hi. Leif Ramsey."

Leif and Savannah shake hands.

I glance around. "Where's your wife?"

"I didn't bring her long. I wanted to scope out the situation first. You didn't get real detailed with me on the phone."

"No, I didn't." I touch my phone in my back pocket. "From now on I'll be using burners."



“You get yourself in some more trouble, man?” Leif asks.

Anger crawls at the back of my neck. He has a lot of nerve.

“No.”

Savannah steps forward. “This is all my doing, I’m afraid.”

Leif raises an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“It’s a long story,” I say. “But first, we need to check on some people who were here.”

“They’re not going to give you information unless you’re family,” he says.

I cross my arms. “Do I look like an idiot to you? I know they won’t. That’s why you and I are going to charm the pants off one of these volunteers.”

Savannah nudges me. “Excuse me?”

I turn to her. “Savannah, do you have a better idea?”

“Not that the two of you aren’t charming, but yeah, I have a better idea. I’ll tell them who I am. I’m a parole officer working for the county. They’ll give me the information.”

“They will?” Leif asks.

“I have a certain amount of charm too, you know.”

I take her hand. “And you think you can handle this?”

“I’ve handled it before. All I have to do is flash my ID.”

“All right. You try first then.”

Leif and I stand back, while Savannah strides to the information desk.

She stands talking for a few minutes, smiling. Then she opens her purse, pulls out her wallet, and flashes something.

She and the information clerk continue talking, laughing, and smiling.

How she can smile is beyond me, but I get it. She's playing a part—and it's clearly not the first time she's played it.

All this time...I was looking at Vannah as someone sweet and innocent, someone who needs a white picket fence.

And then it turns out she comes from the damned Mafia.

Of course, that doesn't mean she herself is Mafia. She wants out. She's explained all of that.

But growing up the way she did, she clearly learned this act she's putting on. I learned in prison to read people. Sometimes I read them better than they did themselves. I knew when someone was hiding something...but Savannah's background slipped right by me. I was blinded by my intense attraction to her, by our explosive chemistry, and by the fact that she's a parole officer.

I should have seen it. I should have seen it all. And maybe I did... Maybe that's the real reason I asked Lance to investigate her.

Is she playing me? Is she...

No. Absolutely not. What we have—whatever the hell it is—is fucking real.

About ten minutes later, Savannah returns and walks right by us.

Leif and I wait a few minutes and then follow her outside the hospital.

“What did you find out?” I ask.

She’s shivering now. As if she’s breaking down after putting on the act. “Giancarlo’s alive. His prognosis is good.”

I heave a sigh of relief. “Thank God,”

“And Mrs. Shaw’s going to be fine.”

“Thank God,” I say again. “What about Abel?”

“Abel...”

“Just tell me, Savannah.”

“He... He had a brain bleed last night, Falcon. From the head trauma. They missed it on the first MRI, and then they didn’t get to it in time. He...” She covers her face with both hands. “I’m so sorry.”

I rake my fingers through my hair. “Fuck it all.”

All this time I was worried about Savannah killing a man. I didn’t realize I was the one who had done so.

All those years... Eight fucking years I gave for a life I didn’t take, only to turn out to be a killer after all. I force myself to stay calm.

“I’m sorry, Falcon,” Savannah says again, gulping. “I never thought...”

“Sorry?” I get a grip, washing the thoughts from my mind. “I acted in self-defense, and he was a motherfucker.”

Leif stands there, listening. I haven't told him enough of the story for him to understand what's going on.

"Apparently he had a history of concussions," Savannah continues. "This isn't your fault."

Savannah so clearly believed that her victim was dead. But my victim? I never thought I caused significant damage. You know how many guys I knocked down in the slammer? Not with a pistol, of course, but with my fists.

None of them ever bit the big one.

"I suppose this means there will be more questioning for me," I say.

"I don't know that there will be," Savannah says. "You were clearly acting in self-defense. And you have a witness. Me."

"Yeah, but I'm an ex-con."

The irony of all of it isn't lost on me. I went to prison under the guise of killing a man that I didn't kill.

I've been out for mere days, and I've actually killed one.

A criminal who wasn't worth his own flesh and bones, but that doesn't really matter in the eyes of the law.

"Falcon, they're not going to come after you," Leif says.

"How the hell do you know that?"

"It's like your friend here says. You didn't break any laws."

“They made an example out of me the first time. And I wasn’t even fucking guilty that time.”

“That’s not what I heard,” Leif says.

“That’s what you heard because you never came to get the truth from me.” I poke him in the chest, and not gently. “You only know that I copped to a plea. I pleaded guilty to manslaughter. But I was innocent.”

He grabs my hand. “Then why the fuck did you cop to it?”

I whisk my hand away. I don’t reply.

“He won’t tell you,” Savannah says. “Believe me. I’ve asked.”

“I’ve known you since we were in diapers,” Leif says. “But I’m a different man than I was back then. Back when you got put away. I made friends. Fellow SEALs. We have each other’s backs, and not all of us came home, Falcon. One thing I learned is that any relationship, romantic or friendly, must have trust. Trust between you and your men in the field. Without trust, we’d all be dead. When the fuck did you stop trusting me?”

I could throw my baggage in his face. I could toss out something like, “When you didn’t visit me in prison.

But that all seems like ancient history because it is. I say simply, “I can’t tell you.”

“Then I can’t help you.” Leif turns and walks away.

“Fuck him anyway,” I say.

Savannah rises from the bench and trots after him. “Hey.” She touches his arm.

I follow them so I can hear their conversation.

“I know we just met, Savannah, but—”

Savannah holds up a hand. “I’m his parole officer. It’s because of me that he’s in this mess. Those guys came to his place looking for me on orders from their superior. If it weren’t for Falcon, I’d be in their custody now. Being forced into marriage or crime or God knows what else.” She turns, facing me. “This is Falcon Bellamy. They called him Savage in prison. Did you know that?”

Leif looks down. “I don’t know anything about his time.”

I close the few steps between us. So much for ancient history. “That’s because you never visited me.”

“I wasn’t here, Falcon. I joined up. I followed through with our plans. Did you expect me not to?”

I stare at the concrete sidewalk. “No. I didn’t want to hold you back.”

“Then how can you blame me?”

I look up, meeting his gaze. “You could’ve written a fucking letter.”

“Maybe. I’m not sure I’ve ever written a letter in my life, but I suppose I could have. Then again, I didn’t have a lot of extra time on my hands either.”

He’s probably not yanking my chain. He joined the Navy. Officers training school and then SEAL training. We both did

our research back in the day. We knew what we were in for. And it wasn't going to be pretty.

Funny thing is, on the inside, you hold grudges. You have to. If you stop holding a grudge, you might not be watching your back—and it'll get stabbed.

But Leif Ramsey would never stab me in the back.

I've got to let this ancient history go.

"I understand," I finally grit out.

The words come more easily than I expected.

"And I want to understand you as well, Falcon. How can I when you won't tell me?"

Savannah comes to my aid again, grabbing Leif's arm. "You just have to believe in him. *I* believe in him."

Leif meets my gaze. "I always did believe in you, Fal."

My lip quivers slightly. "And I believed in you too, buddy. Nobody I'd rather be in a foxhole with."

"Me either, and I was in foxholes with some of the best." Leif comes forward and embraces me.

And it feels good.

Feels good to have my pal back.

## SAVANNAH

I'm not sure what the story with Leif and Falcon is, and I may never know.

If Falcon doesn't want to tell me, he won't. He's made that pretty clear.

But I'm no longer his parole officer.

That happened when I called Bridget this morning.



*"HEY, BRIDGET. SAVANNAH GALLO."*

*"Where the hell are you? I've been leaving messages all morning."*

*"I apologize. Some stuff went down last night. I was up late, talking to cops and such."*

*"Cops?"*

*"Yeah. It's a long story. I hope you won't read about it in the papers, but you might. Suffice it to say, I apologize for not calling you earlier. I could tell you the truth. That my phone*



*was dead and I didn't know where it was, but would you believe me?"*

*"I have no reason to disbelieve you, Savannah."*

*"I hate to leave you in a lurch, Bridget, but I'm going to have to resign."*

*"Resign? You know how shorthanded we are."*

*"Yeah, I know, but I haven't been the best parole officer."*

*"You've done fine. Your paperwork is impeccable." She pauses "What aren't you telling me?"*

*"That's just it, Bridget. I can't tell you. But I do apologize for leaving you in a bind. I hate doing that."*

*"Can I talk you out of this?"*

*"I'm afraid not."*

*"What about... Today's Wednesday. Take the rest of the week off. Use PTO. We'll talk Monday, okay?"*

*"Bridget—"*

*"Monday, Savannah. Okay?"*

*"No, Bridget. I'm sorry. But I quit."*



"SO WHAT NEXT?" Leif asks.

"Savannah and I are free for now. Do you want to have dinner tonight and discuss it?"

"Yeah. You mind if I bring Kelly?"

Falcon narrows his eyes. “How much of your work do you share with her?”

“Everything,” Leif says. “She’s completely trustworthy.”

“Are you going to level with him?” I ask Falcon.

Falcon doesn’t reply.

Leif turns to me. “If he levels with anyone, it will be me. He may ask you and Kelly to leave the room.”

I shrug, though inside my heart crumbles a little. “That’s fine. I just feel like he needs to talk to somebody.”

“Hello?” Falcon shakes his head. “*He* is right here.”

Leif nods. “We know that, Fal.”

“What’s going down right now,” Falcon says, “has more to do with Savannah’s past than with mine. In fact, it doesn’t have anything to do with mine. Except that it might come bite me in the ass and they’ll decide to charge me with manslaughter again.”

“We won’t let that happen,” Leif says. “Will we, Savannah?”

“I agree. We won’t.” I grab his forearm. “You didn’t do anything wrong. You were protecting me. And I think now I may be able to protect you.”

“No,” Falcon says. “You will *not* try to protect me, Vannah.”

I shake my head. “That’s not fair. If I can, I will.”

“You can’t protect me, Savannah. And don’t even try. Please.”

He has no idea of my connections.

Frankly, I’d like to sever all ties—except I do love my parents, my brothers. Brother, I guess, since one is gone for good.

But my family can help the situation. They can make it go away.

I don’t like asking for favors, though. Because the problem with favors when there’s a situation like this? A family situation?

They want to be repaid.

My family *does* owe me.

They owe me for all the times I looked the other way in my job as a parole officer in Austin.

But this is a big favor to ask, and it will no doubt get them in trouble with the McAllister family. If it indeed was the McAllisters who came after me.

I have to wait for my father and grandfather to find out.

“You think you can help him?” Leif asks me.

“I know I can.”

“Vannah, no...”

I cross my arms. “I don’t take orders from you, Falcon. I don’t take orders from anyone, which is why I left Austin in the first place. But I have a feeling that you would move

heaven and earth to help me if I needed it. Why won't you let me do the same for you?"

I already know why.

On the inside, he was the leader. He took care of his cell block, but no one took care of him.

He was on his own.

"I think we've got a lot to talk about, Falcon," Leif says.

Falcon frowns. "I can't talk about all of it."

"You're going to have to. I've told you that if you want my help, I need to know what I'm getting into. In Afghanistan—"

"Don't throw Afghanistan in my face," Falcon says, anger lacing his tone. "You know damned well I wanted to be there, Leif."

"But you weren't." Leif holds up a hand. "I'm not saying that to be rude or mean or to throw it in your face. I'm saying it because it's a simple fact. I imagine I've been through quite a few of the same things that you've been through. Or I've watched my companions go through them. It's far from pretty."

"You don't know the half of it."

"Maybe I don't. Maybe our experiences are completely different. I'm willing to level with you. Will you level with me?"

"About prison? Sure. But what I did to get in there?" Falcon's expression goes dark. "Never in a million years."

Leif rubs his forehead. “All right. I can handle that. But if it comes back to bite you in the ass, and you ask for my help? You’re going to have to level with me, or I can’t help you.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“*Can’t*, Falcon. That’s another thing I learned in the Navy. Without all relevant information, you don’t stand a fucking chance.”

“Yeah? We’ll cross that bridge if we come to it. What we’re dealing with now has nothing to do with me.”

I nod. “It has to do with me and my family. Which is why I think I can help.”

“And I’m telling you no,” Falcon says in a demanding tone.

“You’ve got to stop that, Fal,” Leif says. “I’m married to a woman who’s just as strong as I am in a completely different way. If I needed her help, she’d be there. And she’d use everything at her disposal. It seems you’ve got a good woman here—”

“Wait, wait, wait.” I hold up my hand. “I’m not his woman.”

“Oh?”

“She’s right,” Falcon says. “We don’t have any understanding between us. Only the day. The moment.”

And a pseudo-marriage proposal that he seems to have forgotten.

“Fine. Have it your way.” Leif looks at Falcon, and then at me.

I haven’t known Falcon long, but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t feeling something amazing. I’m probably falling in love with him—with my ex-parolee—who’s in trouble now because of me.

If I had any sense in my head I’d let him go.

I’d go home to Austin, fix this, and never set foot in Summer Creek, Texas again.

And if that’s what I must do to help Falcon? I will.

**FALCON**

“**Y**ou’re clear,” Leif says.

“You’re fucking sure?”

“Yeah, I’m fucking sure. I just spent the last hour and a half going over every inch of this place with a fine-tooth comb. There isn’t any surveillance equipment here. Not anywhere. No microphones, no cameras, no bugs in your landline. You’re good, Falcon. Trust me. I’m trained to do this. I’ve done it for the Wolfe family the last couple of years.”

“All right. Thanks, man.”

Leif’s wife, Kelly—a gorgeous woman with auburn hair and blue eyes—is having a drink with Savannah before dinner in the family room area.

It’s a gorgeous Texas day, but we can’t go outside. Crime scene.

We join the ladies in the family room where they’re sitting together on my leather couch, Sydney at Savannah’s feet and Sammy cuddling in Kelly’s lap.

“We’re good,” I say to Savannah.

Savannah's rigid composure visibly softens. "Good. That's a relief."

"So how did you two meet?" I ask.

"She just got done telling me the story," Savannah says. "It's intense."

"Yeah," Kelly says. "Not sure I'm up for repeating it, but Leif, you can tell him."

"Kelly here..." Leif pauses and frowns. "Well, you were in prison, but you know the billionaire Derek Wolfe who was murdered last year?"

"Yeah. You hear things on the inside." I take a sip of my bourbon—to hell with parole rules. "But some of the things about Wolfe can't possibly be true."

"Oh... they're true," Kelly says.

"Fuck," I say.

"No need to mince words," Kelly says. "I'm one of the women from the island."

Savannah says nothing. Who can blame her? We all heard the stories of what happened to those women on that island.

"You can ask whatever questions you want," Kelly says. "I'm an open book at this point."

"We won't put you through that," Savannah says, "but we're happy that you're here now."

Kelly smiles. "I owe Leif everything."

"I wasn't there when you really needed me," Leif says.



“But you were,” Kelly says. “If you could’ve rescued me from that horrific place, that would’ve been great. But I have to look at things as a whole, you know? It all led me to you.”

A look passes between Leif and Kelly.

Yeah, they’ve been through some shit too.

All this time, I’ve had so much resentment toward Leif. He didn’t visit me in prison. Didn’t even write me.

But he was over in Afghanistan, serving our country. Watching his friends go down. And Kelly... Let’s just say I was able to save a lot of my fellow prisoners from what happened to her.

“So...” I say. “Right now, Savannah’s the issue. You’ve heard the story of what went down here at my house. Why we can’t go into the backyard.” I scratch reach down and scratch Sydney behind her soft ears. “Why we have to take these two mutts here out on leashes in the front yard to do their business.”

“Crime scene,” Leif says.

“Yeah. I was more worried about the guy Savannah stabbed. I didn’t think he had a chance in hell of making it. You got him right in the carotid, sweetheart.”

Savannah simply nods.

“All I did was clock my guy in the head with his pistol. And he ended up dying.”

“I’m no lawyer,” Leif says, “but it seems like it’s an open-and-shut case. These guys trespassed on your property, held

you at gunpoint. What else were you supposed to do?"

"Yeah, I get that. You get that. The ladies here get that." I sigh. "But I'm an ex-con, man. I pleaded guilty to manslaughter once, even though I didn't do it."

Leif tilts his head. "Right. And you won't tell us why."

I shoot a fiery glance at Leif. "No, I won't. But I served my time for that crime. Guilty or innocent, it's all irrelevant at this point. I did my time, and they can't get me again for that one."

"No," Savannah says. "But because you're an ex-con, they're going to look very closely at Abel's death."

"I know."

"You've got your father's money, your own money," Leif says. "You've got an eyewitness in Savannah here."

"Yeah, and my father and grandfather are on the case as well," Savannah says. "Those guys came for me. Not you, Falcon."

"So what's the next move?" I ask.

"From an investigative standpoint," Savannah says, "they're going to look into this. You're probably going to have to answer more questions, and you may want to have an attorney present when you do."

"Fine. My old man knows lots of attorneys. Though they couldn't help me last time."

"They might've been able to help you, Falcon," Savannah says. "You *chose* to plead guilty. Only you know the reasons

for that.”

I don’t reply. I don’t even nod. They’re right. I didn’t pull the trigger that killed that cop who was out hunting near our property. But someone did. It was an accident for sure. That’s why it was manslaughter and not murder.

I won’t give up the guy who did it. Why should I at this point? I’ve already done the time.

“So they investigate,” Leif says. “You’ve got nothing to hide.”

“No, I don’t,” I say. “Like Kelly here said. I’m an open book. They know everything.”

“Except the stuff you won’t tell *us*,” Savannah says.

“Except that stuff. Absolutely right.”

“So you have to understand, Falcon,” Savannah says. “From the standpoint of the investigation team, you’re already a killer. You pleaded guilty to a homicide. So in their eyes, you *were* guilty.”

“She’s right, Fal,” Leif says. “You could make this a lot easier on yourself if you came clean about this whole damned thing.”

“I won’t,” I say. “I made a promise eight years ago, and I won’t break it for anyone. Not even myself.”

“Yeah, I know you won’t.” Leif nods. “Like I said, you’re still the guy I’d want in a foxhole with me.”

“Brother, you don’t know how many times, while I was locked in a cell, that I wished I were in a foxhole with you.”

“I missed you out there. I really did. I made some great friends. There was a group of six of us on my last tour.” Leif pauses, his eyes shadowed. “Only two of us came back.”

“I’m sorry, man.”

“Yeah. It sucks. When you join up to serve your country, you know there are no guarantees. You and I had that discussion many times.”

I nod. “Yes, we did.”

“Why did you both want to join?” Kelly asks.

It’s a valid question, and I’m surprised Savannah hasn’t asked it yet. Then again, she has a lot more on her mind.

“We’re ranchers,” Leif says. “We grew up with love for the land and for our freedom. My parents drummed it into my head from the day I could understand words.”

“He speaks the truth,” I say. “My father’s not a veteran, and neither of my grandfathers served either. But Leif and I were talking serving since we were in our early teens.”

“You both had good childhoods,” Kelly says.

“We did,” Leif says. “In fact, I consider Falcon’s dad a second father, and vice versa. The two of us were inseparable. And they both instilled in us values, taught us how to defend ourselves. Taught us nothing’s free in this world.”

“And they taught us to value family,” I say, regarding my knuckle tats.

R R H E

My siblings I’d die for.

There are a lot of unsaid words in that sentence about family, words I'll never say to any of them.

Prison was hell. I've been so damned mad at Eagle lately that I swore to God I would never take the fall again. Never go back to prison to save anyone's hide.

But I know I would.

I'd do for Eagle or for Hawk. For Robin or Raven. For Leif or Savannah.

Because that's what I was taught.

And that's who I am.

## SAVANNAH

Falcon and I stopped at the grocery store after we left the hospital and picked up something simple for dinner. Steaks, potatoes, and a couple heads of broccoli. Gourmet vanilla ice cream for dessert.

Kelly and I head to the kitchen to cook.

“I’m not much of a cook,” Kelly says, “but I think the two of them need to talk.”

I nod. “Yeah, they do. But the problem is that this is all on me.”

“I know it seems that way,” she says. “Believe me, I’ve been there.”

Kelly’s life has been so much harder than mine ever was. I have no idea what her childhood was like, but spending a few years on that awful island where women were hunted and abused and raped... I can’t even imagine it. All my family ever asked me to do—other than marry Miles McAllister, which they let me out of—was fudge some parole records.

They even let me go when I asked them. They let me move here to Summer Creek.

But I'm still a member of the Bianchi family. And a rival family wants me.

That's my theory, at least.

Why they think marrying their women off as if we were still living in Victorian times helps the families is beyond me. The women aren't happy. The men aren't happy. The children aren't happy.

Though my parents did learn to be happy. My mom, Caroline, was married to my father when she was only eighteen. They hadn't even met before the wedding day. It's crazy that things like that happened in the United States of America in the twentieth century, but they did.

"I can't even imagine what your life is like," Kelly says.

I grab a cutting board and chop the stems off the broccoli. "I can't imagine what yours is like either. I'm sure it was much worse."

"Meeting Leif changed a lot of things for me. I sure fought it at first though."

"Why?"

Kelly shrugs. "Just my lack of self-worth. I grew up without my father—he turned out to be a psychopath anyway—and my mother is a big mess as well. I won't go into any details, but suffice it to say that I didn't think I was worth anything. I didn't think anyone like Leif could possibly fall in love with me. But he did. Flaws and all."

"I don't know anyone of us who doesn't have flaws. Look at me, for instance. My family."

“But you’re *not* your family, Savannah.”

I shake my head. “But don’t you see? In this kind of organization, you *are* your family. It’s a different set of rules. It’s a set of rules where they can take an eighteen-year-old girl and just *give* her to someone. Force her into marriage.”

“How can they do that? We have freedom here.”

“I know it doesn’t make any sense to you.” I chop the head of broccoli into florets. “It’s kind of like our own little monarchy. It’s ridiculous, I know. But when you’re in that unit, and you’re born into it, it’s all you know. Until you go to college, and you see how other people live. And you realize you’d do anything to get out. But you can’t. Your blood binds you. So I’m always going to be a target for a rival family. That’s what I think happened here.”

“It’s good for me to hear things like this,” Kelly says.

I look up as I’m placing the florets on a baking sheet. “What?”

Kelly covers her mouth with her hand. “Oh God, no. I don’t mean it like that. Forgive me. Ask Leif about how I was when he met me. Sometimes I speak before I think. All I mean is it helps me to remember that very few people in this world have it easy. Their circumstances may be completely different from mine, like yours are, but you have your own demons.”

I grab some olive oil and drizzle it over the broccoli. “I do. They’re pretty evil.”

“I hear that.”



I grind pepper over the vegetables. “I shouldn’t compare myself to your situation. You had it much worse than I ever did.”

“But that’s my point.” She sighs. “I don’t think you can assign value to it. Whether I had it worse or you had it easier. I think all we can say is that my life was what it was, and yours was what it was. And neither of them are without difficulties.” She frowns. “Oh, hell. I don’t know what I mean.”

I force a smile as I take the steaks out of the refrigerator, remove the plastic wrap, and set them on a paper towel to drain.

“What can I do to help?”

“Get the potatoes out. You want mashed? Baked? French fried?”

“I say we just throw them in the microwave.”

“That works for me.

Kelly pulls four potatoes out of the five-pound bag, washes them in the sink, scrubs them, and then searches the drawers. When she finds a knife, she cuts a few tiny slits in each one for steam to escape.

Then she looks at me. “That was presumptuous of me. I should’ve asked you where the knives were.”

I shrug. “I wouldn’t have known. I don’t live here. Well, I guess I do, since my apartment is trashed and the whole place is a crime scene.” I sigh. “I don’t know which end is up anymore, Kelly. But I don’t live here. Falcon and I... I don’t really know *what* we are.”

“It can be frustrating,” Kelly says. “I fought Leif for the longest time. I wish I could give you some advice. The truth is, I don’t know Falcon, and although Leif used to, he’s the first to admit that he doesn’t anymore.”

“Eight years can change people. Especially eight years either behind bars or in the trenches of Afghanistan.”

“Sure enough,” Kelly agrees. She pops the potatoes in the microwave.

I set the broccoli to roast in the oven, and because we can’t grill the steaks since we can’t go outside where the grill is, I decide to cook them the old fashioned way—in a cast iron skillet I find in one of the cupboards. That’s how my grandmother still cooks steaks to this day.

I put the skillet on the stove, turn the heat on.

“How long will the potatoes take?” I ask Kelly.

“No more than five to ten minutes. It’s hard to gauge when you have four in there at once. But I’ll check them periodically. Keep going till they’re all squeezable.”

“Sounds good.” I search the refrigerator. “No sour cream but we’ve got butter.”

“Butter’s good. I eat butter as often as I can. I never had it when I was a kid.”

“You never had butter?”

“It’s a long fucking story, Savannah, and I don’t want to bring the evening down any more than it already has been.”

“I hear you. Maybe one day you and I can have a girls’ night.” Then I sigh. “Except my life... It’s so screwed up. It may never be the same.”

“It will be.” Kelly smiles. “I’ve seen Leif work miracles.”

“Maybe you have, and I’m sure he worked more than one for you. But my family has way more resources than Leif does.”

“Leif is backed by the Wolfe family of Manhattan. They’re billionaires.”

“My family isn’t worth billions. We’re probably close. But it’s dirty money. I have a trust fund, but I’m determined not to touch it.”

“I hear you. I inherited a shit ton of money from my father. My natural father, who I never knew until recently. I ended up giving most of it away to charity, to help abused women who needed it. Of course I socked away enough so that Leif and I can have a good start in life.”

“Who can blame you for that?” I give her a smile. “But I don’t want any of mine. Not a cent.”

“Even if it could help Falcon?”

I bite my lip. “That’s a good question, and if I thought Falcon needed it, I would hand it over in a minute. But his family has their own money. Falcon has a trust fund that’s probably larger than mine.”

“True. Leif tells me they’re heirs to the Cooper Steel fortune.”

“They are. His grandmother passed away a little over a year ago. Everything went to her only son, Austin Bellamy, who’s Falcon’s father. Plus they have a lot of money from the ranch in their own right. They’ve got a huge operation, one of the biggest in Texas.” I frown. “You think Falcon is telling Leif the truth right now?”

“I couldn’t say,” she says. “But I do know Leif can be very persistent. And very resourceful.”

## FALCON

**E**ight years earlier...

*It's not an easy thing, withdrawing that much money in cash from a trust fund.*

*And it's not like a drug cartel on the border is going to take a cashier's check.*

*Funny thing about banks. They don't keep millions of dollars in paper money sitting around. Lucky for me, I have contacts.*

*The one person I know who will never let me down is my grandmother. Sandra Cooper Bellamy.*

*I take a drive to the far side of our ranch, to her megamansion.*

*My grandfather, Brick Bellamy, passed away a few years ago. Nana hasn't remarried, and I doubt she will. She and my grandfather had one of those once-in-a-lifetime love stories. They were still holding hands in their sixties. It was equal parts cute and nauseating.*

*I didn't tell her I was coming because she would've asked why. Not that I need an excuse to visit Nana, but I didn't want*

*to have to say anything about this over the phone.*

*I bring my car to a stop in the circular driveway that's lined with majestic oak trees, parking behind Nana's black Lincoln town car. Her driver, Jackson, is on call at all hours. Nana doesn't go very many places anymore, so Jackson's probably in his room in the mansion waiting for his phone to ring.*

*The house itself is a sprawling mansion, the exterior designed from limestone. It's warm and earthy tones are welcoming, as is the wide southern veranda with ornate columns and a spacious wrap-around porch, home to three porch swings. As kids, my brothers, sisters, and I spent many happy hours out here eating Nana's homemade treats and washing them down with fresh lemonade. I broke the swings more than once, and each time, Pops threatened to whoop my ass, but he never did. Nana wouldn't have stood for that, and Pops would do anything for the love of his life.*

*I walk to the arched doorway and ring the doorbell.*

*Nana's housekeeper, Maybelle, answers. "Mr. Falcon," she says.*

*"Hi, Maybelle. I'm here to see Nana."*

*"She's in her library, reading."*

*"Oh. She hates to be disturbed when she's reading."*

*"She does, but you know she has a soft spot for you and her other grandchildren. I'll be happy to disturb her."*

*"Thank you, Maybelle. I appreciate it."*

*She holds the door open for me and I enter the large foyer, adorned with marble floors and a crystal chandelier hanging from a high, coffered ceiling.*

*To the left of the foyer is a sitting room where we kids were never allowed to go. I always longed to jump on the plush sofas and elegant armchairs, but now that I'm old enough to sit in the room, I have no interest in it. It's too...formal.*

*To the right is the dining room with a huge cherry table and sixteen chairs. Who the hell needs sixteen chairs?*

*Maybelle clacks along the marble tiling and turns left down the hallway toward the library.*

*Nana's house is on the north side of Bellamy Ranch. I live on the east side of Bellamy Ranch. Nana is far away from the old barn near the border.*

*A few moments later, Maybelle returns. "Go ahead into the library."*

*"Thank you again." I stop, trying to keep my cowboy boots from making horrible noises on the marble.*

*The house is decorated in a western Texas theme—lone stars, bluebonnets, and Texas landscapes everywhere. The oak double doors to Nana's library are cracked open, and I knock softly and then enter. The walls of the library are lined with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, and southwest artifacts and framed maps adorn the spaces between the books.*

*I inhale the crisp scent of parchment and leather bindings. I love Nana's library. We spent many happy hours in here as*

*kids as she read to us from the classics—Robinson Crusoe, the Swiss Family Robinson, Oliver Twist.*

*We were the best-read kids in Texas.*

*My grandmother sits in a brown leather recliner, a book on her lap, spectacles on her nose, and a smile on her still beautiful face.*

*“Nana?”*

*Her eyes light up as she removes her reading glasses. “Falcon, darling. Come on in.”*

*“I know you hate to be interrupted when you’re reading.”*

*She closes her book and sets it on the oak table next to her chair. “Nonsense. I always have time for my favorite grandson.”*

*It’s a joke. She says that to all of us.*

*“I need your help.”*

*“Of course. Anything.”*

*I could beat around the bush, but Nana would hate that. “I need to get my hands on some cash. Large quantities of cash.”*

*Her thin eyebrows shoot up. “I don’t like the sound of that.”*

*“Trust me, I don’t either. And I can’t tell you why, Nana. I can only tell you that it’s very important.”*

*“Are you in some kind of trouble, Falcon?”*

*“I’m not. I swear it.”*



*I can't lie to my grandmother, and I haven't. I just hope she doesn't ask me who's in some kind of trouble.*

*Watching one of her grandchildren go down would kill her.*

*"How much do you need?"*

*"I'm not actually sure of the amount. But I think a million will be enough."*

*Her mouth drops open slightly. "A million dollars?"*

*Of course a million dollars, Nana. But I don't say the words. I simply say, "Yes."*

*"That's a lot of money, Falcon."*

*"I know. And I could take it out of my trust fund, but I'm not sure how I could get that much in cash."*

*Nana frowns and glances around the library. "And you know I keep cash on hand here."*

*"I do. Dad trusted me with that information when I turned twenty-one. I promise there's a good reason for this. And I will pay you back out of my trust fund."*

*"I don't need you to pay me back, Falcon. All I need is your promise that you will stay out of trouble."*

*How can I make that promise? I'm paying off a drug cartel.*

*"Of course, Nana," I say, keeping my voice as steady as I can. "I've always stayed out of trouble, haven't I?"*

*"Yes, you have." She smiles and pats my hand. "You were always a good boy. You've always taken such good care of*

*your sisters and brothers. Always been a good leader and a good example for them.”*

*Yeah.*

*I’m feeling like a big shithead.*

*But she’s right when she said I always protect my sisters and brothers. That’s what I’m trying to do here. Hawk and I are the ones who flushed the cocaine. We had no idea Eagle was behind it.*

*However, for all we know, Diego Vega could’ve had spies in the area. He may already know we got rid of it, and that’s why they’re threatening Eagle.*

*No. If he saw us, he’d have come straight to us. He probably thinks Eagle took it and sold it himself, pocketing the money.*

*Maybe this is all a test, because a couple hundred thousand dollars’ worth of cocaine is not a lot to someone like Diego Vega. If it had turned out to be a good place for a dead drop, that old barn would be filled with drugs buried underneath its surface.*

*It’s a good thing Hawk and I found that shit. Otherwise God knows what would be stored on our property.*

*Nana pushes a button on her intercom. “Lawrence?”*

*“Yes, ma’am.”*

*“Could you come to the library, please?”*

*“Right away, ma’am.”*

*Lawrence is Nana’s butler and close confidant.*

*A moment later, he enters, clad in his tuxedo. “Yes, ma’am?”*

*“Close the door, please, Lawrence.”*

*Lawrence does as he’s told, and then nods to me. “Mr. Bellamy.”*

*“Hi, Lawrence.”*

*“Falcon needs a million dollars in cash. Would you get it for him, please?”*

*“Absolutely. Give me just a moment.”*

*Lawrence leaves the room.*

*Funny. I always thought Nana stored her hordes of cash somewhere in the library. Apparently I was wrong.*

*Or if she does, she doesn’t want me to know about it. So she has another place, and Lawrence is getting it from there.*

*I learned long ago to never underestimate my grandmother. She’s smart as a whip, and just as sneaky.*

*Lawrence returns with a black duffel bag and hands it to me. “Mr. Bellamy.”*

*“Thank you, Lawrence, and thank you so much, Nana. I’ll get the transfer started right away.”*

*“Don’t worry about that, my sweetheart. I know you’re good for it. I have so much money, and this is nothing to me. I know you wouldn’t ask unless you had a good reason, Falcon. So please, just make sure my trust in you is not misplaced.”*

*I rise, walk over to her, and kiss her wrinkled cheek. "It's not, Nana. I promise."*

*I pick up the duffel bag, and then I walk out of the library. Lawrence follows me. When we get to the door, he touches my arm.*

*"Yes?" I ask.*

*"These bills are unmarked," he says. "They can't be traced back to your grandmother."*

*"Thank you for your discretion," I say.*

*Lawrence glares at me. "She's an old and frail woman, Mr. Bellamy."*

*"She's old, yes. I wouldn't call her frail."*

*He steps toward me, lowering his voice. "She thinks she's stronger than she is. Remember. I see her every day. I wait on her every day. I've watched her decline over the past couple of years. She loves you. She loves you and your brothers and sisters and your mother and father so much."*

*"You're not telling me anything I don't know."*

*"She believes in you," Lawrence says. "But she's blinded by her love for you. A grandson with a trust fund doesn't just come in asking his grandmother for cash. If it were for anything other than nefarious purposes, you would've just gone to the bank."*

*I can't fault his logic or his observation. He's exactly right.*

*"I won't say anything to your grandmother, Mr. Bellamy. But know this. I love her as if she were my own mother, and I*

*won't allow anything to happen to her."*

*"You don't love her any more than I do, Lawrence. But I appreciate your concern."*



MY GRANDMOTHER'S ashes sit on my mantle.

I suppose they should probably be at my parents' house. My father was her only child, but I was lucky enough to get off on furlough for her funeral a year ago, and when I requested her ashes, my father simply nodded.

He knew, as well as I did, that I held a special place in my grandmother's heart as her first grandchild.

And I knew, as well as he did, how she died very disappointed in me.

I think back to that time, when I asked her for the money, and she didn't bat an eyelash.

She gave it to me, no questions asked.

She believed in me.

But Lawrence knew.

He cared for her deeply, and he never told her. Then when I went down for manslaughter and got sent away to prison, my grandmother never came to visit me.

My father told me she was just too old to leave the house, but I know better.

She blamed herself. She felt that if she hadn't given me that money, I never would've gone to prison.

She's wrong, of course. If she hadn't given it to me, I would've gotten it somewhere else. It just might have taken longer because my father didn't keep cash in the house the way she did.

She was from a different era. She remembered when people didn't trust banks.

Leif and I haven't talked much since the ladies went to make dinner in the kitchen.

Instead, I'm standing in the family room, staring at the urn that contains my grandmother's ashes that sits on my mantle in the family room.

Dad held the ashes for me while I finished out my last year in prison, but it was the first thing I grabbed when I moved back into my house on the family property.

"You called me over here for something," Leif says. "So what's with the silent treatment?"

I suck in a breath, look away from Nana's urn. "Just a lot to think about."

"I hear you, Falcon. I want to help you. I'm sorry about—"

"Don't. I don't know why I got so bent out of shape about it. I mean, why would you change your plans just because I fucked up? So you went into the Navy without me. You served your country, and you didn't visit me because you weren't here."

“That’s not exactly true. I’ve been back in the US for the last two years.”

He’s right, but I don’t say it.

“You’ve got your demons,” he says, “and I’ve got mine.”

Again I don’t say anything. There’s no need for a response.

“So this thing with Savannah...” Leif begins.

“What thing?”

“I see the way you look at her, man. It’s the way I looked at Kelly when I met her.”

“You think?”

He smiles. “I *know*. Kelly was not easy to love at first, but I fell hard. And I’m seeing it in you.”

I shake my head. “I’m not fit to be with someone like Savannah.”

“Are you kidding? You’re perfect for Savannah.”

“I’m an ex-con, Leif.”

“And she’s a member of a crime family.” He chuckles softly. “It’s like it was written in the fucking stars.”

“She’s my parole officer.”

“Probably not for long.” Leif takes a seat on my leather couch. “Listen, I didn’t come here to give you a lecture, or to tell you to fall in love with this woman. I think that ship has sailed. I came here because you called me. You said you needed my help. And I want to help, Falcon. I do. But I need to know what I’m dealing with.”

“My Grandma Bellamy died a little over a year ago,” I say.

“Yeah, I know.” Leif’s gaze shifts toward the mantle. “My mom and dad called me. I would have come to the funeral, but I was in the middle of some undercover work for the Wolfes.”

“I got off on furlough. First time I saw the outside in seven years, and I’ve got to tell you, Leif, I was tempted...”

“To make a run for it? Leave the country?”

“Yep. I almost called you. I knew you were working for the Wolfes. My father told me. And I know the Wolfes can get things done.”

“I’d have had your back.”

“I wasn’t sure at the time. But I was fucked up. Seven years in the slammer will do that to you.”

“I get it. My experience is way different, but I get it.”

He’s trying to be understanding, empathetic. But he was serving his country. He came back a hero. A fucked up hero, maybe, but still a hero.

I came back a fucked up ex-con.

Huge difference.

“So let’s be honest about one thing,” he says. “You need my help with the Savannah situation. So before we continue, you need to level with me. What are your feelings for her?”

My feelings for Savannah...

How do you describe the beauty of a Texas sunset? The pure sound of a child laughing?



That joy you feel, except it's more than joy. Words don't exist.

Savannah... Sweet Savannah, who doesn't deserve the fate she was born into. She deserves so much more. She deserves everything.

When I think about those two men coming for her, taking her...

I curl my hands into fists as rage thunders through me.

I know this rage. It's the kind of rage I felt every time I heard Tommy Ortiz scream from his cell when Bruno violated him.

The kind of rage I felt when the cops came after my littlest brother.

The kind of rage I felt when I heard Raven—sweet Raven—was sick.

The kind of rage I felt when I heard that Savannah was almost married off to some junior mob member of a rival family.

Except quadruple it.

Quintuple it.

And then times that by infinity.

That's what I'm feeling now.

Pure rage, but not toward Savannah.

Toward anyone who might lay a finger on her.

Leif wants to know what I feel for Savannah.

I look him straight in his blue eyes. “I can only tell you this,” I say, my teeth clenched. “I would burn down the whole fucking state of Texas for her.”

## SAVANNAH

“Hey guys,” I yell from the kitchen. “Dinner’s ready.”

Falcon and Leif traipse in a few minutes later. They both look...angry.

I can feel the anger.

Its malevolence is so thick I feel like if I brandished a knife I could slice right through it.

But their anger’s not focused on each other, or on me or Kelly.

It’s something bigger than that.

“Hey.” Kelly slides her hand up Leif’s arm to his shoulder. “You okay?”

He nods. “We’re fine.”

“You sure?”

“We’re good, baby. Just doing some talking. Catching up.”

But Falcon doesn’t look good at all.

He looks... I’m not sure.

Then I know the exact word to describe his look at the moment.

*Savage.*

Leif and Kelly are married. Husband and wife.

What am I to Falcon? Can I go to him? Try to soothe him?

Does he even want me to?

I could say so many things.

He spent the last eight years behind bars, with no one to comfort him when he needed it.

Yet here I am. I've known him for less than ten days, and I'm living in his house.

I look up to meet his gaze, and I find him staring at me.

It's almost a glare, but not one with any malice in it.

No, it's filled with something else. He's angry, yes, but not at me. Not at Leif any longer.

At the situation?

I'm not sure.

I've never seen this look on a man before.

Not even on Miles McAllister's face.

I want to ask him what's wrong, what I can do to help...

But something stops me.

Because looking at him right now—with that almost cruel and menacing look upon his face—I'm not sure anyone is safe here.

Anyone except me.

Something in his eyes tells me without words that he would do anything for me.

That scares me more than anything else.

I don't want Falcon going down again because of me. He claims he's innocent of the manslaughter charge, and I believe him.

I believe him because I believe *in* him. He's a good man at heart. A good man who believes in the law, who knows right from wrong.

The problem is? He's lost his belief in something very important.

He's lost his belief in humankind.

I've been there, and I worked hard to get myself out of that mindset.

I can't afford to be dragged back down into it by Falcon.

Except I already know I'll follow Falcon anywhere.

I'm not sure what I feel for him can be called love. Love is almost too tame a word. Love isn't supposed to hurt, but what I feel for Falcon *does* hurt. It's a love so harsh and powerful that it guts me.

And not necessarily in a good way.

But not in a bad way either.

"Savannah?"

I jerk at Kelly's voice. "Yeah?"

“You’re kind of staring into space, honey. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, fine.” I take a seat at the table. “Please, sit down everyone. It’s basic. Steaks and potatoes and broccoli. We have ice cream for dessert.”

“Sounds great,” Leif says.

Falcon doesn’t say anything. Why should he? He was with me when we were at the grocery store. He knows what we’re having.

I pick up the plate full of steaks and pass it first to Kelly. Once all our plates are full, we begin to eat.

So quiet, and so strange.

I’m still not feeling hungry, but the food tastes oddly good. Nourishing. Strengthening.

“So…” Leif finally says. “I guess I’m the loser.”

“Loser for what?” Kelly asks.

“We’re playing the silent game, right? First one to talk loses?”

She smiles at him.

“Just not much to say,” Falcon says.

I nod. “I agree. The past couple of days are still hard for me to process. It’s like they weren’t real.”

“They’re real all right, Vannah.” His gaze lingers on me.. “I swear to God no one will ever harm you.”

His words are raw and deep, and they cut into me, but not in a bad way.

Because I know I would do anything for him as well.  
Falcon Bellamy, ex-con, my parolee, and damn...

It may not be love. Love is pretty, sweet, nice. This isn't any of those things. It's something much deeper and more profound.

I'm in...

Love is the only word I know.

What else do you call the combination of lust and need and desire and passion bordering on obsession?

The only word available is love.

But it's so much more than that.

Miles McAllister once told me he loved me.

I didn't believe him, and I know now I was right not to.



*FIVE YEARS EARLIER...*

*"I've waited long enough for you, Savannah," Miles says.*

*"I won't. I won't be married off."*

*"That has no bearing on the issue. My father and your father made a deal."*

*"This is the United States of America. You can't force a person into marriage here. It's not legal."*

*Miles rolls his eyes. "You're so naïve, Savannah."*

*I glare at him. “Why do you want someone who doesn’t want you?”*

*“This doesn’t have anything to do with whether I want you or not. It’s what’s best for my family and yours. Besides...I... love you.”*

*The word “love” catches in his throat. It’s a damned lie, and we both know it.*

*From the conversation we’re having, we should be alone.*

*But we’re not.*

*My father, Vincent Gallo, sits next to me. Across from me sits Miles, and next to him, his father, Declan McAllister.*

*We both have attorneys sitting with us as well.*

*“We agreed to allow your daughter to finish college, Mr. Gallo,” the attorney for the McAllisters says. “Time’s up.”*

*“The young lady speaks correctly,” our attorney says. “We can’t force this marriage.”*

*“Not under any law in the United States or the state of Texas,” the other attorney says. “You know damned well, as I do, that we’re not dealing with those laws right now.”*

*Our attorney stays silent.*

*My father turns to me. “Savannah, you knew, when we allowed you to go to college, that you were expected to marry Miles when you were done.”*

*“I’m not a commodity, Daddy. I’m a young woman.”*



*“You are. But your mother was married off to me at eighteen. We hadn’t even met at the time.”*

*I shake my head. “I’ve heard the story a thousand times, Daddy. These things shouldn’t happen. They’re not supposed to happen.”*

*“We live in our own world, Savannah. You know that.”*

*How well I know that. This world took my brother from me, and I want no part of it.*

*“Maybe I have things I want to do.”*

*“We know that. You’ll be able to go to law school as scheduled,” Dad says.*

*“Yeah, and do the family’s bidding. But which family? My Gallo family or the McAllister family?” I shake my head. “I want no part of this.” I rise.*

*“Savannah, sit down.”*

*“I’m twenty-two years old now. I’ve been my own person since I was eighteen. I’m afraid I don’t have to take orders from you anymore.” I head toward the door, turn the knob—*

*It’s locked.*

*They’ve locked me in here. My skin goes cold.*

*“Someone needs to unlock this door,” I say. “Or I’ll call the police.”*

*“I’m afraid there’s no cell reception in here,” McAllister’s attorney says.*

*“I see a phone right there.” I point to a landline on the credenza.*

*“Which requires a code to access, which I don’t plan to give you.”*

*Prickles skitter over my arms, and I brush my hands over them. “I truly don’t have a choice, do I?” I say.*

*“I’m sorry, Savannah,” Dad says. “But you don’t.”*

*I take my seat. “What do I have to do to get out of this?”*

*“There’s nothing you can do,” Mr. McAllister says. “Your father and I made a deal, sweetheart.”*

*“Don’t you ever refer to me as sweetheart.”*

*“However,” Mr. McAllister says, “there might be one thing.”*

*My heart races. “What? Whatever it is, I’ll do it.”*

*The McAllisters’ attorney clears his throat. “You have a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice.”*

*“I do.”*

*“With plans to go to law school.”*

*“Yes. I’ve already been accepted at Georgetown.”*

*“That was never going to happen anyway,” Mr. McAllister says. “You’d be going here somewhere in Texas. Once you marry my son.”*

*Mr. McAllister’s attorney clears his throat again. “I’ve discussed this with my client, and we’ve had preliminary discussions with your father. If you truly don’t want to marry*

*young Mr. McAllister here, you'll need to put your law school plans on hold. Indefinitely."*

*I rise, curling my hands into fists. "Being a lawyer has always been my dream! Daddy, how can you let them take that away from me?"*

*"If you marry Miles, sweetheart, you'll still go to law school."*

*"And answer to whom?" I demand.*

*My father doesn't respond.*

*"There's currently an opening for a parole officer in the area, and you meet the necessary qualifications," the McAllisters' attorney continues. "You take that job, and when we come to you and ask for a favor, you'll do it."*

*"And if I don't?"*

*"Then you marry Mr. McAllister."*

*Dad looks at me. "Sweetheart, it's the only way."*

*"What do you mean it's the only way? None of this makes sense to me. I'm twenty-two years old, a legal adult, and you've locked me in a room."*

*"Sweetheart, you know the kind of work I do. And unfortunately, family members are always affected."*

*"Then why didn't you leave? Why didn't you leave instead of marrying Mom?"*

*"If I hadn't married your mother, you wouldn't be here."*

*“True, and I wouldn’t be in this horrid position that you’ve put me in. Locking me in a room. Not allowing me to call the police. What kind of father are you?”*

*He rises then. “Savannah.”*

*I drop back into my seat.*

*And I hate myself for it. But when my father uses that voice, I obey.*

**FALCON**

**A**fter dinner, Leif and I go out on the front porch and talk while we watch the dogs.

“How are your sisters doing?” I ask.

“They’re good. Laney just graduated from college. And Scarlett—What?”

“What do you mean what?”

Leif wrinkles his brow. “I mentioned Scarlett’s name, and the look on your face... It got...weird.”

I’ve got no problem with Scarlett Ramsey. But my brother Eagle is currently pussy-whipped over her, and I have a feeling he’s doing something stupid.

“You’re imagining things,” I say.

“I’ve known you a long time, Falcon. I know what your face says.”

“Do you?” I scoff. “We’ve been separated for the last eight years, Leif. You don’t know what the fuck I went through, and I don’t know what the fuck you went through. I think it’s safe to say that we’re not the same people we once were.”

“Yeah, sure. We’ll go with that. For now, at least. Anyway, Scarlett is living at home with Mom and Dad.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. She hates it, since she’s twenty-nine years old and all. But she got laid off from her job as a paralegal. The firm was downsizing.”

“Money trouble?”

“I don’t think so. Not as long as she’s living with Mom and Dad. She’s a smart girl. She’ll find her way.”

Yeah.

She’ll find her way all right. By way of my littlest brother, who’s gotten into some bad shit again.

“Have you talked to her lately?”

“Yeah. Kelly and I stayed with Mom and Dad when we first came out, while our house was being built.”

“You got a house built that quickly?”

“Money talks, but no. Kelly inherited a ton of money from her psycho father. So we’re having it built on the family’s property, but we did stay with Mom and Dad for a few nights. We’re set up in town right now, in a short-term rental.”

“I see.” I draw in a breath. “Have you seen Eagle?”

“Once. He came to the house to see Scarlett when Kelly and I were still living there. That was a month or so ago.”

“They’re not...involved, are they?”

“I don’t think so. Scarlett didn’t say anything like that.”

I nod.

“Why do you ask?”

“You don’t know? My little brother’s had a crush on your sister for years.”

“Really? She’s four years older than he is.”

“She is, and she’s also hot as hell.”

Leif scowls at me. “That’s my sister you’re talking about.”

I take the tennis ball from Sydney’s mouth and throw it into the front yard for her. “Be that as it may. She’s hot as all get out, and I think my brother’s doing some stupid shit at her bidding.”

“Hold on.” Leif goes rigid. “Scarlett wouldn’t do anything wrong.”

“Wouldn’t she?” I toss Sydney’s ball again. “How well do you know your sister?”

“I know her well enough, for sure. You watch your mouth, Fal.”

I rise and scoop up Sammy who’s chewing on a shrub. “Leif, I would’ve said the same thing about my brother. And I can’t tell you any more than that. But he let me down.”

“When you left—”

“When I *left*? When I was shoved behind bars is more like it. I didn’t leave of my own accord like you did.”

“Hey man, we’re not going back there again.”

Sammy wriggles out of my arms and runs toward his mother. “We *won't* go back there. But I’m just saying, people change a lot in eight years. You and I both did. Maybe Scarlett did too.”

“Scarlett was here. Finishing college, going to paralegal school, working. She wasn’t watching people get killed in Afghanistan.”

“No, and she wasn’t listening to poor young boys screaming as they were raped every night in prison,” I say. “But that doesn’t mean she hasn’t been going through her own stuff, man. Open your eyes, Leif. I need to find out what your sister’s up to.”

“My sister is not up to—”

“Stop it. I’m not making any accusations. I’m asking you, as a friend, to look into it.”

Leif shoves his hair off his forehead. “You’ve been leveraging our friendship a lot in the past twenty-four hours.”

I cock my head as a memory—one nearly as old as we are—invades my mind. “Do you really want to go there, Leif? Really? Have you forgotten that you owe me?”

He drops his gaze for a moment and then meets mine. “No. I haven’t forgotten.”

“Good. Just check it out. That’s all I’m asking. I have a hunch my brother’s into something because of your sister. I need to keep him out of trouble.”

“You’re not his keeper, Falcon.”



I nod.

But I don't say anything.

Because the truth is that I *am* my brother's keeper. I have been since that fateful day years ago.



*"I GOT THE MONEY," I say to Eagle, Hawk by my side.*

*"What's he doing here?" Eagle glares at Hawk.*

*"I was with Falcon when we found the drugs," Hawk says, keeping his voice measured, "but I'll be happy to get the fuck out if you don't want my help, you spoiled piece of shit."*

*Eagle and Hawk have always been a bit like wildfire and rain. Hawk, with his quiet fortitude, and Eagle, with his rebellious rambunctiousness. I'm always stuck in the middle—there's a bit of both my brothers in me.*

*"Did you think I was going to keep this from Hawk?" I ask.*

*"You could have told me."*

*"I did tell you. I told you Hawk and I found the shit."*

*Eagle paces across the floor of his room. He's withdrawing, and he's a mess. But he made his own fucking bed. He's my brother, and I love him, but I can't take away his physical pain. Part of me wishes I could. Another part wants him to remember every single second of this agony so he'll never do something so damned stupid again.*

*Then there's the third and last part of me—part heart and part brain—the part that knows I must protect him at all costs because I'm his big brother, and it's my job.*



“SO WHAT DO YOU THINK?” I ask.

“You haven't said anything.”

“Right.” I need to get my mind in gear. Flashing back to the past won't do me any good. My insides are knotted, and my body's telling me to run. To run like hell. “Savannah and I need to get out of here. Seriously. Go on the run.”

“Are you serious?” Leif says.

“Yeah. And you know what that means, don't you?”

“I know how much your family means to you. I know how much Raven means to you. You just donated bone marrow to her. So if you're planning on leaving, you'd better have a damned good reason.”

“I do. And she's in there, cleaning up my kitchen.”

“So you've fallen hard.”

“I think I already told you, man. I'd burn down the whole state of Texas for her.”

Leif touches my forearm, but I jerk away.

“Easy,” he says.

“I think there's still a part of Savage in me.”

“Yeah, there is. There's a part of Phoenix in me.”

“Phoenix?”

“It was my nickname in the SEALs. I had a knack for getting out of scrapes, so they called me Phoenix, like that bird that burns down and then rises from the ashes to live again.”

“I wanted to leave Savage in prison. But it’s not possible.”

“Nope, Falcon. It’s not.”

“They’re going to come for me, Leif. They’re going to come for me because that derelict died. They’ll say that because I’m an ex-con, it was premeditated or something. It doesn’t even have to be premeditated for manslaughter. I went on the inside to protect someone I love. And I would do it again. But that’s not what’s going on here.”

“Maybe you’d be protecting Savannah.”

“Savannah’s guy lived, thank God. The only way I can protect Savannah is if I’m by her side, guarding her. She’s got that rival Austin family after her, so I need to protect her.”

“You’re serious.”

“I am. These feelings I have for her, they’re...” I slam my fist against my heart “They’re maddening. Literally maddening, as if I’m losing myself in them. I feel like a rabid dog, going after anything that gets in the way of what I want. What I love.”

Leif nods, his countenance solemn. “I feel you, Falcon. Believe me. I do.”

“How do you deal with this?”

“You do what you can...without breaking any laws.”

I stand, pace around a bit. “I *haven't* broken a law, but that's not going to stop them from coming.”

“I have resources,” Leif says. “I can get you out of here.”

Right. Resources. Leif could get Savannah and me new IDs and everything else we need. We could leave tonight, I'd bet. Be out of the country by morning.

Sydney runs toward me and drops her ball at my feet. Sammy's busing getting pets from Leif.

I just adopted a dog.

These two are great dogs, and they could easily find a new home. But I made a commitment to them.

I laugh out loud—a sarcastic and guttural laugh.

“What's so funny?” Leif asks.

“Nothing. Nothing at all. My thoughts are all over the place. I want to run. But I want to stay, and there are hundreds of reasons not to run.” I shake my head. “And the first thing I think of are the dogs.”

Leif strokes Sammy's soft puppy coat. “Say what?”

“I know I'm not making sense.” I take Sammy from Leif and hold him to my chest. “I'm not going anywhere, Sammy,” I say softly.

“You changed your mind that quickly?” Leif says.

I place Sammy on the ground and he scurries toward his mother. “I'm not leaving. This is my home. I need to be here for my family. For Raven. For Eagle.”

“I know. You’ve always been a family man, Fal. But the resources are available if you need them.”

“What’s the cost? Just in case, I mean.”

“It’s a bundle, but you can afford it.”

“Yeah, I can.”

“It’s a last resort, though, man. If you do it, you can’t ever come back.”

“I’m not going back into the slammer for killing that asshole. I’d do it to protect Savannah in a minute, but not for any other reason. The only way I’d take you up on that offer is if they come after me and I know she’s protected.”

“She is already. Her guy lived. The most she could get is battery, and it was in self-defense.”

“I know. But if they find out...”

“Don’t forget that her family has resources as well. Resources you probably have no clue about. Mafia organizations have been getting around the law for centuries. They’ve got police officers, DA’s, and judges on their payroll. Savannah will be fine.”

“I hope you’re right. I hate that she’s a part of this.”

“I understand.”

Leif’s statement is simple, but the truth lies in his countenance. He *does* understand. It’s in the contentment in his eyes, the lack of rigidity in his jawline. He’s been through hell, but he came out the other side and found the love of his life.

I nod. “I think, in your way, you do understand.”

“I do. Kelly’s situation is completely different, but I hate what she’s been through, what she was forced to be a part of. And I agree. I’d mow down anything in my way to protect her from any of that coming back to haunt her. Her so-called father and brother are dead now, thank God, and her mother is a non-issue.”

“And Derek Wolfe’s island...”

“Some stragglers exist. Those who had enough money to buy their way out of prosecution or pay to have their names removed from the FAA manifests. Or who were traveling under aliases and escaped the radar. But they know better than to go after any of those women. Besides, Kelly’s main aggressor turned out to be her own brother.”

“That’s fucked up, man.”

“You’re telling me.” Leif shakes his head. “I saw some nasty-ass shit on my tours, but I swear to God, some of the nastiest stuff in the *world* took place on that island from hell.”

Kelly joins us on the front porch. “Hey,” she says. “I think we should go, Leif. Savannah’s hitting a wall.”

Leif rises. “I get it. This has been a lot for her to handle.”

I shake his hand. “I’ll be in touch. I’m sure I’ll be hauled in for questioning tomorrow.”

Leif nods. “No doubt. You got an attorney?”

“Yeah. My father’s got many on payroll. I’ll be covered.”

“They couldn’t cover you the last time, though...”

I sigh. “Don’t think I haven’t forgotten that. But they won’t make an example of me twice. Not in this lifetime.”

I wave as Leif and Kelly drive away, and then I take the dogs and go inside to see to Savannah.

## SAVANNAH

“H ey.”

I open my eyes.

Falcon stands over me as I’m lying in a fetal position on his bed.

“What do you need, Vannah? What can I do for you?”

I have no words.

I’m at a loss.

My life has fractured into so many pieces that aren’t interlocking...except for the man standing next to me.

He is the glue holding me together at this moment.

This man. This parolee.

This ex-con who claims he’s innocent.

And now?

He faces another manslaughter charge...

Because of me.

Because I couldn’t be professional enough to keep him at arm’s length.



Because I breached my ethics as his parole officer.

Because I'm a member of the Bianchi family.

Because I have a rival family who's out not just for my body but for my blood.

Because...

He sits down next to me, jarring the mattress so I roll toward him. He brushes my hair off my forehead.

"I'm sorry if tonight was too much for you."

I shake my head slightly.

"I should have seen that you weren't ready for company."

"Don't," I say.

"Don't what?"

"Don't make excuses for me or for yourself. You needed to reconnect with Leif as a friend. That's what tonight was. It was meeting his wife, getting to know her. All that..."

I trail off, words refusing to come.

"Savannah," he says, his voice dark and commanding, "don't give me any excuses. I don't deserve them. I am who I am, and while my circumstances had a lot to do with that, in the end *I* control me. Not prison. Not my background. I do."

"But—"

"Enough." The word is soft, yet it sounds like a roar.

I nod. I don't have the strength to fight him on it. Maybe tomorrow. But not tonight. I'm done for today. I need to clock out.

He kisses my forehead in a loving and chaste way, the way my mother used to when I was a child and needed consoling.

It's sweet and endearing...but it's not what I need from him right now.

I need to escape from the many thoughts plaguing my mind.

I need to feel something larger than myself.

I need...

I need Savage.

I want pleasure. I want pain.

I want anything that takes away these thoughts that continue to torment me.

I turn away from him, lie face down, my ass in the air.  
"Spank me, Falcon."

He doesn't reply.

"Please."

"Savannah, look at me."

I don't turn. "Please."

"Look at me, Vannah. I'll do what you ask, but first we need to talk."

"No. I don't want to talk, Falcon. I want to feel something other than orgasms. I'd love it, and it would bring me relief. But not enough. Not enough."

"Savannah, if you want me to hurt you—"

“Yes, Falcon. God, yes. I want you to *hurt* me. I want you to give me what I deserve.”

“I won’t strike you in punishment, Vannah. I won’t.”

“But it’s what I want. Please.”

“Spanking can be arousing,” he says. “It can be part of the sexual experience. If that were what you were asking for, I’d do it in a heartbeat, and we’d both enjoy it. But that’s not what you want, Savannah. You want to be punished, and it’s not my place to punish you.”

“But—”

“Stop it!” This time his roar isn’t subtle at all. “I will never hurt you for the sake of hurting you. I’ve been forced to do that too often in my life and I certainly won’t do it to someone I—”

He stops abruptly.

“To someone you...what?” I ask.

He blinks. “Nothing. I won’t. If you need me to hold you, I’ll hold you. If you need me to fuck you, I’ll fuck you. But I won’t spank you to make you feel worse than you already do.”

I open my mouth to protest, but he stops me with a gesture.

“Listen to me, and answer this question. Have you ever been spanked before as a part of sex?”

I sniffle. “No.”

“Then we won’t start this way. I’ve spanked a woman sexually before, and it’s amazing for both partners. But I’ve

never done it when a woman is under duress, under stress. It's not right, and I won't do it, Savannah. Not even for you."

I twist my lips. "What do you mean, not even for me?"

He pauses a moment, until, "Nothing. I just mean I won't do it."

I haven't known Falcon long, but I instinctively know when to stop pushing.

"Whatever else you want," he says. "If it doesn't include punishment, I'll do it. A cup of tea. A glass of water. A back rub. A foot rub. A quick hard fuck. A slow soft fuck. Whatever, Savannah. I'll do it. But I will not punish you under any circumstances."

"But you just said—"

"A couple can enjoy spanking without it being a punishment. Many couples enjoy it."

"So you're saying you don't want to tie me up?"

He closes his eyes a moment, and a visible shudder passes through him. "I'm saying that whatever you and I choose to do mutually will not involve me *punishing* you. There are things I've done, things I had to do for my own survival, that I'll never do again, Savannah. Not while I'm a free man."

"Not even for me?"

He shakes his head. "Especially not for you."

I've already fallen hard, and in that moment, I fall completely.

I tumble into a rabbit hole from which there is no escape.

I'm in love with Falcon Bellamy.

And I don't want to escape.

FALCON

I pull Savannah to me and kiss her.

Gently at first, but she melts into the kiss and deepens it...and then...

I'm lost.

I kiss her hard. I kiss her fast. I kiss her with all the pent-up passion inside me. All the pent-up anger at the world.

And I understand.

I understand her request for me to hurt her.

I understand more than she knows.



*THE SCREAMS ARE MORE than I can bear sometimes at night. I saved Tommy Ortiz, and I've saved a few others over the years from a single beating or rape. But I can't save them all.*

*It's impossible.*

*Savage can only do so much.*

*Sometimes the screams wake me from a nightmare of drowning in an ocean of acid, the caustic liquid burning my skin, my eyes, my soul.*

*When I awake, I gasp for air to the sounds of men being violated, emasculated in the worst way.*

*I curl my fists in rage, chills skittering up my spine as the fire of anger surges within me.*

*Must do something.*

*Must do anything.*

*But cannot.*

*I'm locked in my cell.*

*Sometimes it's not another prisoner.*

*Sometimes it's a guard.*

*The prisoners I can sometimes punish during the day if I know who they are.*

*The guards?*

*I'm defenseless.*

*They get away with it.*

*They get away with everything.*

*Fantasies swirl through my head of defacing, maiming, killing those who prey upon the weak.*

*I can't stand the pain, the anguish, I...*

*I punch the concrete block wall with my fist hard enough that my knuckles bleed. Sticky red trickles over my knuckle*

*tats. H E R R*

*Hawk*

*Eagle*

*Raven*

*Robin*

*And blood. And pain.*

*The pain helps a little. It eases the rage and anger and fire.*

*It lets me sleep.*



SAVANNAH BREAKS THE KISS. “PLEASE,” she gasps out.

I know what she wants. What she needs.

The spanking I won’t give her. The fuck I will.

I undress her quickly, throwing her clothes onto the floor. Then I pull off my own jeans and T-shirt and a moment later I’m inside Savannah, thrusting, thrusting, thrusting...

I’m ready.

Ready to spill inside her.

Ready to take my release.

Then I stop. I pull out, tease her pussy lips with my cock head.

Must slow down.

Must let her come.



Must give her what she needs.

“Falcon...”

“Easy, baby. Easy.” I pull all the way out and then move down her body, spread her legs.

I inhale the musky scent of the two of us together. Her pussy, my perspiration, her perfume, my musk.

Sex.

The scent of sex.

I’m so fucking hard I could cut diamonds, but I steel myself and slide my tongue over her pussy.

“No,” she says.

I raise my head from between her legs. “Excuse me?”

“I can’t. I can’t do this. I need to... I need to do something for you, Falcon. This has all been for me. I can’t be selfish anymore. I want to give back. I want to—”

She moves away from me. “Lie down. Please.”

“Savannah...”

“I’m serious. I’ve made this all about me, Falcon, and I’m done. I haven’t done anything for you. You’ve fucked me, made me come so many times. Helped me when I needed help. Protected me when I needed protection. Please...I can’t make this about me anymore. Let me do something for you.”

“What do you want to do, Vannah?”

My cock is ready. Ready for whatever she has in mind. But I can’t get too excited. She may want something else.

But she heads straight for my dick and slides her tongue over the head.

“Fuck...” I growl.

How long has it been since I’ve had my dick in someone’s mouth? That time during furlough, but those were three women, so there were always lips around my cock while other things were going on.

But this...

Savannah’s lips...

And nothing else. I can concentrate fully on what she’s doing to me.

And damn...she does it well.

She nips and sucks at my cock head and then slides her lips all the way over my shaft, sucking just the right amount to make me insane with desire. I’ve been inside her already, but this... Something about a blow job. It’s different, and it’s not as tight or as forceful as being inside a pussy, but in a way it’s more intimate.

More exciting.

Even so...I’ve never enjoyed it more than I do now.

Her lips are perfect, and she’s not the best I’ve ever had in terms of technique, but that doesn’t matter, because...

Because...

Because it’s her.

It’s Savannah.

And I...

Fuck.

It's ridiculous, what I'm feeling. It's surreal. Unreal. Illogical.

But it's there, and I can no longer deny it.

I love her.

I love Savannah Gallo.

And that's why I'll do anything.

Any-fucking-thing.

Anything to protect her. To keep her safe.

I'll maim, kill, commit arson.

Burn the whole fucking state of Texas down for this woman.

This woman whose lips are sucking my cock.

This woman who—

“Fuck, Vannah!”

I explode down her throat, grabbing the sides of her head and pumping my hips upward.

She doesn't miss a beat.

She swallows.

Swallows me. Takes me in.

And I can't hold it back any longer.

“I love you, Savannah. I fucking love you.”

## SAVANNAH

I've never swallowed before. Always hated the thought.

But this time I go with the feeling. I don't think. I want to take care of Falcon. Give him something I've never given another.

So I swallow. Let him inside me in a different way.

"I love you, Savannah. I fucking love you."

I gasp. Except I don't. My mouth is full of cock.

Did I hear the words? The words I've been aching to say to him?

Does he love me?

I wait for the contractions of his cock to stop before I move my mouth from him.

His eyes are closed and his teeth clenched. He'll relax in a moment, but for now, he's still caught up in the climax.

And I'm caught up in his words.

What if he said them in the heat of the moment? What if he regrets them? What if—

“Fuck, Savannah.”

I move forward and push the hair off his sweaty forehead.

“It’s okay.”

“I wanted to...”

“I know. But I was being selfish. This isn’t all about me.” I caress his face. “You’re in this as much as I am, Falcon. Thank you for helping me see that.”

“No one will harm you,” he says, his jaw still clenched. “No one will ever touch one hair on that pretty head of yours. Not while I’m breathing.”

I draw in a breath.

His words are beautiful. Caring. Protecting.

But they’re not a declaration of love.

It was the heat of the moment, nothing more.

I curl into his arms. I want to hear the words again. Desperately. But now I’m going to take what I need. Comfort in his arms. In his mere presence.

Falcon Bellamy represents so much more than strength.

He’s compassion.

He’s protection.

He’s armor for me in this moment.

And I wrap myself in him.



MORNING COMES MORE QUICKLY than I expect. I slept soundly in Falcon's arms, but when my eyes open, he's gone.

I find him out front with the dogs. He put up a makeshift fence with garden netting between what look like wooden stakes to keep Sammy from running off. Sydney's a good girl and comes when she's called, but Sammy's a pup. He needs to learn.

He's sitting on the stoop drinking a mug of coffee.

"Morning," I say.

He turns. "Hey. There's coffee."

"Yeah. I'll get a cup."

I return a moment later with a mug of the steaming coffee.

"What next?" I ask, taking a seat next to him.

"I already got a phone call this morning. I need to go in for questioning about Abel's death."

I swallow. "It's just questioning."

"That's what they're saying, anyway." He takes a sip from his mug. "I've got our attorney meeting me there. It's all good."

It's not all good.

None of this should be happening. It's all on me.

"I'll go with you," I say.

"No, Vannah. I want you here. Where you're safe."

I squeeze his hand. "I'm safest with you."

“I’ve got security on you. My father arranged it. We’re being watched twenty-four-seven.”

“Oh.”

I neglected to tell Falcon that *my* father said he’d get security on me as well.

I’m surprised I haven’t gotten the third degree about why I’m staying at Falcon Bellamy’s place.

Then again...

My father keeps tabs on me. He probably already knew I was... Seeing? Dating? Sleeping with? Falcon Bellamy.

He didn’t mention it.

How could he? He was ready to marry me off at eighteen. He doesn’t have the normal feelings a father has for a daughter. I’m a commodity in his world.

I’ve no doubt that he loves me, but he’s a product of his environment.

We all are.

I am.

And so is Falcon.

And his environment for the last eight years has been prison.

I take a sip of coffee and lean into Falcon’s hard body.

I’m not sure I have any strength left, but on the off chance I do, I want to give it to him.

He’ll need it.

**FALCON**

I was in a sterile room a lot like this one when I told a police detective that I wanted to plead guilty to manslaughter in the death of Jaden Perez.

He was young, only twenty-six years old to my twenty-two, and he was out hunting mule deer in the brush adjacent to the Bellamy property. He was also a cop—a rookie—and besides child molesters and rapists, there's nothing Texas hates more than cop killers.

My attorneys tried. My father pulled out all his Cooper Steel clout and all his money...but someone was going down for killing this up-and-coming police officer.

I knew only that it wasn't going to be either of my brothers, so I was the only one left.

My brothers wouldn't have survived prison.

Hawk would have gotten stronger for sure, but at nineteen, big and muscled though he was, he would have been seen as fresh meat with that cleanshaven face of his. He'd have gotten hurt before he was able to fight back.



And Eagle? At seventeen he'd have gone to juvie and then transferred to the adult prison on his eighteenth birthday. Ex-juvies don't have an easy time in adult prison. Eighteen-year-olds are kids as far as prisoners are concerned, and kids can't hack that life.

If the poor guy hadn't been a cop, I've no doubt my father could have made this all go away. Or the worst Eagle would have gotten was a few months in juvie.

But Jaden Perez *was* a cop. Not only that, he was a new husband with a baby on the way. He worked as a youth counselor at his church, and he'd just lost both of his parents in a car accident.

He was the poster boy for "someone has to pay for this."

That someone was me.

I had no other choice.

I didn't fire the shot, but it came from my gun.

And I was the only one who could survive what was coming.

My attorney, Lola Briggs, is dressed in a tight-ass navy blue suit. I hate suits on women. I'm not overly fond of them on men, either. They're uncomfortable as hell. I loosen my tie a bit...or try to. It doesn't help. I still feel my throat tightening, as if a boa constrictor is squeezing the breath out of me. Snakes are always bad news.

Lola though, is good news. She's worked for my family for twenty years, and she's a fucking shark. But even she couldn't save me the last time.

This time I'm actually guilty, though not of a crime.

"If the question can be answered with yes or no," Lola says to me, "that's all you say."

I nod. "Got it."

"If I tell you not to answer, you don't."

"Got it."

"They'll try to bait you, Falcon. They'll make you want to defend yourself. Still, if I say don't answer, you don't."

"Yes, ma'am." I salute.

"Leave the jokes outside," Lola says. "They won't serve you well in here. As far as these detectives are concerned, you're a confessed killer already. That's how they're going to treat you."

"I served my time for that one."

"You did. But that's not what cops see. Once a con, always a con."

I nod, drawing in a breath.

She's right. I hate it, but she's right.

The two suits enter, one male, one female. Lola and I rise, and Lola holds out her hand first to the woman, her eyebrows noticeably raised.

"Gina, Marvin, good to see you. This is Falcon Bellamy. Falcon, Detectives Gina Mulvaney and Marv Ericson."

I don't shake hands, simply nod.

“Please sit back down.” Detective Mulvaney takes a seat on the other side of the empty table and Detective Ericson sits next to her. Both have manilla folders and iPads.

Detective Mulvaney clears her throat. “Mr. Bellamy, I’m sure your attorney has advised you that this is simple routine questioning. You’re not under arrest or even a suspect at this time.”

“I understand.”

“Good. Now, could you begin by telling me when you first noticed the two victims—”

“Excuse me.” Lola interjects. “Victims? They were trespassers.”

“It’s simply a word, Lola.”

“Words have meaning, Gina. One is recovering, and the other didn’t make it. However, we don’t even know yet what the cause of his death was.”

“We do now.” Mulvaney slides a document across the table to Lola. “Official cause of death is a brain bleed, caused by the blow to the head the victim received by your client.”

“The trespasser also had a history of concussion and the bleed wasn’t even noticed on the initial MRI,” Lola counters as she scans the document. “Nothing in this report says the blow to the head Mr. Josephs received was the cause of death.”

“We think we can prove that it was.”

I stiffen. “This is outrageous.”

“Falcon...” Lola nudges me.

“Are you kidding me? This derelict comes onto my property, holds me at gunpoint, threatens my friend and my dog, and—”

“Falcon!” This time she’s harsh.

I shut up.

“We’re going to go through all that, Mr. Bellamy,” Mulvaney says. “But at this time, we believe we can prove that the blow to the head that you’ve already admitted to was the cause of Mr. Josephs’s death. That doesn’t mean you’re under arrest or even will be under arrest.”

“You may address *me*, Gina.” Lola shoots darts at Mulvaney with her eyes. “I’m speaking for my client until I tell him otherwise.”

Say what?

Whatever. Lola’s good. I’ll go with it.

“Have you forgotten that if you succeed in proving the cause of death—which I highly doubt you will—you must also prove that Mr. Bellamy was not acting in self-defense or in defense of another?” Lola’s tone is acerbic.

“I know the law, Lola.”

“Do you?”

“Your client is a confessed killer.”

“For which he paid his debt to society. That cannot be held against him in court.”

“He’s admitted to pistol-whipping the victim.”

Lola doesn't miss a beat. "The trespasser was on his property, held him at gunpoint, and threatened his guest. I don't know what you think you need to prove here. What happened to routine questioning?"

Detective Ericson interjects then, speaking for the first time. "Chill, Mulvaney."

That's all he says.

Mulvaney doesn't look happy.

The dynamics here are odd. Mulvaney's clearly the senior detective, but she went right for my throat.

I've never met the woman before in my life. What gives?

"You need to recuse yourself," Lola says.

"I will not."

Lola pushes a document toward her. "You will."

"Excuse me," I say, "but what's going on here?"

"Detective Mulvaney is Jaden Perez's aunt, his mother's sister."

Ah. Now I get it. That explains Lola's raised eyebrows when Mulvaney entered. The detective's got an axe to grind, and she'd like to bury it in my head.

Not happening.

"Did you really think I wouldn't put two and two together?"

Mulvaney sneers. "That was nearly a decade ago. I can stay objective."

“Can you? You told my client this was routine questioning, and then you went straight for his jugular. Not on my watch, Gina.”

Mulvaney stands, lets out a breath, and leaves the room.

“I guess I’m up,” Ericson says. “Mr. Bellamy, this *is* just routine questioning. A lot of people don’t even have attorneys present at this stage.”

“I’m not a lot of people,” I say.

“Understood. I’m sorry Detective Mulvaney got a little personal. She’s actually a decorated officer.”

“I know that, Marvin,” Lola says. “but this isn’t the case for her.”

Ericson turns to me. “Take me through what happened. I’ve got your statement here, but I need to hear it from you. When did you first realize someone had entered your property?”

“My guest and I were in the hot tub in the back, and she thought she heard something.”

“And did you hear it?”

“No, I didn’t. But then the dogs starting barking, so I realized something was up.”

“Okay. What did you do then?”

“I told my guest, Savannah Gallo—”

“Savannah Gallo, your parole officer.”

I clear my throat. “That’s correct.”

He regards me for a moment, but then he moves on. “So you told Savannah...”

“I told her to lock herself in the changing room. It’s the only place inside the pool area with a lock on it. The only place she’d be safe.”

“So you were concerned for her safety?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because of my background, Detective.”

“What about your background?”

“You know my background. I recently got out of prison. I made some enemies on the inside, and I thought one or more of them had sent someone to...”

“To what?”

“I’m sure I don’t have to spell it out for you.”

“All right. We’ll let that go for now, but you may have to come back and elaborate.” He makes some notes on his iPad. “What happened next?”

“I put on my clothes and went to investigate. Two men had entered through the gate into my backyard. My dog—”

“Your dog?”

“Technically Savannah’s dog. I have the dog’s pup. He wasn’t barking.”

“But the mother dog was.”

“She was protecting her pup. Protecting us.”

“Speculation, but that’s fine.”

“Two men were holding drawn pistols. One was blond, Giancarlo, and the other was dark-haired, and was called Abel.”

“You knew the men?”

“No. I just heard them call each other by name.”

“We’re getting ahead of ourselves.” He makes some more notes. “Go back to when you confronted them.”

“Abel aimed his gun at the dog, and I told him, ‘Don’t you fucking dare.’”

“And did he cease?”

“He did. The blond told him to leave the dog alone. Clearly he was the boss of the two. I asked who sent them. They said—”

“Which one said?”

I rack my brain. “Honestly, I don’t remember. Could have been either one of them.”

“All right. What did they say?”

“They said they had no issue with me. That they were here for her.”

“*Her* meaning Ms. Gallo.”

“I assumed so at the time. Yes.”

“What happened next?”

I think, try to remember, but it’s all a blur from there.



I can't say that though. When I told Lola it was a blur, she was adamant. Do not use the word *blur*. If they think I don't remember, they'll fill in what happened for me, and it won't be in my favor.

I don't get any negative feelings from Detective Ericson, but I keep what Lola said in my mind.

"The dog had herded her pup into a corner to protect him, I assume, but he went running off, and she let out a shrill bark. Both men were startled, and I took advantage of the diversion to launch myself at the dark-haired one, Abel, and disarm him. I got him in a headlock and pointed his own gun at his head."

"Where'd you learn a move like that?"

"Where do you think? On the inside, of course."

"I see." More notes. "You were aware you could have been shot, right?"

Of course I was.

I was acting on instinct. And yes, I did learn that on the inside, but I was also acting to protect Savannah. My instinct to protect her was stronger than my instinct to protect a fellow inmate or even to protect myself.

All I knew was that she wasn't going anywhere with them.

"Mr. Bellamy?"

"I'm sorry. Did that require an answer? Of course I was aware I could have been shot."

"Did you have any intention of shooting either Mr. Josephs or Mr. Rossi?"

“If I had that intention, they’d both have bullets in them.”

“Falcon...” Lola admonishes.

“Well, come on, Lola. Did I realize I could have gotten shot? Of course. I’m not some nitwit.”

“You *are* an ex-con, Mr. Bellamy.” From Ericson.

“I’m also aware of *that*, Detective.”

“All right.” He sighs. “What happened next?”

“Carlo and I were at a standoff, and he made it pretty clear he didn’t care about Abel’s life. I could shoot him, as long as Carlo took Savannah, which was not going to happen.”

“And...”

“I saw Savannah sneak out of the pool house. I’d told her to stay put, but she didn’t. I realized I couldn’t let Carlo know she was out, so I kept him focused on me. I was also worried the dogs would bark and give her away, but they didn’t.”

“They didn’t?” He raises his eyebrows.

“Surprised the hell out of me too, but they didn’t. Savannah crept closer, until finally Sydney barked, Carlo turned, and Savannah lunged at him with a jagged piece of glass she’d broken from one of the mirrors in the changing room.”

“Then...”

“She was going at him with a vengeance, so I clocked Abel in the head with his pistol, and he fell onto the ground. Then I pulled Savannah off Carlo and made her give me the

robe she was wearing so I could try to stop the bleeding from his carotid.”

“I see. That all seems to be here. Then what?”

“I told Savannah to get some clothes on. She was covered in Carlo’s blood. She went into the house and found the landline and called 911.”

“Did you consider leaving?”

“No, Detective,” I lie.

If Savannah had gone with me to the safe house Hawk and Eagle set up after I was incarcerated, we’d be long gone by now.

“Why not?”

“Because neither of us did anything wrong. The men were trespassers, and they held us up at gunpoint. Plus, I just got out. I wasn’t about to leave my family. My sister is sick with leukemia.”

“Yes. I’ve heard. How is she?”

“I haven’t checked in with her yet today. I had to come here instead.” I don’t even attempt to disguise the resentment in my voice.

“I’m sure she’s doing fine, Falcon,” Lola says. “Thanks to you.”

“Yes,” Ericson says. “I see here you were released early because you were the only one of your siblings who was a match for your sister’s bone marrow transplant.”

“That’s correct.”

“So you’d still be inside if it weren’t for her getting sick.”

“I was up for parole next month, and my counselor said I’d probably get it.”

“Except the last time you were up for parole, your sentence got extended because you attacked an inmate.”

“Incorrect. I *defended* myself against another inmate. My sentence got extended because I was in possession of contraband. Which, had I not had it in my possession, I’d have either spent a month in the infirmary or I’d be fucking dead.”

I expect admonition from Lola, but she resists.

Good.

“Who was that inmate?”

“He was called Zion. I had witnesses. He attacked me.”

“I see. Do you know what he was in for?”

I roll my eyes. “Don’t you have all this information? My life is an open book starting eight years ago.”

“I just want your take on it.”

“What does it have to do with this case at hand?”

“Mr. Bellamy, you’re an ex-con. It’s all relevant to your *mens rea*.”

“Mens what?”

“*Mens rea*,” Lola says. “It’s a legal term which means malice aforethought. Your intention as opposed to your action, and it’s not relevant here. You know this, Detective.”

“It’s always relevant when someone has already been convicted of the same crime.”

“I wasn’t convicted. I pleaded guilty, and I had my reasons.”

Lola stands. “And *mens rea* was not an issue with that crime. Do not say anymore, Falcon. You’re out of line, Detective. This interview is over.”

## SAVANNAH

A burly man sits outside Falcon's house in a black car.

Earl. My bodyguard.

My father called, and I'm supposed to let him in the house.  
I refused.

First, it's not my house, and second, my father can fuck himself.

Still, though, having Earl here does give me some peace of mind. Not a lot, but some.

Earl is no Falcon.

I'm sitting out front with the dogs, trying to relax by playing with Sammy. He's so cute, and he has that sweet puppy breath and those little puppy teeth that scrape over my hands. They're sharp little things.

I raise my eyebrows when Falcon drives up.

He gets out of the car and stalks toward me, his eye on fire.  
"What are you doing out here? You're not safe."

"See that black car?"

He looks. "Yeah. Who the hell is it?"

“It’s Earl. My bodyguard, compliments of my father.”

Falcon furrows his brow. “Why didn’t you invite him in?”

“Not my house.”

“Savannah, come on. As long as you’re staying here, it’s your house.”

“I wasn’t sure.” My voice is small and shaky.

“To be honest, I’m glad he’s here. I assume he’s vetted?”

“My father wouldn’t have hired him if he weren’t.”

“I’ll go talk to him. Ask him some questions. I’ll make sure he’s okay.”

“Thanks, Falcon. I’d appreciate that.” I herd the dogs into the house, and about fifteen minutes later, Falcon comes in, followed by Earl.

Earl is the size of a tank, of course, and he’s dressed all in black. Not great for the Texas heat.

I should have invited him in.

But who the hell can I trust? I can’t even trust my own father to keep me safe.

But I can trust Falcon.

Falcon will move the earth to keep me safe. He’s already proved that.

“Earl, this is Savannah.”

Earl nods. “Ma’am.”

“Hi, Earl. I’m sorry I didn’t invite you in.”

He shrugs. “Not a problem, ma’am.”

Earl is armed with a gun on a belt holster, and he probably has another on his ankle or strapped to his chest. Falcon no doubt checked.

“You trust him?” I ask Falcon.

“Hell, no. But I don’t trust anyone my people don’t vet. He won’t be staying here. My guy will.”

“Mr. Gallo asked that I—”

“I don’t give a fuck what Mr. Gallo wants,” Falcon says harshly. “He lost his right to have a say when he tried to marry his daughter off to some miscreant. You’re here to meet Savannah. She needs to feel safe here.”

“That’s why I’m here,” Earl says. “To keep her safe.”

“And you can do so from a distance.”

“I need to be near her. What if someone breaks in?”

“I have my own people,” Falcon says. “People my father and I trust implicitly. And that’s not you.”

“Have it your way.” Earl turns toward the door. “Can I get a glass of water, at least?”

“Sure. Follow me.” Falcon leads him to the kitchen.

They continue to converse in low voices. I can’t make out what they’re saying.

I don’t hear a faucet running, and I know Falcon doesn’t have any bottled water.

Interesting.



They return, and Earl heads back out to his car.

“What was that about?” I ask.

“He’s on the up and up,” Falcon says, “but I’m still not letting him stay inside.”

“Whatever you say.”

“He’s on a twelve-hour shift. There are two others who split the job, so they’re all twelve on and then twenty-four hours off.”

“Okay.”

“I’m letting them stay on the property, Savannah—in their cars—and I’ll have someone stay in the house. Any extra protection is not a bad thing.”

I nod, gulping.

Falcon’s phone buzzes, and he grabs it out of his pocket. “Yeah, Dad?”

Pause.

“Fuck. I’ll be right there.”

He shoves it back in his pocket, a look of pure terror in his eyes. “I have to go.”

My pulse starts racing, and my skin chills. “Where? What’s wrong?”

“Raven’s sick. She’s back in the hospital.”

“I’m coming with you.”

“Vannah, you need—” He stops, clearly thinking. “All right. Come with me.”



THE HOSPITAL GIVES me the creeps.

Ashley died here.

And now Raven's back.

We hurry to the sixth floor, where Raven has been admitted.

"Dad!" Falcon races toward a handsome older man with graying blond hair and deep blue eyes.

Mr. Bellamy gives Falcon a quick embrace. "Falcon. Thanks for coming."

"Where's Mom?"

"Inside, with Raven."

He grabs my hand. "This is Savannah Gallo. Vannah, my father, Austin Bellamy."

I shake his large hand. "Hi, Mr. Bellamy."

"Savannah." Mr. Bellamy's blue gaze softens. "I'm sorry for all you've been through in the past few days."

I'm not sure what to say to that, so I simply nod.

Falcon says no more as he scurries into Raven's room.

"She'll be okay, right?"

Austin Bellamy's eyes are dark rimmed. "We don't know anything yet."

“What happened?” I blink. “If you can talk about it, I mean. I don’t want to interfere.”

“She’s running a slight fever and she has a bruise on her leg.”

“Just one?”

“Yes, but when a person has leukemia, any bruise needs to be investigated.”

“I understand.” I swallow, my throat feeling constricted. “Falcon loves her so much.”

“We all do, Ms. Gallo.”

“Call me Savannah. Please. I...” I grab his hand. “I don’t know your family at all, and in many ways, I barely know Falcon. But it’s obvious how close you all are. I’m... I’m so sorry. I’m...”

“Don’t feel like you have to say anything.” He gently pulls his hand away from me. “Sometimes there are no words.”

He should know. I peek into the room. Falcon sits with a woman, presumably his mother. She’s beautiful with skin a shade darker than Falcon’s and long dark hair that’s pulled into a ponytail at the back of her neck.

And in the bed...

Raven.

Falcon’s sister.

Even with her head that’s beginning to grow a fuzz, she’s beautiful. Fine porcelain features and full lips.

Her skin is flushed. Is that a good sign?

Mr. Bellamy said she was running a fever. That would make her hot and flushed.

Mrs. Bellamy looks over her shoulder. “You can come in, dear.”

“I don’t want to intrude.”

“Come in, Vannah,” Falcon says.

I walk in hesitantly. “Hello.”

“I’m Star Bellamy,” Mrs. Bellamy says, not rising, “and this is Raven.”

Raven gives a weak smile.

“Hi. It’s nice to meet both of you.” I glance out the door. “But I should go.”

“It’s okay,” Falcon says.

“Let me see you,” Raven says, her voice soft. “I want to lay eyes on the woman—”

“Ray...” Falcon interrupts. “You need to rest.”

I move into Raven’s line of vision. “Hi there.”

“Hello,” Raven says. “I’m glad to meet you, though I wish I weren’t lying in this damned hospital bed to do it.”

“I’m sure you’ll be out of it in no time,” I say.

Then I wonder if I should have said that. What if she’s sick again? What if Falcon’s bone marrow didn’t cure her?

“The doctor thinks Raven probably has a virus,” Mrs. Bellamy says, “but with her history, we can’t take chances. So we’re having some blood work done just to make sure.”

“I feel fine, Mom,” Raven says. “Other than feeling like shit.”

I furrow my brow.

“I see that doesn’t make sense to you,” Raven laughs a little. “I felt so bad for so long, that feeling like normal shit feels fine to me. Which I know makes no sense at all, which is why it doesn’t make sense to you.”

I smile weakly, admiring Raven’s spirit. “No, I get it.”

“You don’t,” she says, “and I’m glad you don’t.”

“You’re going to be fine,” Falcon says. “My bone marrow is magical.”

I smile at his words. He says them with such conviction that he makes me believe he believes it himself.

Raven turns to him and smiles. “You’re such a dickhead.”

Falcon returns her smile. “A dickhead with magic bone marrow.”

“It was nice meeting you,” I say. “I’ll give you some time.”

I turn and bump right into a hard male chest.

I look up...and oh my god. It’s Falcon...only slightly taller and with blue eyes.

“I’m so sorry!” I say.

“No problem.”

“Hawk,” Falcon says. “Meet Savannah.”

“Hey, Savannah,” Hawk says.

“Hi. I was just leaving so you guys can all have some family time.”

I can't get out of this room quickly enough.

How can every member of a family be so good-looking? Even lying in a sick bed with only fuzz for hair, Raven is more beautiful than I am on my best day.

Mr. Bellamy stands outside the room, his back to the wall, tapping on his phone.

He has a grave look about him, as if he can't bear to look at his daughter.

I can't blame him. What if this is starting again? And what if...

I can't let myself go there.

If Raven doesn't make it, Falcon may not make it either.

So Raven *must* make it.

It's probably just a virus, like her doctor said. It's probably just...

I head to the end of the hallway where the vending machines are and sit down on a chair in the small waiting area.

I'm thankful no one else is there.

I've been here before, on this floor and on the seventh, when Ashley was here.

Ashley...

It's only been weeks, yet it feels like...

It feels like a lifetime ago.

Then...footfalls.

“There you are, Vannah.” Falcon’s eyes flash with sexy anger. “Come with me.”

## FALCON

I spent the morning being interrogated by a clearly biased detective and then by a clearly non-biased but unbelieving one.

I come home to find a strange bodyguard outside my house while Savannah is there alone.

And I end up here.

Back at this damned hospital, looking at my sweet sister in a hospital bed.

No.

No.

No.

This cannot be happening again.

Raven is not sick. My bone marrow may not be magic, but damn it! It *has* to work.

“What’s wrong?” Savannah asks, her brown eyes wide.

“What isn’t wrong?” I retort, yanking her along beside me.

The room...



The room is still vacant.

I shove her inside and close the door, and then grab both of her hands and plaster her to the wall, her hands above her head, and I crush our lips together.

Hers are already parted, and I push my tongue inside.

Sweet, sweet Savannah.

I can lose myself in her.

Lose myself in her softness, her femininity.

Lose myself in my sweet sin.

But she yanks her arms down, breaking my grasp on her and the kiss as well.

“No, Falcon.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. I said no. Not like this. Not again.”

“I need you,” I grit out.

“And I need you,” she says. “But not in the hospital again. I can’t do it. Not with Raven in the other room. And Ashley.”

“Ashley? Ashley’s gone, Vannah.”

“I know that.” She curls her hands into fists. “I know that, damn it. But these days. They’ve all blurred together, and I... I...” Tears well in her eyes.

“Hey. I didn’t mean to—”

“I know you didn’t.” She grips my shoulders. “I want you too. Don’t you know that? But this can’t be us, Falcon. We

can't be the couple who has sex every time something goes wrong. It's a bandage. A patch. It doesn't fix anything."

"Bandages work miracles sometimes, Vannah." I lead her hand to the bulge in my jeans. "And I could use a miracle about now."

"Falcon—"

"Say it."

She looks at me, her eyebrows raised. "Say what?"

I shake my head. "You don't even know, do you?"

"Falcon, I—"

"You didn't say it back, Savannah. I told you I love you, and you didn't say it back."

My words.

Does she remember?

"I was... I was... Your dick was in my mouth, Falcon, and I—"

"My dick's not in your mouth now, Vannah. Ideally, I'd like it in your tight cunt, but you stopped me."

"I—"

"I've only said those words to a woman once before, and I didn't feel half for her what I feel for you. You're a drug to me, Savannah. But a sweet drug that I never knew I needed. The kind of drug that eats at you, body and soul, but that you'd die without."

"A...a drug?"

“I’m not a poet, Vannah. But I fucking love you, damn it.”

She scrapes her fingers over my cheek. “How could you doubt me?”

“Easy. I haven’t heard you say it.”

She tilts her head up and kisses me gently. “I love you, Falcon. You. With all your flaws and with all your fire. With all your strength and your good, good heart. *You*, Falcon Bellamy.”

I close my eyes, savor her words. Nothing about drugs. Just simple words of love.

“But...” she continues, “that doesn’t mean we should fuck in here. We can fuck at home.”

“At my home?”

“Well, yeah. Mine’s unlivable at the moment.”

“At *our* home, Savannah. It’s our home.” I pull her to me and kiss her hard.

I grind my cock into her belly, but she pushes back again.

“I love you, Falcon. I want you. But not here. I can’t. Not again. Too much has gone on here.”

“Yeah. Our first fuck, and I wouldn’t change it.”

She cocks her head, her eyes wide. “Wouldn’t you? Do you remember what happened that night, Falcon?”

Hell, yeah, I do. Raven stopped breathing. Code blue was called, but she didn’t need to be revived. She began breathing again on her own.

And I know what I'm doing.

I'm fucking Savannah in the same room, hoping Raven will survive again.

She's right.

We can't do it here.

Besides, we were damned lucky no one walked in on us. What if someone had been admitted to the hospital and had needed this room? A cancer patient who walks in on two people screwing.

"All right," I finally say.

"I love you," she says again, this time in her soft voice that makes my skin heat.

"I love you too," I echo.

And those are the truest words I've ever spoken.

I'll never take them back.

Which means I can't lose Savannah. Not to a rival family. Not to anything.

I'll find a way to make sure of it.

"Go back," she says. "Sit with Raven. Don't leave her side. I truly think she's going to be okay, Falcon, but you need to stay with her. You'd never forgive yourself if you didn't and something happened."

I shove my fingers through my hair. "But I can't leave you alone at the house."

"I've got Earl. When does your security get here?"

“Hell if I know. Let’s ask my dad.”

We leave the vacant room and head back to Raven’s room, where my parents and Hawk are all seated next to the bed. “Dad, can we talk to you for a minute in the hallway?”

Dad rises. “Sure, son.” He leaves the room and closes the door, leaving it open just a crack.

Two nurses whisk by us, and the nurses’ station isn’t far away.

“Let’s go to the end of the hallway,” I say. “For some privacy.”

Dad nods, and once there, “What’s this about, Falcon?”

“I want to stay here with Raven, but I don’t want Savannah at my place alone. When does your security start?”

“They’ve already started. Your place is being surveilled, and your bodyguard should be arriving”—he checks his phone—“about now. Looks like I have a text from him.”

“This is all unnecessary,” Savannah says.

“It’s necessary,” Dad counters. “I don’t want you or Falcon in danger.”

“No, that’s not what I mean,” she says.

“She’s talking about Earl, the bodyguard her father sent. I won’t let him stay in the house.”

“I can have him checked out,” Dad says.

“I already did, but you have more resources. That’d be great.”

Savannah sighs. “Falcon, I have something to say.”

“Just a minute, Vannah.” I turn to Dad. “Have you been in touch with Gallo?”

Dad shakes his head. “I don’t deal with mobsters.” He looks at Savannah. “Sorry, I didn’t mean—”

She raises her hand to stop him. “Not a problem, but I—”

“Just check him out, then,” I say. “In the meantime, I need to get Savannah back to my place securely.”

“I’ll call her a car from a service I trust.” Dad taps on his phone again.

“Falcon, listen to me.”

I turn to Savannah, who has her hands on her hips like an insolent child. “What, Vannah?”

“You don’t have to do any of that.”

“Hell, yes, I do.”

“You don’t, because I’m not leaving. I’m staying here with you. In Raven’s room.”

I drop my jaw. “No you’re not. You’ve been through trauma. You need sleep.”

“You think I’d get a wink without you there? Your guy will be there soon and he’ll take care of the dogs. But that’s not even why I’m staying.”

“Why then?”

She wraps her arm around my waist. “Because this is hard for you, Falcon. You shouldn’t be alone.”

My father turns his gaze to Savannah and then to me.

Does he see what's between us? Does he know?

Do I care?

Not even slightly.

“There's only that uncomfortable couch,” I say. “And those ridiculous wooden chairs.”

“I'll get a recliner sent to Raven's room,” Dad says.

“And I'll sleep on the uncomfortable couch, Falcon. Or the floor. I don't care. I'm not leaving you.”

“Savannah, the nurses interrupt nearly every hour to check Raven's vitals. You won't get any sleep.”

“I think I've already said I won't get any sleep back at your place without you there.” She lays her head on my shoulder. “I'm serious. If you're staying, I'm staying. If you don't want me here, you'll have to physically remove me.”

“What if you stay at our place, tonight?” Dad asks. “Star and I gave up our nearby hotel room when Raven was released the last time, so we're going home.”

“Great idea, Dad, and thanks.”

“Yes, that's so generous of you,” Savannah says, “but I only... Not to put you down or anything, but I only feel safe with Falcon.”

Dad nods as we walk back toward Raven's room. “I understand. I'll make arrangements for a recliner. That way you'll both have a place to sleep. But you should ask Raven. If

she doesn't want you both here, you need to abide by her wishes."

"Of course." I nod.

Mom and Hawk leave Raven's room, meeting us in the hallway.

"What's going on out here?" Mom asks.

"Nothing," Dad says. "Falcon and Savannah are staying here with Raven tonight, if she's okay with it, of course."

Raven will be fine with both of us staying. She knows what Vannah and I have both been through the past couple days.

"Let's head out, Star," Dad says. "Hawk?"

"I'm going to get a bite and then hang with Raven a little longer."

Dad nods, and he and Mom walk toward the elevators.

"So?" Hawk eyes Savannah. "Just what do we have here?"



## SAVANNAH

I need to stay with Falcon. We need each other.

But even if that weren't the case, I wouldn't be leaving the hospital. I have an ulterior motive.

I want to look in on Mrs. Shaw. And then Giancarlo.

I can't tell Falcon. He'll want to go with me, and I need to talk to Giancarlo alone.

"So?" Hawk eyes me. "Just what do we have here?"

"You know the whole story, I assume," Falcon says. "Unless Dad didn't tell you."

"Dad told me."

"Good," Falcon says, "because I just told it to a fucking detective today and I have no desire to rehash it all."

"Everything good?" Hawk asks.

Falcon shakes his head. "How can you even ask that, with Ray back here?"

"Trying for levity," Hawk says. "It's my way. She'll be all right, Fal. She has to be."

“Damned right she has to be.”

“I’ll let the two of you talk,” I say, peeking into the room. Raven seems to be sleeping.

Falcon grabs my arm. “You stay right here.”

“You going to answer me?” Hawk raises his eyebrows.

“About what’s going on with us?” I ask.

“This is on me, Vannah,” Falcon says.

“Falcon, we have nothing to hide.” I turn to Hawk and look into his big blue eyes. They’re laced with fear and sadness for his sister. “I’m in love with your brother.”

“You are?” A voice says from behind me. “Lucky me.”

I turn.

Wow. This one’s tall too. And hot. A little thinner than the other two but no less muscular and with a boyish look that makes him more pretty than handsome.

Wow.

“Eagle,” I say.

“That’s my name.” He holds out his hand. “I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure.”

“Savannah Gallo,” I say.

“Hands off, Eagle.” From Falcon.

“Easy, bro.” Eagle smiles. “I don’t touch what’s not mine.” Then he gets serious. “How is she?”

“In good spirits, for what it’s worth,” Falcon replies. “The doc thinks she just caught a virus, but we won’t know until the blood panels come back.”

“How long will that be?” Eagle asks.

Falcon shakes his head. “How the fuck should I know?”

“Easy, easy,” Eagle says again.

Falcon is looking at his youngest brother in a strange way—as if he can’t decide whether he wants to hug him or slice him up and throw him to a den of hungry lions.

I must be seeing it wrong.

If there’s one thing Falcon is all about, it’s family.

I clear my throat. “If you’ll all excuse me, I need to...go to the bathroom.”

Falcon touches my cheek. “Don’t be long.”

“Of course not.”

I have the information for Giancarlo and Mrs. Shaw from my earlier talk with the clerk.

I want to see Mrs. Shaw, make sure she’s okay. But how can she be okay? She’s a widow...and it’s all my fault. I’m probably the last person she wants to see.

I head to her room anyway, summoning all my courage. Her door is open, and I peek inside. She appears to be sleeping, and I don’t want to disturb her. A nurse walks by me to enter the room.

“Are you a friend?” she asks.

“Yes. Is she doing okay?”

“She’s doing just fine, but that’s all I can say unless you’re family. Would you like me to wake her?”

“No.” I shake my head. “I’m glad to know she’s doing well. I’ll come back another time to visit.”

I leave, relief sweeping through me. Relieved that Mrs. Shaw is fine, but also because I got a temporary reprieve from talking to her.

As much as the guilt is consuming me, though, I’d gladly have Mrs. Shaw yell at me into next week to avoid seeing Giancarlo.

But I must.

I find his room, and his door is closed. I knock.

“Yeah?”

Is it his voice? It’s crackly and raspy, and I don’t know him well enough to recognize his voice anyway.

I open the door, and he’s lying in bed. Oddly, there’s no bandage on his neck, but he looks pale.

“For fuck’s sake,” he says when he sees me.

I try to calm my rapid heartbeat. “Hello, Giancarlo.”

“Hello, bitch.”

I breathe in. One, two, three... “The other night at the restaurant, you thought you knew me. Thought we had met.”

“I knew who you were.”

“I get that now.”

“Get the hell out of here. It’s thanks to you I’m in this hellhole.”

“What did you expect?” I keep my voice steady. “You trespassed, held Falcon at gunpoint, and you were going to kidnap me.”

He says nothing.

Of course not. I know the drill. You say nothing that could be used against you.

That’s been drilled into my head since I could understand the words.

“What do you want?” he demands.

“I’m just checking on you.”

His lips move as if he’s trying to smile but can’t quite get there. “To make sure you’re not a murderer?”

I steel myself, will myself to stay calm. “I wouldn’t be a murderer anyway. You and I both know that.”

He doesn’t reply.

Yup. He can’t.

He lifts his arm an inch, displaying his IV. “As you can see, I’m going to live. I got four units of blood, and I’m still weak.”

“You’re living because of Falcon, and you know it. Or didn’t they tell you how he saved your stupid life?”

Nothing, of course.

“I hope you’re planning to let Jordan go. I can’t have her involved with the likes of you.”

“Who she sees is her business.”

“And mine. She’s one of my best friends, and I sure as hell don’t want her involved in what you do for a living.”

No reply.

“Fine. We’ll leave it at that. You’re alive thanks to Falcon Bellamy. You owe him your life. Don’t forget that.”

“Oh, he won’t.”

I jerk at the voice.

The voice that turns my insides into quivering snakes. The voice that once said “I love you.”

I turn.

Miles McAllister stands in the doorway to Giancarlo’s room.

“Hello, Savannah.”

I clear my throat, willing my heart to stop beating like a hummingbird’s.

I should have seen this coming, but I didn’t.

I told Falcon I was going to the bathroom. How long have I been gone? I’m not even sure how much time has passed. No more than ten minutes at the most. I think.

Falcon wouldn’t think anything of a woman spending ten minutes in the bathroom. Would he? He spent the last eight years of his life behind bars without any contact with women

using the facilities. I have no idea what he would think. If he's even thinking about me at all. He's focused on his sister, who he loves and is frightened for.

"I was just leaving." I brush past Miles and—

"Not so fast." He grabs my arm.

I yank it away—or attempt to. Miles is stronger than I am, and I haven't been eating well since...

Well, since all of this went down.

Realizing Falcon was my parolee.

Ashley's accident.

Ashley's death.

Giancarlo and Abel.

My attack on Giancarlo.

Abel's death.

And now this...

"You're not going anywhere," Miles says.

"Think again," I say.

He digs his nails into my flesh. "Do you think your big burly cowboy is coming to your rescue? He doesn't know where you are. He thinks you went to the bathroom."

"How do you know that? Who do you have watching me?" I demand.

"Sweet Savannah." Miles chuckles. "I've been watching you since you turned eighteen. You don't make a move

without my knowing.”

My jaw drops as the blood in my veins turns to ice.

My skin prickles, and not in a good way. If I fell down, I’m sure my limbs would break off like icicles.

“You’re coming with me,” Miles says.

I open my mouth to speak, but no words emerge. My vocal cords are frozen, like the rest of me.

Miles lifts the fabric of his slacks to reveal an ankle holster. “You and I are going to walk out of this room slowly, normally, as if we’re visiting a friend. You understand me?”

I shake my head.

Except I don’t.

I’m frozen. Can’t move. My body isn’t working.

“Good,” Miles says. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

*No, no, no!*

But the words don’t come.

My body doesn’t obey my brain.

Miles still holds my arm, and I walk with him, my legs obeying him and not me.

*Falcon! Daddy!*

*Anyone!*

*Where’s the bodyguard my father hired? At Falcon’s house? Why not here? Why isn’t anyone watching me here?*



We move toward the stairwell. Miles hates elevators. I remember that about him. I don't know why. I don't care why. Maybe he just knows people are less likely to see him in the stairwell. Or maybe he was stuck in an elevator as a child.

Don't know.

Don't care.

He opens the door to the stairwell. Which floor are we on again? Trauma. Fourth floor. Right.

Four flights of stairs until we get to the lobby.

Is Miles armed?

This is a small-town hospital. No metal detectors.

This is a place where people trust each other.

But I trust no one.

Not even my parents.

Not my brother who left the country and hasn't been in touch with me since.

Not even Gert, my bestie. She's close, but I've never completely let down my guard with her.

But Falcon.

I let it down with Falcon.

And I found a love so profound I never imagined it could exist.

*Falcon, where are you?*

And I still can't stop myself from following Miles.

Something's holding me. Some mixture of fear and loyalty  
and family and self.

And I'm frozen. Frozen inside.

Frozen and following a man I abhor away from the man  
who is my salvation.

## FALCON

**E**ight years earlier...

*“Come on.” I shake Eagle. “Get it together, man. What the fuck have you done?”*

*My brother shivers in my arms. I see him as a child, as a toddler, just learning to walk, walking to me, his oldest brother, with pride in his eyes. And I take him in my arms, hug him, and tell him how proud I am.*

*He would smile, lighting up his big brown eyes—the ones that are wide as saucers now.*

*“Come on, brother. We’re going to fix this. We’re going to fix it. I promise.”*

*I’ve been making promises to my littlest brother for as long as I can remember.*

*When he accidentally knocked over one of Mom’s favorite vases, and I took the blame for it. She still thinks I broke it after all these years.*

*“Come on, I promise...”*

*He’s still shivers. And I still don’t know what to do.*

*Behind me, Hawk touches my shoulder. "We've got to get out of here."*

*My brother's right, of course.*

*"Come on," Hawk says. "The sun is setting, and if we have to work after dark, we'll need light."*

*"We don't have any tools," Hawk says. "We need shovels, at least. We can't fucking dig with our hands."*

*"Right, right."*

*Eagle is still staring into space.*

*"We've got to get Eagle home."*

*"We can't take him home like this," Hawk says. "We can't let Mom and Dad see him like this. We can't let the girls see him like this."*

*"Robin and Raven would help," I say.*

*"But Falcon, we can't bring them in on this. You and I are already accessories. Do you want that for Robbie and Ray?"*

*I shake my head and close my eyes.*

*Think!*

*No, I don't want that for my sisters.*

*Why, why, why did Hawk and I get rid of that powder? If we'd left it, none of this would be happening.*

*Except Eagle might be in more trouble. When you get in with these cartels, it's damned near impossible to get out.*

*We've got to get Eagle somewhere safe. Somewhere they won't find him.*

*Where the fuck is that?*

*Damn.*

*“We’ve got no choice,” I say. “We have to leave everything as is, get Eagle home, and keep watch over him until morning. Then you and I will come back and deal with this shit.”*

*“No,” Hawk says. “We do it tonight.”*

*My brother’s right. I’m thinking of Eagle, and he’s thinking of the big picture, which is where we need to be focused.*

*Eagle will have to stay here where we can keep an eye on him. I nod to Hawk. “I’ll stay here with him. You go back for supplies. Try not to be seen.”*

*“I won’t be.” Hawk hurries away from the area.*

*I hold onto Eagle. “It’s going to be fine, baby brother. It’s going to be fine.”*



I SEE different things when I look at my youngest brother.

I see the man who screwed up royally and got me put away.

But I also see the cute little toddler who followed me around, grabbing my hand and calling me Fah-fah, the little boy who I taught to ride a horse and a two-wheeler. The little boy who said I was his hero.

Then I see the shivering seventeen year old who went into shock. That young man, still a boy, really, who shivered in my arms and begged me, without words, to help him. To protect him.

And I vowed I would, just as I did when he was a little kid.

Just as I did when he was a baby and I held him for the first time when Mom was still in the hospital.

Robin and Raven treated him like he was their baby. They were little mommies to him.

But me?

I wasn't a little father to Eagle.

I was a big brother. A hero. And in the end, a savior.

He's up to something, but I can't deal with that right now. I've got Savannah to consider, and in the next room, Raven, who may be rejecting my bone marrow.

Raven...who may be relapsing.

Raven...who may die.

"Nice of you to show up," I finally say to him.

"I love her just as much as you do, Fal."

I don't doubt his words. I've never doubted Eagle's words. He always means well. Since that fateful day, I know he's stayed clean. We got him into rehab and I got updates from Hawk while I was inside.

Hawk watched him like a... Well, like a hawk.

He became his protector while I was gone.

But I'm back now.

“So what's up with you and the woman?” Eagle asks.

“You heard her.”

Eagle grins. “She's in love with you.”

“Apparently.”

Eagle steps toward me. “And you return her feelings?”

“I do, so back off.”

He holds up a hand. “You've got no worries with me. I owe you a lot.”

Fuck, he has no idea. “I don't want to go there, Eagle. Not here, and not now.”

“I just mean—”

“You're up to something. Something that involves Scarlett Ramsey, but it has to wait, Eagle. Raven's more important.”

And so is Savannah, but I doubt Eagle has a clue what she and I have been through during the last few days. He doesn't check in the way Hawk does.

You'd think he'd learn after all the shit that went down all that time ago.

A doctor—Raven's doctor—walks swiftly down the hallway and into Raven's room, bypassing us.

“Let's go,” I say, walking into the room. “He might have the results.”

“Raven,” the doctor says. “Are your parents here? I have some answers about the blood work.”

Raven yawns. “They left for the evening. But my brothers are here.” She gestures to us. “What is it, Doctor?”

“Your red count and hemoglobin look great, but...your white blood cell count is slightly elevated.”

“God.” I rub my forehead.

“Easy, Fal,” Hawk says. “Let’s see what Dr. Hayes has to say.”

“Now, it could be nothing,” Dr. Hayes says. “You could still have a virus. As you probably know, when you contract an infection, your immune system responds by making more white blood cells.”

“So you don’t know anything yet, then?” I ask.

Dr. Hayes turns to me. “Your sister has gained weight well, and her hair is coming in. From all standpoints, she looks healthy. She’s responded well to the bone marrow transplant. But she’s still recovering, and viruses will attack when a person is down. It’s likely that’s all it is, but with her history, we can’t be sure without more tests.”

“What more tests do we need?” Raven asks.

“The pathologist needs to look more closely at your white blood cells. If they’re normal, we can be assured this is just a viral infection. If they’re abnormal...”

He doesn’t finish. Why should he? We all know what he means.

Raven doesn’t smile.



Seeing her smile, seeing her feel good was such a wonder once she came home.

“How do you feel, Ray?” I ask.

“Same,” she says. “Sick, but not *sick*. I don’t expect any of you to understand.”

“I understand,” Dr. Hayes says, “and that’s a good sign. Once you’ve had cancer of any kind, you realize that run of the mill viruses aren’t that bad.”

“Have you had cancer, Doc?” Eagle asks.

I roll my eyes. “Christ, Eagle.”

“I haven’t, and I count myself lucky,” he says. “But as an oncologist, I’ve known more cancer patients than most. I’ve studied the disease relentlessly. I know what patients say.”

“How long until you get the other results?” I ask.

He looks at his watch. “Could be later tonight. Could be early tomorrow. I’ve asked them to rush it.”

“What do we do until then?”

“I’d like for Raven to stay here for the night, no matter what, so we can keep an eye on her.”

“I’ll be staying with her,” I say.

“Falcon...”

I grab her hand and give it a squeeze. “Stop it, sis. I’m staying.”

She nods. “Okay. I’d like that. I feel safer with you here.”

Safer.

I protected Eagle all those years ago.

I protected Savannah when those derelicts came onto my property.

I gave Raven my bone marrow, but I can't protect her. I can give her my whole body, but I have no say in how it turns out.

I've never felt so useless.

But I'll stay. Especially since Raven wants me to.

Savannah and I are both staying because she won't leave me—

Fuck! Savannah.

She should have come back from the bathroom by now.

## SAVANNAH

**M**y voice finally returns when we exit the stairwell and head to the hospital entrance.

Finally, I find my voice, and my body unfreezes. “Why, Miles? Why are you doing this?”

“Because you were promised to me, Savannah.”

“Why do you want a wife who hates you?”

“Did I say it was what I wanted?” He shakes his head. “You really don’t have a clue how all of this works, do you?”

He’s not wrong.

I’ve tried to distance myself from what my family does.

I hate the whole idea of it.

It took both of my brothers, and I was determined that it wouldn’t take me.

But I’m not strong like Vinny is. Like Michael was.

They were strong...and it took them anyway.

I try to wrestle out of his grip. “Explain it to me, then. How does this work? Why do you need me?”

He doesn't reply.

Falcon...

Falcon has no idea where I am, and he has no way of finding me.

He's got other things on his mind. His sister, first and foremost, and then of course the detectives who are hounding him about Abel's death.

Abel's death...

They're going to try to send him back to prison. I know the system. I've worked in the system. I know how they look at ex-cons.

No.

I won't let it happen.

Not to Falcon.

Not to the man I love.

He would do anything to protect me.

And damn it...I'm going to do the same for him.

"Miles," I say.

"What?"

"If I go with you—if I do whatever it is that you need me to do without arguing—could you do something for me?"

He stops and meets my gaze. "I'm not in the habit of making deals."

I scoff. “You’re kidding, right? You made a deal for me back in the day, remember? I recall being locked in a conference room while your father and mine and a couple attorneys decided our lives.”

“You’re correct.” He shrugs. “I should rephrase that. I’m not in the habit of making deals with *you*, Savannah.”

“You mean with a lowly woman?” Women are regarded as chattel in these organizations. It didn’t take long to figure that out.

He doesn’t reply.

“Why are you okay with this? Surely you’ve got someone else you love. Or you could find someone.”

He looks away. “That’s inconsequential.”

“It shouldn’t be. Love should never be inconsequential.”

“It is in my case. Just as much as it is in yours.”

The look in Miles’s eyes is... I can’t tell what it is. Is there someone for him? A woman? A man? A large animal? I can’t tell. He’s cold. Cold as ice, like the blood in my veins.

He leads me away from the entrance and down a more secluded hallway near the cafeteria, which is now closed. “No deals to be made, Savannah. You’re mine, so you’re coming with me.”

“I’m telling you I will come,” I say quietly, “without fighting you. Whatever it is you get by having me at your side, I’ll see you get it. But there is one thing you have to do for me.”

“Did I not just say I won’t make deals?” Flecks of saliva sputter from his mouth.

I gulp back my nausea. “You did. But I could run away screaming right now, and that wouldn’t bode well for you.”

“You won’t do that.”

“Won’t I?”

“You’re forgetting that I’ve known you since you were a kid, Savannah. The day you were born, you were promised to me. I was ten years old. You think I haven’t watched you over the years? You’re meek. Meek and weak.”

I gulp again, summoning my will against his harsh words. “Weak? Meek? Are serious? Did you see what I did to Giancarlo?”

“That doesn’t change who you are at your core. Quite frankly, it’s good that you choose fight over flight. But that doesn’t change who you are. Not on a day-to-day basis. Not when you’re *not* being threatened.”

Anger courses through me. “You have no idea who you’re dealing with.” I curl my hands into fists, open my mouth—

Miles clamps his hand over my lips, muffling my scream. “So you’re not meek little Savannah,” he whispers against my ear.

His hot breath makes me want to retch.

“Fine, I will hear you out. When I remove my hand now, Savannah, you’re not going to scream again. Is that clear?”

I can't speak with his hand over my mouth, so clearly he wants me to either nod or shake my head.

So I do neither.

"You going to answer me?"

Again I do neither.

With his other hand, he wrestles with something and —

I go cold.

There it is. The nose of a gun against my back. He couldn't have gotten it out of his ankle holster so quickly. He had it in his waistband, underneath his jacket.

Small town hospitals. They don't check your belongings before they let you in.

Finally I nod.

"Good girl." He removes his hand from my mouth slowly. I gasp in a breath.

"Now, tell me what you want, Savannah."

"Put away the gun, Miles."

"Are you crazy? You think you can make that kind of a request? That kind of a demand?"

"What are you going to do, shoot me? If you're going to do that, you would've done it by now. I don't think you *can* shoot me, Miles. I think there's an agreement with our families, and if I'm dead, that agreement all goes away."

He says nothing.

“So why don’t you tell me what that agreement is? Why you’re still after me all these years later? When we apparently came to a deal after I finished college?”

“That deal went away when you left your parole officer position in Austin.” He nudges the gun farther into my back.

I hold back a gasp, hold back a wince.

“So that’s what you want? You want me to go back to Austin, to my position there?”

I’ll do it. I’ll do it in a minute if it will spare Falcon.

“I’m afraid that deal’s off the table, you little bitch.”

Icicles hit my neck at his words. Not that he called me a bitch. But if he doesn’t want me back in the parole office, he obviously wants me for something else. And that could be anything.

“Tell me what you want,” I say, willing my voice not to stammer.

A caustic grin splits his face. “You’re going to be my bride, Savannah Gallo.”

I shake my head, calming the tremors inside me. “You don’t love me, despite what you said five years ago in that locked room.”

“No, I don’t. In fact, I hate you.”

Without thinking, I turn around, face him, his gun now pointed at my belly.

“Then what’s this about? Why do you need me to marry you?”



He pushes the nose of the gun into me. “Why don’t you ask your daddy?”

I swallow my fear of the pistol now touching me. “Do you see him here? I’m asking you!”

“Let’s get this straight, Savannah. I agree to listen to you. You tell me what you want. If I agree, you will walk to my car quietly, at my side, and we will be husband and wife by morning.”

I gulp, forcing the nausea down my throat. My stomach is churning, acid trying to float upward, but I steel it down.

“I want you to leave Falcon Bellamy alone.”

He lets out an acidic scoff. “The guy who killed Abel? I don’t think so, Savvy.”

I take a deep breath then, let it out slowly. I used to hate when Ashley called me Savvy. Now I would gladly listen to her on repeat for the rest of my life rather than hear it once more from Miles’s lips.

I draw in one more breath, let it out again. “Those are my terms. Whatever you think you have against Falcon, make it go away. Pay off the cops if you have to.”

“The guy’s an ex-con, Savannah.”

“He’s innocent.”

He laughs sarcastically. “Right. We’re all innocent, Savvy. There’s not one among us who’s guilty.”

I suppress my shivers, gulp down nausea once again. “I believe he’s innocent. Whether you do or not is

inconsequential to me. He paid his dues, did his time. You know very well that he was acting in self-defense when he pistol-whipped Abel, and *I* know you can make this go away. Do that, and I'll go with you. Now."

"You think I have that kind of power?"

"If you don't, your father does."

"So does *your* father, Savvy."

"You know as well as I do that this has to come from your side. Abel was *your* man. Make it go away, and make sure Giancarlo here lives, and I'm yours."

"And you know what that means?"

I nod my head, again suppressing the quaking that's going inside my body.

It means I'm his commodity. Owned by him. By Miles McAllister and the McAllister family.

He will rape me, and impregnate me, force me to bear his children, and if they're girls? They'll be auctioned off to the highest bidder as I was.

I hope I only have boys. Boys who escape like Vinny did. Not boys who die, like Michael did.

I nod again. "You must think me naïve, but I'm not. I know exactly what being your wife will mean. My only consolation is that you won't bruise up my face or anything else that can be seen."

"No," he vows. "I will not. But I resent the implication that I'll harm you in other ways."

I sniff back a tear. “You’re already harming me, Miles. You’re forcing me into a marriage that neither of us wants. Marriage that somehow means some kind of alliance between our two families. You’re getting way more than me. There’s something you need, otherwise you wouldn’t be pushing this, not at this late date.” I pause a moment. “So do we have a deal?”

A moment passes.

Then another.

Until—

“Deal,” he says.

That’s all he says. He doesn’t offer me any explanation as to why. He doesn’t have to. I know something else is at play here. Something far more sinister than me fudging some parole records. Far more than both of us being forced into marriage.

Something else is going on.

I’m walking into a minefield.

And I’m doing it gladly, to save Falcon Bellamy.

## FALCON

Never have I felt more pulled into multiple directions at once than I do in this moment.

I don't want to leave my sister, but where is Savannah? Savannah's the woman I love, and she should've been back from the bathroom twenty minutes ago.

I look into Raven's eyes.

"It's okay," she says. "Go."

"Ray..."

She smiles—a weak smile that's forced, but she does it for me. "I see it in your face, Falcon. Mom and Dad will be back. Hawk and Eagle are here. Robbie's on her way. I'm fine. Go. Find her."

*Thank you*, I mouth to my sister, and I leave her room.

The bathrooms are at the end of the hallway, near the alcove where the vending machines are. I race toward them, my feet already feeling numb.

That sixth sense I got on the inside? The one that saved my ass more than once?

It's like a crow pecking at the back of my neck, telling me to beware.

It's pecking hard now—so hard I absently touch the back of my neck to check for blood.

No blood of course, but I massage the muscles, try to ease the pecking.

Doesn't work.

And then the door is in front of me. The women's restroom.

Can't go in there.

Everything in me tells me not to go in there, yet I have no choice.

I crack the door. "Savannah? You in there?"

No reply.

"Is anyone in there?"

Again no reply. Not that I expect there to be one. Most women, when a man yells into the women's restroom, aren't going to reply.

A moment later a woman exits, her face pale and her lips trembling.

"I'm sorry if I frightened you, ma'am. I'm looking for my girlfriend. She left nearly half an hour ago to go to the bathroom, and she never came back."

She cracks the bathroom door open. "I don't think there's anyone else in there. You can go in and look now if you'd

like.”

“Thank you.”

I walk in then. “Savannah?” I look under each stall.

No feet.

No one at the sinks.

Then I look inside each stall, just to make sure no one is sitting on the toilets, hiding.

They’re all empty.

Where is she? She wouldn’t have gone into the men’s room. Perhaps she went to a different floor, or down to the first floor to get a snack.

I walk briskly through the hallway to the other end, where the elevators are. But I don’t have the patience to stand and wait for an elevator. I open the door to the stairwell and race down six flights of stairs to the first floor.

I repeat my actions in the ladies’ bathroom by the cafeteria.

No Savannah.

Then I go to the cafeteria, rake my gaze over every corner.

No Savannah.

Until a light bulb flashes in my mind.

Giancarlo.

Perhaps she went to see how he’s doing, to make sure he’s still on the mend, so she’s not looking at a manslaughter charge like I am.

If that were the case, why wouldn't she just tell me?

I race back up the stairs to the fourth floor where Giancarlo is, walk briskly to his room, peek inside the cracked door.

He's still lying there. Still with an IV in his arm, still hooked up to his machines.

He's alive.

Thank God.

But no Savannah.

He's asleep, and the only thing left to do is go back up to Raven's room.

Let her know that I can't stay with her tonight.

I have to do it quickly. I could easily just call Hawk and have him relay the message, but this is my sister. My sister who may be...

No. Can't go there. It's a virus. Just a virus.

I take the stairs again, this time to the sixth floor and back to Raven's room.

My mother gasps when she sees me. "Falcon, what happened?"

I don't know what she means, until I realize I'm sweating, perspiration dripping down the sides of my face.

"Took the stairs. Ran up and down them."

"Did you find her?" Raven asks.

I shake my head. "I don't know where she could've gotten off to. We came here together, in my car."

“I’m sure she’s fine,” Raven says. “Go. You go find her, Falcon.”

“But I need to stay here with you. I promised.”

“I’ll stay the night,” Hawk says. “You go. Go find her.”

I go to my sister’s bedside, kiss her fuzzy head. “Whatever this is, Raven, you do *not* let it get you. Do you hear me? You going away is not an option.”

“I’ll be okay, Falcon.”

I simply nod, and then I back out of the room.

As I walk to the elevators, I don’t know what to do.

I, Falcon Bellamy, don’t know what to do.

It’s an odd sensation, something I’m not sure I’ve ever felt.

Eight years ago, I knew what I had to do. I had to protect my brother.

A few days ago, I knew what I had to do. I had to protect Savannah.

All those times in prison, when I was either attacked or someone from my cell block was attacked, I knew what I had to do.

I had to protect them.

And now?

Yes, I have to protect Savannah. With everything in my being I know this.

But I don’t know where to start.



I find my car, get in.

I sit in the driver seat.

I'll call Leif. He'll know what to do. He worked as a bodyguard. He knows how to investigate.

I pull my new phone out of my pocket, but my fingers don't move.

That crow is still pecking the back of my neck, but with that I feel something new.

Something I've suppressed for so long.

I feel *fear*.

For Savannah.

For what my life might be without her.

I scribble a quick text to Leif.

*I need your help. Meet me at the hospital. You know what to do.*

Then I head back into the building, back up to the trauma ward, back to Giancarlo's room.

I walk in, and he's still lying alone, asleep.

A nurse could come in at any time and check his vitals, but at this point I don't care.

"Wake up, you fucking son of a bitch."

Giancarlo's eyelids flutter and he opens them. "I'm awake. What the hell do you want, Bellamy?"

"Where is she? Where's Savannah?"

Giancarlo yawns, grimacing. “How should I know? If you can’t keep track of your woman, that’s on you.”

I glance around his room. The bathroom. There’s a mirror inside. I could easily take him out the way Savannah tried to. I won’t, of course. I won’t let him fucking die. But he doesn’t know that. “You tell me everything you know, or I swear to God I will finish what she started right here in this hospital room.”

“You do that and you’ll end up back in the slammer.”

“Do you think I fucking care? I saved your ass. You would’ve bled out if it weren’t for me. Right now, I can take it all back in a fucking instant.”

“Just to know where your bitch is?”

“Where is she?” I hold onto his IV line.

“I’m not feeling too well,” he says.

“Do I look like I care? What do you know?”

“I don’t feel...”

He gasps in a breath.

Then his machines start beeping out of control.

Two nurses race into the room. “Sir, you’re going to have to leave.”

I let go of his IV line. “You’d better not die, you son of a bitch,” I whisper near his ear through clenched teeth.

I wait.

I wait because I don’t know what else to do.

One of the nurses leaves the room.

“Is he all right?” I ask.

“Is he a friend of yours?”

“Yes.” The lie is bitter on my tongue, in my throat, in my gut.

“He should be fine. He just lost his breath. His pulse ox went down a bit. Probably just a panic attack, but we won’t know until the on-call doctor takes a look. He’s on his way now.”

“But he’s okay. He’s breathing.”

“Yes, sir. At this time he appears to be okay.”

Good.

As much as I’d like to strangle the motherfucker with my bare hands, I don’t want Savannah to have a man’s death on her conscience.

I’ve got one on mine, though, and aside from the fact that they might try to put me away because of it, I don’t give a rat’s ass. The world is a better place without that son of a bitch Abel in it.

Without Giancarlo, too, but again... I don’t want that for Savannah.

A panic attack...

The nurse isn’t a doctor, but nurses see a lot of things in hospitals. Most of them are just as equipped to diagnose as a doctor is.

A panic attack...

If Giancarlo was panicking at the site of me, at my questions, then he *does* know something.

He knows where Savannah is.

And he will tell me.

And he will tell me *tonight*.

My phone buzzes with a text from Leif.

*Got it. On my way.*

Good.

Between the two of us, we should be able to figure out where Savannah is.

Once I'm able to talk to Giancarlo again, he *will* answer me. He will answer me without panicking again.

Because the text I sent held a code.

*You know what to do.*

It means he needs to arrive armed.

## SAVANNAH

I leave the hospital willingly, walking by Miles's side.

His gun is back in his holster.

I could easily escape. Run away screaming.

He wouldn't dare stop me, and he wouldn't dare shoot me at this little hospital.

But I don't. I walk with him, keeping a noncommittal look on my face, even though inside I'm sobbing. Big racking sobs, knowing I'll never see Falcon Bellamy again.

But another part of me feels at peace.

Because now I know what love is, and I know that it sometimes involves sacrifice.

Falcon will not go back to prison. Not on my watch. I believe he's innocent of the crime he confessed to, and though he may not be innocent in Abel's death, he was simply protecting me and protecting himself, which he had every legal right to do.

But because he's an ex-con, the DA may not see it that way.

Miles can fix it.

My father can fix it.

Whatever is going on right now with Miles—why he needs me now more than ever—has something to do with my father and grandfather. I feel it in my bones.

I will find out what it is.

It means I have to marry Miles, sleep with him, probably be forcefully violated by him, and I will do it. I will find out what's going on with my family, what role I'm playing.

And somehow, someday... I will try to get back to Falcon.

I keep my expression reserved still as we exit the hospital, as Miles gives the valet attendant his ticket and some five-dollar bills.

I stand next to him as I wait with Miles for the attendant to bring his car.

His black Mercedes drives up a few minutes later, and the attendant gets out.

Part of me is surprised Miles is driving himself.

Part of me isn't.

Miles has always been an enigma.

I want to ask where we're going, but I'm determined not to speak.

I won't make this easy for him, even though I have acquiesced up to this point.

He may force me to sleep with him—he may beat me and rape me—but I will do what I can to make it difficult.

If I won't be happy in this marriage, neither will he.

Someone will answer to me. Someone will answer to me why this is so important—Miles and me together.

I thought my father had made a deal. I had done my time, and I could leave. I took the job in Summer Creek. Stopped doing the family's bidding.

It's becoming clear that either my father lied to me, or something has happened since then. Something just in the last couple of weeks.

And I'm wondering...

As I look at the events as they've unfolded...

Ashley's death.

Michael Barrett's accident.

Meeting Falcon.

Being his parole officer.

A lot of coincidences.

Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.

But when things line up like this?

More often than not, something else is at work.

I aim to find out what it is.

Because if they have something on Falcon or the Bellamy family, I need to make it go away. For Falcon's sake. For

Raven's sake. For the sake of the rest of his family, who I don't even really know.

"You're quiet," Miles says.

I say nothing.

"I can order you to talk to me."

I say nothing.

"You don't want to know where we're going?"

I do, but I won't give him the satisfaction of asking.

So again I say nothing.

"We're stopping in Austin for the night. We'll stay at my father's place."

Not Miles's own house? Odd, but again, I say nothing.

Knowledge is my only defense, but if I ask? He could lie to me. Tell me something I want to hear. Try to confuse me with fiction interspersed with facts.

So I choose again to say nothing.

"I see what you're doing, Savannah."

I say nothing.

"You're in love with this Bellamy character." He makes a gagging noise. "I know you'll never be in love with me. I was never in love with you either, despite what my father had me tell you five years ago."

And I just proved my own point. Miles will lie to me.

So I say nothing.



“I made a deal with you, Savannah. I’ll do what I can to make sure your Mr. Bellamy is not charged with any crimes regarding Abel’s death. But you and I both know that I don’t have the final say in any of them.”

Bullshit. Again I say nothing.

“But that’s all I promised you, my lovely wife-to-be. I didn’t promise you anything else with regard to Falcon Bellamy or his family. And perhaps I found your Achilles’ heel, Savannah. Perhaps I have found a way to keep you in line. Forever.”

Rage boils in my veins. My heart begins to thump wildly. My hands curl instinctively into fists, but I do my best to maintain my composure.

And I say nothing.

“You’ll talk once we get to Austin,” he says.

That’s what he thinks.

“I can guarantee you will. But I’m not going to tell you why. We’ll just let that be a fun little surprise.”

**FALCON**

I meet Leif at the entrance to the hospital.

“The only lead I now have is this Giancarlo character who Savannah stabbed. He’s not talking to me.”

“I’ll make him talk.” Leif looks around the lobby. “Let’s go find them.”

Without saying anything more, Leif and I walk toward the stairwell. When we reach the fourth floor and Giancarlo’s room, he’s alone again. Appears to be sleeping. The machines are all beeping just fine.

“I tried to get information out of him earlier, but he had a panic attack and his machines went crazy.”

Leif’s gaze darkens. “Yeah? They’ll probably do so again. That’s why we’re going to unplug them.”

“We can’t do that,” I say. “The nurses’ station will get notice right away if the machines aren’t working.”

Leif nods. “Good point. Then we’ll just have to make sure that he holds himself in check. Because if he doesn’t, I’ll fucking blow his head off.”

Leif.

He hasn't changed after all.

In his own way, he sold his soul to the devil just as I did.

I enter Giancarlo's room, followed by Leif.

"Wake up, asshole," I say, making sure his call button to the nurses is well out of his reach.

He opens his eyes.

"You going to tell us where they took her?" Leif asks.

"I don't know what you're talking about." His voice is still hoarse as he moves his gaze to Leif. "Who the fuck are you, anyway?"

"He's with me."

"Why should I tell either of you anything?"

"Because," Leif says, pulling his pistol out of his ankle holster with amazing speed, "if you don't, I'm going to finish what Savannah started."

His eyes go wide. And the monitors go insane.

"Ease that up," I say to him. "Take a few deep breaths, and ease off the panic, asshole. Because if anyone comes in here, your life is over."

Just as I suspected, he's able to bring his breathing and heart rate down to normal.

Of course he is.

He's a fucking iceman. Hired guns always are.

They have to be.

“We’re going to have a little chat,” Leif says. “My pal here wants to know where his woman is.”

“His woman who tried to kill me?”

“You really want to go there?” I shake my head. “The two of you trespassed on my property, threatened to kidnap her. She was defending herself and defending me. You know that as well as I do. That ship has left the harbor, you prick. You’re going to level with us. You’re going to refer to her as Savannah or Ms. Gallo. If you mention her trying to kill you again, Leif will finish the job in the next minute.”

That quiets him down a little.

But then, “You don’t have the fucking balls.”

I suck in a breath, grit my teeth. “You saw me kill your buddy. And Leif here? He’s an ex-Navy SEAL. He doesn’t even need his piece to end your life.”

“But I—”

“Shut up,” Leif says. “No buts, no ifs, no ors. Where is Savannah Gallo?”

“I don’t know.”

“Think again.” Leif cocks his trigger.

Giancarlo’s eyes go wide. “I mean I really don’t know. He took her.”

Anger grips me. “He?”

“My boss. Miles McAllister.”

The pecking at my neck is now clawing, talons sinking into me.

Miles McAllister. I never got back to Lance's to get the information on Savannah and McAllister. There wasn't time... and there isn't time now.

"All right," Leif says. "Who the fuck is Miles McAllister?"

"He's the son of a powerful crime lord based in Austin," Giancarlo says, keeping his raspy voice low. "He was supposed to marry Savannah Gallo."

Savannah told me as much, but now it sinks in like the fucking nails at my neck. "What the fuck did you say?"

He swallows, his eyes moving back and forth. "I'm not sure what's going down. I'm on a need-to-know basis. But for some reason, Savannah Gallo *has* to marry Miles McAllister."

Oh, *hell* no.

No one is marrying the woman I love except me.

Leif glances toward his pistol. "What else can you tell us? Where the hell are they?"

"I don't know. On a plane to Las Vegas? All I know is he needs to get married to her quickly."

"Savannah would never marry anyone else."

"If she's got a gun to her head like I do right now, she would probably say 'I do' pretty quickly."

Jealousy swirls in my gut. But it's overridden by anger—anger and fear and the need to protect my woman.

I'm like a wolf—a wolf who's rabid and ready to kill for his mate.

“I can get that information,” Leif says. “I can find out where Miles McAllister is. The Wolfe family has all kinds of resources, and I have access.”

“All right.” I look into Giancarlo's blue eyes, summoning the Savage within me. “You mention this to anyone? This little visit from us? Your plug will be pulled.”

“He's right,” Leif says. “I've got someone on you twenty-four-seven. Someone here at the hospital. So don't even think about betraying us.”

“I've got men on me too,” he says. “The McAllisters—”

“You've already fucked up,” I say. “The McAllisters have no qualms about letting you die. You think I don't know how these things work? I met my share of you dildoes in prison. Once you fuck up, they wash their hands of you.”

That's not exactly true, but Giancarlo doesn't need to know that.

Leif secures his piece back in his ankle holster, moving his jeans to cover it.

I don't know if Giancarlo is trustworthy. In all likelihood he'll squawk like a canary once we leave.

We leave the room, walking toward the elevators and entering the stairwell quickly.

“You really have someone on them?” I ask.

“Yeah. But he won’t die, Falcon. I know you don’t want that for Savannah.”

“No, I don’t. I wouldn’t mind seeing him in his grave, but not until he’s completely cured of the injuries Savannah inflicted on him.”

“It’s just someone to threaten him. Scare him a little.”

“You don’t think we did that?”

“Oh, we did. But I believe in extra precautions whenever possible.”

I nod and text Hawk quickly.

*Any news?*

*Nothing yet, but she seems in okay spirits.*

*Good. I’ll keep in touch. You ping me if anything happens.*

*Will do.*

Leif and I head to his car. I take the passenger seat as he pulls up information on his phone.

“I’m accessing some resources,” he says. “It’s usually pretty quick.”

I wait. The minutes seem like hours.

Until—

“Eureka,” Leif says. “Miles McAllister’s address in Austin. A gated community with a lot of security, of course. His father, Declan McAllister, has even more security, but I’ve got the addresses. And I’ve gotten through tight security on more than one occasion.”

“Where do we go first?”

He continues to fiddle with his phone. “First I’m checking flight manifestations to Vegas, and other places where you can get married quickly.”

“Good. What if they’re traveling under aliases?”

“Got that covered.”

Okay, then. I don’t ask any more questions. If Leif’s got it covered, it’s covered.

“Nothing on the flight manifests,” he says. “So we check the younger McAllister’s house first, right?”

“I don’t know. You said his father’s got better security.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m thinking that’s where we go then.”

“It’s your call. Your woman.”

Damn.

My call? So if I’m wrong, I may not find Savannah in time?

I rub my temples and then the back of my sore neck. “I don’t know, Leif. I don’t fucking know.”

Leif pierces me with his ice blue gaze. “What’s your instinct? Say you’re back on the inside, and you’re in this predicament. What is your instinct telling you to do?”

“The father’s house.” I say without hesitation.

“I’m on it.”



Leif plugs the address into his GPS, and we're off.

## SAVANNAH

We arrive at Declan McAllister's home. A servant answers the door and lets us in.

Maggie McAllister, Miles's mother, greets us. She's a beautiful woman in her early sixties, but she's meek and quiet.

Miles kisses her cheek. "Hello, Mother."

"Miles." She looks at me. "Savannah, how nice to see you again."

I don't speak.

"My mother is speaking to you," Miles says.

Again, I don't speak.

"Damn it, Savannah. Say hello to my mother."

I will not obey him. I refuse. He can force himself on me. He can force this marriage. But I will not take orders.

And I pay for it.

With a blow to my head.

Before I know what's happening, I'm on my knees in the marble foyer.

Maggie helps me up. “It’s easier to just obey,” she whispers in my ear.

I look at her—really look at her. She was no doubt married off at a much younger age than I am now. Probably eighteen, which is when they wanted me.

The look on her face is one of pure resignation. Understanding of her lot in life. Of the role she’s been hired to play.

Not hired, rather, but forced.

It’s her way of telling me to accept my fate. To play the role.

All my needs will be taken care of.

This I know. I will live in luxury...as long as I know my place.

To be the trophy wife of Miles McAllister. The wife that binds the McAllister and Bianchi families together.

I rise to my feet and stare at Miles, fire in my eyes.

Still I say nothing.

“You’ve chosen to play the hard way,” Miles says. “I expect by morning you’ll change your tune.”

Yes, I’m sure I’ll be raped tonight. Violated in the worst ways. Probably beaten. But only where no one can see bruises.

Maggie takes my arm. “Come on, Savannah. Let’s get you a hot beverage.”

I don’t want a hot beverage.

But by the grace of God, Miles doesn't follow us.

Maggie takes me to the kitchen. "Boxy, could you prepare some tea for Ms. Gallo and myself?"

"Certainly, ma'am."

Maggie gestures to a seat at the table. "Please."

Why not? She's trying to help me, after all. I sit.

"Would you like something other than tea?" Maggie asks.

I don't say anything.

"You can talk to me, my dear."

"Can I though?" I finally say. "Anything I say to you will go straight back to Miles."

Maggie sits down next to me. Then she does something totally unexpected. She takes one of my hands in hers. "I love my son."

I simply nod.

How could anyone love Miles McAllister?

"You will understand that one day. One day when you have children of your own."

I don't want to have children of my own. Not unless they're Falcon's children.

But she's right. I've chosen my fate. I will have children of my own with Miles unless I can figure out how to get out of this—once Falcon is in the clear, that is.

"You may not love your children's father," Maggie says, "but you will love *them*. I understand that it's hard to imagine

that now, but you will eventually see that I am correct.”

I’m not sure what to say to that, so again I say nothing.

“I know how you’re feeling. I’ve been where you are. Your mother has been where you are. Try to look on the bright side. All your needs will be met from now until the day you leave this earth. You’ll live in riches beyond your wildest dreams.”

I snap my hand away. “Are you forgetting I grew up this way? I already know what riches beyond my wildest dreams are. I’ve chosen to live without them, Mrs. McAllister.”

“Yes, I suppose you have. I’d be lying if I said I knew what this was all about. My husband doesn’t tell me things about the business. But I will try to find out.”

“You can’t.”

Maggie looks at the table. “No, I probably can’t.”

“I need to speak to my father.”

“You will. Once the marriage has taken place and it has been consummated.”

“When is that going to be?”

“First thing tomorrow. Miles and his father already made all the necessary arrangements for the license and everything.”

I force back tears. “I don’t understand. They let me go five years ago. Why now?”

“I don’t know. Like I said, I’m going to try to find out for you.”

I resolve not to say anything else, but then I can't help myself.

"You say you love your son."

"I do."

"You just witnessed him hit me with a force so hard I fell to the floor." I touch my hand to my cheek. "I'll probably have a bruise."

"You may. But don't worry about that."

"How can I *not* worry about it?"

"Makeup. My maid can cover you with makeup. You'd be amazed at what she's covered on me over the years."

"You're okay with that?"

Maggie looks around the kitchen. Boxy is at the counter, but no one else is present. "Savannah, of course I'm not okay with it. But I'm a shell of what I once was." She closes her eyes, smiles softly, and then opens them again. "Did you know I was in beauty pageants when I was in high school?"

"No, but I can see how you might've been. You're still a beautiful woman."

"I had looks on my side for sure," she says, "but the reason I did so well in pageants was because of my talent. I was a virtuoso pianist."

I stop my jaw from dropping. "I had no idea."

"I haven't touched the piano in decades. Declan couldn't have a wife who outshined him. But I had dreams once.

Dreams that I was forced to let go of. It can be done, Savannah.”

“With all due respect, you’re older than I am. Women are no longer objects in this world.”

“They were no longer objects when I was married to Declan,” she says. “But I did not have a choice, just like you don’t have a choice. Marriage to these people represents a lot more than just a simple alliance of families.”

“What else?”

She frowns. “I can see your father kept you in the dark about many things. And of course he would.”

“I don’t care about any of this,” I say. “This family stuff took both my brothers away from me. I don’t want it to swallow me too.”

She sighs, giving me another look of resignation.

She can’t answer. How could she?

It has already swallowed her up. She had to let go of her dreams, of her talent.

Now she simply exists.

She’s not living. She’s waiting to die.

“I want more,” I say, strength returning to my voice.

“I can only give you this advice,” she says. “Do not anger your husband.”

The fact that she used the words *your husband* instead of *my son* is not lost on me. Already, she has let part of her son

go. She probably had to for her own sanity.

I'm on the pill. I have been for ages, but he can keep me from my pills. Somehow I have to get away and get an IUD. At least I don't have to worry about it tonight or tomorrow. I have the pills in my purse. But as soon as I can get away, I'm seeing a doctor. I will not bring Miles's baby into this world if I can help it.



**FALCON**

The McAllister house stands imposingly at the end of a long, meandering driveway, guarded by towering wrought-iron gates that swing open to grant access to the privileged few. The meticulously manicured landscape surrounding the property is comprised of velvety green lawns that stretch out in all directions, adorned with vibrant flowerbeds bursting with colors and carefully sculpted hedges.

The house itself is a sprawling mansion, made of equal parts stone and stucco, with large floor-to-ceiling windows fitted with tinted glass. Elaborate balconies and verandas, supported by intricately designed columns, adorn the front of the house. The roof is tiled with ceramic.

Way different than the ranch house where I grew up. This is not a welcoming house, like mine was.

This is a house that says *Keep Out*.

Light fixtures illuminate the exterior, and ornate ironwork and stone add elegance while also echoing its unwelcoming message.

“Yeah,” I say to Leif. “We’re not getting in there.”

Leif glances around the area. “Are you kidding me? I got through worse than this when I was in Afghanistan. One time I used a sharp piece of stale bread to make an escape from a guarded cell. I got my friend Buck out too.”

“Shit, man.”

“Crazy, I know. But I couldn’t save my pal Wolf. He was tortured, and he died in the worst way.”

“Fuck. I’m sorry.”

“Ancient history.” He turns the car around. “We’ll park a few blocks away.”

“I’m not armed.”

“Not a problem. I’ve got everything we’re going to need in my trunk.”

“She may not even be in there,” I say.

He keeps his gaze focused on the road ahead, but I feel it penetrating me as if he were looking me straight in my own eyes. “Do you want to proceed? Tell me something. Do you *feel* her?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Think about your time inside, Falcon. Think about what you learned. You had to rely on your sixth sense. It’s what I had to do as well as a SEAL.”

I close my eyes, try to concentrate. “Yeah, you’re right. I knew when a threat was imminent, but how am I supposed to know if Savannah’s in there?”

“You already do. You told me to come here rather than to the kid’s house.”

He’s right. I did. And for the life of me, I can’t feel shit now.

“Your call,” Leif says. “We can try to find her in there, or we can go somewhere else.”

I breathe in, hold my breath a moment, try to clear my mind.

The only time I had to try to clear my mind during the time I was incarcerated was at night. I needed my sleep. If I didn’t get my sleep, I wasn’t at my best the next day, and some inmates—myself included—learned to smell weakness a mile away.

But this—this clearing of my mind while awake—is new to me.

I attempt it, and I try to feel Savannah.

I jerk my eyes open. “Let’s go in.”

“You think she’s here?”

“Leif, I don’t have a fucking clue. I’m not sure I feel her. But I’m using logic. This is the most likely place she is. We know she hasn’t flown anywhere, and as you say, this has more security than Miles’s actual place.”

“You got it. We’re in.”

We get out of the car, and Leif opens the trunk. He hands me a black ski mask and a black hoodie. “Put these on.”

I zip the hoodie. “I feel like I’m getting ready to do a SWAT mission.”

“You are. The only difference is that we don’t have anybody at our backs.”

“We have each other,” I say. “That’s all we needed when we were kids.”

Of course, when we were kids, the worst we had to deal with was Burlington Hays stealing our lunch money.

“True enough.” Leif pats me on the back. “We’re going to get her back, Falcon. We’re going to get her back.”

I simply nod.

I have to believe we will, because I don’t know that I can live if we don’t.

Leif hands me a pistol, fully loaded, and I shove it in my waistband.

He’s already armed in his ankle holster, and he takes another piece as well, shoves it in his belt.

Then he hands me a burner phone. “Turn your phone off.”

“I can’t. What if Savannah tries to get hold of me?”

“We can’t risk their security tracing your signal.”

“I... I can’t do it.”

“You have to.”

And here’s where the difference between Leif and me lies. He was a member of the Navy, an elite SEAL, and he had the most up-to-date technology at his fingertips.

I was an inmate. I didn't have a phone inside. I didn't have to worry about it being traced.

I relied on handmade shivs and my fists.

"Where do we go first?"

"We need to breach the perimeter," he says. "And we need to do it without being seen."

"That seems impossible."

"It's not. We can do it." He grips one of my shoulders with his firm hand. "You've got to believe in this, Falcon. You've got to believe that you have justice and the good of everything on your side."

I breathe in slowly, and then I nod.

Leif nods back and then pulls out a bag of what looks like beef jerky.

"You need a snack?" I ask.

"Nope. These aren't for me, and I don't suggest you eat them either."

"What are they?"

"Beef jerky laced with canine tranquilizer. For the guard dogs."

"It won't hurt the animals, will it?"

He shakes his head. "Nope. They'll just take a little snooze. That's all we need."

"Do we even know if there are dogs?"

“Nope. We haven’t cased the place yet. My guess is there will be guard dogs. Every top-notch security system uses human guards, guard dogs, a wired and wireless entry system, and then of course the most basic thing. A big ass fence.”

We’ve already seen the fence. It’s six feet tall, black wrought-iron. With a locked gate.

“I didn’t see a guard at the gate though,” I say.

“There isn’t one. Odd, yes. If it were me, I’d have one. But it’s probably a remote-controlled gate. If it’s digital, and I’m betting it is, I should be able to hack the code.” He holds up a gadget that looks kind of like a cell phone.

“Where the hell do you get all these things?”

He glances around. “I’m outfitted by the Wolfe family. They’ve got the highest tech in security. They’ve had to, to keep their fathers’ victims safe. And even then, it hasn’t always worked. I could tell you stories about what happened to Kelly.”

“Fuck.”

“Another time, man. First things first. Kelly’s home safe, behind locked doors and behind our dogs. I’ve got a security system that’s better than this one.”

“Do you?”

“You better fucking believe it.”

He grabs a few other gadgets, none of which I recognize, but I don’t bother to ask what they are.

“So what do we do first?”

“This all appears to be electronic, so once I isolate the code, I can disable all the cameras and all the sirens.”

“And open the gate?”

“And open the gate.”

I draw a breath, very aware of the pistol that I’ve never fired in my waistband.

It’s been eight years since I fired a gun.

Last time was when Hawk and I were out doing target practice and we stumbled upon those drugs.

I have to believe it’s like riding a bike. It will come back to me.

I pull the gun out of my waistband, feel it in my hand, consider its weight.

It’s a Sig Sauer. Not a brand I’ve ever shot. I prefer Smith & Wesson or Glock.

“You okay?” Leif asks.

“Just getting to know the piece.”

“Let’s hope you don’t have to use it. But it’s your basic nine-millimeter.”

“Yeah. Just been a long time is all.”

“You’ll be fine. If push comes to shove, you’re going to be glad you have it.”

“I hate leaving the damned phone in the car. Savannah may try to get in contact with me. Or Raven. What if Raven’s bloodwork comes back?”

“Falcon, Raven’s bloodwork *will* come back. And it’s either going to be good news or bad news. *When* you get the news isn’t going to change that.”

He’s right of course.

“But Savannah...”

“It’s doubtful Savannah will have a chance to get in touch with you. But if she does, and we find out she’s not here, you’ll see the message when we get back.”

“It might be too late by then.”

“Fine. Bring your damned cell phone. But turn it off. Turn it off until I have the system disabled.”

I sigh in relief. I open the car door, grab my cell phone, look to see if there’s any news. There isn’t, so I click it off and shove it in my pocket.

“Thanks,” I say.

“Don’t thank me. I still have to disable the damned thing.”



## SAVANNAH

“Let me show you to your room,” Maggie says.

“You mean to your son’s room?”

She shakes her head. “He won’t touch you tonight. Not until you’re legally wed.”

“Really? I suppose I should be thankful for that.”

She doesn’t look at me. In fact, it’s almost like she prefers not to look at me. “It’s a one-night reprieve, Savannah. Enjoy it.”

“I will.”

She doesn’t know I’ll be trying to figure out a way to get out of here.

This place is as secure as Fort Knox, though. I should know because I grew up in a house like it.

I went to private school, driven by a private car and driver. I wore the uniform. Until we moved my senior year. And I had to start over.

And everything that precipitated the move.

Vinny’s disappearance.

Michael's marriage and eventual death.

It's all too much to deal with.

Several servants are milling around, and I wonder for a moment why one of them isn't showing me to my quarters. Why the lady of the house is doing it herself.

But I don't ask. One thing I know about families like this, having grown up in one—nothing is done without a reason.

I follow Maggie up the left side of the double-sided stairway leading to the second floor. She leads me down the left hallway, and then she opens the door with a key.

“Here you are. I'm sure you'll be very comfortable here.”

I walk into a suite. The living area is complete with a sofa, wingback chairs, and a bookshelf.

It leads into a bedroom. A king-sized bed is covered in royal blue, and the en suite bathroom is complete with a giant jetted tub and a walk-in steam shower, all done in marble and granite.

“I don't like to do this, Savannah, but I'm going to have to lock you in.”

“I suspected as much.”

“Food will be brought to you.”

“Thank you. I'm hungry.”

I'm not, but I like the idea of having utensils. They'll probably give me a dull knife. But you can do a lot of damage with a fork.

“I’ll see that you get a meal shortly.”

“Thank you.”

“Feel free to relax.”

“There’s no television.”

“No, afraid not. And I’ll need to look in your purse.”

“Why?”

She takes my purse from me. Opens it. Pulls out my phone. “Because of this. I have to take it, Savannah.”

“Fine.” I sigh. “I haven’t touched it.”

I forced myself not to, even though I was dying to send Falcon a message.

But I’m doing this for his safety. He can’t know where I am.

“If you need anything, use the intercom. A servant will attend to you.”

“What if I need to speak to someone?”

“Use the intercom.”

“So there’s no landline in here either?”

“I’m afraid not, my dear. This shouldn’t be news to you. You know how these things work.”

I sigh. “I suppose I do.”

“Your food will be up soon. In the meantime, try to relax. Enjoy your last night of freedom.”

“Being locked in a room isn’t exactly what I would call freedom,” I say impudently.

Again, she resists my gaze, staring at the wall. “You know what I mean, Savannah. You’re older than I was, older than your own mother was. You’ve been allowed to live some of your life. Embrace that. Don’t let anyone ever take the memory of those years from you. Those memories will serve you well when times get tough.”

Maggie is still in the room when I walk into the en suite bathroom and look in the mirror. My cheek is red from Miles’s punch. I don’t see any bruising yet.

“I’ll send someone to attend to you in the morning. If you’re bruised, we’ll cover it with makeup.”

“I’m not going to try to escape,” I say.

Maggie nods. “Good. Any attempt will be futile anyway.”

“You don’t understand. I made a deal with your son. But if he doesn’t keep up his end of the bargain? I *will* find a way out of here. And I don’t care who I harm in doing it.”

I expect her to look surprised, but she doesn’t. She simply smiles her weak smile. “Try to keep some of that fire, Savannah. Don’t let them douse your light.”

Then she walks out of the en suite bathroom, out of the room. I follow her through the living area as she walks out the door. “Use the intercom if you need anything.”

She closes the door, and I hear the digital lock click.

There's no doorknob on the door. It can only be opened from the outside.

First thing I do, of course, is go to the window. Assess my chances of escaping.

Because even though I know I have to do this—I have to do this to protect Falcon—my first inclination is to get the hell out of here.

It's what Falcon would want for me.

But there's no roof outside my window to crawl onto. No trellis to escape down.

I'm completely isolated, like Rapunzel locked in her tower.

My handsome prince will come for me.

Already I know that.

Falcon spent eight years in prison protecting those weaker than he was. If he could, he would heal his sister.

And he loves me.

He won't take this lightly.

And again I feel that push-me pull-you thing inside me.

I want him to come. I want him to be my brave knight, to rescue me, the damsel in distress.

But he's no knight, and I'm no damsel.

I knew exactly what I was doing when I went with Miles.

I turn away from the window and open the chest of drawers.

Panties and bras, all in my size.

I walk to the closet.

Clothes. Mostly dresses and shoes. All in my size.

They've been expecting me.

I imagine this room has been stranded in time for the last five years.

I'm still wearing leggings and an oversized T-shirt.

My hair is pulled back in a ponytail, which I'm sure is a mess by now.

I need a shower.

Of course there aren't any leggings here for me. Not even a pair of jeans. The closest is a pair of navy blue dress pants.

Not too much of a problem. I'll just put my clothes back on after I'm done showering.

I strip my clothes, head to the bathroom, and start the shower.

And I look in the mirror.

It fogs up from the steam as the shower warms.

Yes. The steam.

Except for the circular shape, right at my eye level.

I'm being watched.

Watched as I take a shower. Watched as I use the toilet. Watched as I do the most private things.

No doubt there are cameras in the rest of the suite as well.

I take care not to look surprised, though I've grown up in a family such as this. Surely they know that *I* know they're watching me.

I stand naked. Then I get into the shower.

I wash my hair, not just once but twice, lathering it up, trying hard to rinse the dirtiness from me.

Once it's conditioned, I wash the rest of my body, scrubbing it down with a loofah.

I scrub and I scrub and I scrub until my skin has turned bright pink.

I scrub some more.

When the water has finally turned lukewarm, I turn it off. Get out of the shower.

Look in the mirror again.

And whoever is watching me can see me.

They see me as I see myself right now.

Physically clean, all the dirt scrubbed from my body and my hair.

But on the inside? So far from clean.

I will never be able to wash the dirt of Miles McAllister from me.

So I'll do as Maggie says.

I'll relish this last evening. Perhaps I'm being watched, but this is the last sliver of freedom I will ever have.

**FALCON**

“All wireless alarm systems rely on radio frequency signals sent between door and window sensors to a control system that triggers an alarm when any of these entryways are breached,” Leif says quietly. “The signals deploy any time a tagged window or door is opened, whether or not the alarm is enabled. But when enabled, the system will trip the alarm and also send a silent alert to the monitoring company, which contacts the occupants and the police.”

I shake my head. “How is this even possible?”

“It is. All the systems use different hardware, but they are essentially the same. This isn’t that advanced. It’s been around since the nineties. I can jam the signals to prevent them from tripping an alarm by sending radio noise to prevent the signal from getting through from sensors to the control panel.”

“It all sounds like gobbledygook to me.”

“It did to me at first too,” Leif says. “But it’s actually pretty simple once you understand how the tech works.”

“Right.”



Leif plays with his gadgets, listening intently. A few lights flicker on and off, and he taps in different codes. This goes on for several minutes until he smiles. “Got it. The whole thing is disarmed, including the cameras and microphones. But now we have to get in and out before they discover this.”

“How could they discover it?”

“Depends. If they have actual humans manning the cameras, they’ll see it quickly. If they don’t, it’ll be a while.”

“And how do we know whether people are watching?”

“We don’t, Falcon. That’s why we fucking hurry.” He pulls out yet another gadget.

“What’s that?”

“It’s a lockpick gun, just in case disabling the system didn’t unlock the gate.”

“Why wouldn’t it?”

“Sometimes the gate is on a different frequency so cars can come and go via a remote control without unlocking the whole system. That’s probably the case here.”

We walk toward the gate, staying in shadows as much as we can. In the distance, several dogs bark.

“Where do you think the hounds are?” I ask.

“Could be in the back, but they sound farther away than that. There’s probably a couple dogs in the back and one or two in the house as well.” He pats the bag of jerky in the pocket of his hoodie. “We’ll take care of them.”

“Just how quickly does the doggie downer work?”

“Too damned long, but it’ll do the job.”

Leif and I make it to the gate.

“Yeah, it’s still locked.” He pulls out the gun, clicks it a few times. “We’re in.”

**SAVANNAH**

A silk nightie.

Not only one silk nightie but several, all in different pastel colors.

I've never owned a silk nightie. I've never really owned anything silk.

I slide the pale green one over my head, the fabric cool against my body that's still warm from the shower.

What now?

Maggie said she'd send some food up. Has it come?

I have no idea because I can't open the door to look.

I sigh.

I'm not the least bit hungry. In fact, I feel kind of sick. I need to keep my strength. Because in the back of my mind, I can't accept that this night is my last sliver of freedom. I have to believe I will be able to escape somehow—once I know Miles has held up his end of the bargain and Falcon has been absolved.

If I have any chance of that, I must keep up my strength.

My gaze falls on a minifridge in the living area.

I open it, but there's no food inside. Only bottles of spring water. I grab one, open it, take a long sip.

Hydration is key as well. Sustenance and hydration, so I'm at my best.

I take a seat, peruse the books on the shelf.

Mostly classics, most of which I read during my private school education.

I grab Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*.

I never could get into this one, not like *Pride and Prejudice*.

Why not try again? It's not like I have anything better to do.

I open to the first page.

*The family of Dashwood had long been settled in Sussex. Their estate was large, and their residence was at Norland Park, in the centre of their property, where, for many generations, they had lived in so respectable a manner as to engage the general good opinion of their surrounding acquaintance.*

So many times I've read those words, trying to elicit enjoyment from this novel.

I look at the next line, when—

A click disrupts the silence.

The digital lock.

My food.

I will eat it, no matter what it is.

I stay seated, expecting a maid to bring in the tray and set it up for me.

But then I jerk.

It's not Maggie. It's not a servant.

It's Miles. And yes, he does bring me food.

And he's dressed in a black silk robe.

I bite my lower lip.

“My mother said you needed to be fed.”

I place the book on the table next to me and cross my arms. “I'm not an animal, Miles. I don't need to be fed. I need to eat.”

But then that's how Miles thinks of me. As a pet to be kept. To be abused when necessary—he would call it disciplined.

“I remembered you like salmon,” he says. “This is wild caught salmon, broccoli, and French fries.”

“I'm sure it will be adequate.”

He makes no move to leave.

“I don't need an audience, Miles.”

“Don't you? I've no intention of leaving.”

“But I—”

“Eat,” he says. His voice commanding. “After we eat, you’re going to submit to me.”

“But your mother said—”

“You think I give a fuck what my mother said? My father doesn’t want me taking you tonight either. But you and I both know you’re no virgin. I’m not either. So I’m going to sample the goods tonight, Savannah. I may as well see what I’m getting into.”

## FALCON

**I**n every prisoner's life there's that one day they can recall that changed everything. That put them on a different path.

*For me it was the day Zion came to my cell block.*

*Zion, I knew, would be trouble.*

*Different from the way Fletcher or Bruno had been trouble for me.*

*It only took me that one time in the cafeteria to get Fletcher in line, and Bruno? After I freed Tommy Ortiz from his tyranny, he stayed in line as well.*

*But Zion...*

*The first day I saw him, I knew.*

*He was as burly as they come, solid muscle, but a good five inches shorter than I was.*

*Already I saw it in him. Small man's complex. He's the guy who has to exert his dominance over everyone to compensate for his lack of height.*

*He had a shock of sandy brown hair, and a nearly pretty face—one that would've made him a target if he weren't so*

*burly.*

*You can tell a lot by how a man walks. Especially on the inside.*

*A lot of new prisoners come in with a hunched posture, which doesn't bode well for them. Those who can come in while walking upright with a straight back are trying to look brave so they won't be a target.*

*They walk briskly, swinging their arms freely. They look straight ahead, while not making eye contact with anyone.*

*If they're good at this act, they won't see a lot of trouble in prison.*

*These are the guys that fly under the radar, are left alone.*

*The ones who look at the ground, shoulders slumped—those are the targets. The ones whose screams I try to ignore at night. The ones for whom prison is a whole different experience.*

*But then there are those like Zion.*

*Those who come in walking upright, a slow even gait, and they look everyone—everyone—in the eye.*

*The kind that assesses everyone with a single glance. Separating the strong from the weak. Ready to assert dominance over the situation, whatever it may be.*

*That was Zion.*

*He walked past Bruno, eyeing him. And then past Fletcher, who is bigger than I am.*

*Until he got to me.*



*He looks me up and down, his gaze taking in everything about me. Judging me. Sizing me up as a competitor. I curl my hands into fists, my gaze never wavering from his.*

*I look at him in the eye. Always in the eye. These criminals only take about a millisecond to respond to that split-second you take your attention away from them.*

*I don't speak to him.*

*I don't speak to anyone until they speak to me. It's kind of my calling card.*

*But he sizes me up, cocking his head.*

*He's waiting for me to say something.*

*He'll be waiting a long time.*

*Finally, he speaks. "How's the fucking food here?"*

*"We just hired a new gourmet chef. He used to work at a Michelin three-star place," I say with sarcasm.*

*He raises an eyebrow. Interesting. Not everyone can do that. But I can. However, I keep my eyebrows right where they are.*

*"What are you in for?"*

*"Killed a motherfucker."*

*The lie I've learned to tell. I'm innocent, but innocence on the inside is a sign of weakness. Plus I don't mention that it was manslaughter. I let them think it was fucking murder.*

*He waits for me to ask why he's here.*

*I don't.*

*Larkin stands on one side of me, Tommy Ortiz on the other.*

*Zion gestures to Tommy. "He yours?"*

*"He is. Hands off."*

*Tommy suffers from the same problem that Zion himself does. Pretty features. The kind that make prison hell.*

*But Tom is under my protection now. And Zion won't get anywhere near him.*

*He gestures to Larkin on my other side. Larkin's not pretty. He's rough, with a crooked nose that's been broken so many times it no longer looks normal. He has a scar slashed across his face. He looks mean enough, but he's a softy on the inside. The man's all beta, which is why he hangs with me.*

*"What about this one?"*

*"I'm nobody's bitch," Larkin says gruffly.*

*"Did I ask you?" Zion closes the distance between himself and Larkin.*

*Do not step back, I say to Larkin subliminally, hoping he gets the message.*

*He does.*

*He's a natural beta, but I've shown him how to survive in here.*

*"What about the rest of these losers?" Zion asks.*

*"Nobody touches anybody in my cell block," I say. "You want to shove your cock up somebody's ass? Get yourself transferred."*

*The eyebrow again. This time, I use my height to my advantage. I shove my shoulders back, lift my chin. Because what I say is fact. Nobody gets fucked on my block. It's bad enough I have to listen to the screams from the other ones.*

*I run a tight ship. But sometimes, when we're all locked up at night, things can go wrong. A rogue guard sometimes finds an inmate he likes, or he takes a bribe from another inmate.*

*Then it's up to me, the next morning, to take care of things. But I don't always know who's at fault. I rely on my men.*

*The grapevine in my block is pretty damned good.*

*"I don't answer to anybody," Zion says.*

*"Good enough. Don't fuck up, and you won't have to."*

*A sly smile curls his lips. "I don't think you understand what I just said."*

*I cock my head, turn my jaw into granite. "You think I don't? I went to college. Did you?"*

*"As a matter of fact, I did."*

*"Then I think we both know what I meant and what you meant. Only one problem." I glance around for a second and then fix my gaze back on Zion. "All these men here? They're on my side."*

*"You think?"*

*"I know your type. You think you're the first little guy I've seen come in here and try to make waves?"*

*"Five minutes alone with me, and you'll no longer think I'm so little." He grabs his crotch.*

*Seriously? He's threatening me? With his fucking dick size?*

*No cock gets near me.*

*"I'm thinking five minutes alone with me, and you'll be a dead man."*

*He grins, and I swear to God if I look closer I'd see saliva in the corners of his mouth. "I'd like to make you shriek like a fucking wildcat."*

*Yeah. I'm done with this piece of shit. "You're going to want to get the fuck away from me now."*

*"I don't take no orders from a pretty boy."*

*I hold back my chuckle. The only pretty boy here, other than Tommy, is fucking Zion himself. Trying to be the tough guy. Keeping muscle on that tiny frame so people take him seriously.*

*If he's thinking about raping anybody in the cellblock, he'll be sorry.*

*And he sure as hell won't get anywhere near me.*

*"You show Savage some respect," Larkin says.*

*"How about I show your ass my cock?" Zion taunts him.*

*"Make all the threats you want," I say. "You mark my words. You even try to carry any one of them out? You won't see the light of the next fucking day."*

*"Big words."*

*I lift an eyebrow. "You think you know what big is? Think again."*

*That gets him. His eyes go wild, as if he's mad. "You watch it, Savage. Yeah, I know who you are. Falcon Bellamy. And I know you ain't in for no murder."*

*"You did your homework," I say. "So fucking what?"*

*"You think you're so fucking tough. You don't know what it's really like to be a criminal. What it feels like to shove a knife into someone's flesh, watch them bleed out. After you've fucking taken their pussy and ass in every way possible."*

*So he's a rapist. Good for him. He won't get along well here. Not in my cell block. We don't take kindly to rapists.*

*They're only above child molesters on our totem pole of who are the worst degenerates of humankind.*

*"Keep talking," I say. "You're close to signing your own fucking death warrant."*

*"Big words," he says again.*

*"Original words on your part."*

*The irony seems lost on him.*

*He finally backs away, standing straight and tall, still meeting my gaze. "You need to watch it, Bellamy."*

*"You call him Savage," Larkin says through gritted teeth.*

*"The only thing I'm going to call him is fresh meat." He grabs Tommy's arm, yanking him toward him. "And I'm taking you."*

*“Maybe I didn’t make myself clear.” I stalk toward Zion, force him to let go of Tommy, and then lead him to the concrete block wall, where I grab a fistful of his orange jumpsuit. “You don’t touch any of my men. Have I made myself clear now?”*

*With his right hand, Zion grabs my wrist.*

*And I’ll give him one. He is fucking strong.*

*But I’m stronger. And meaner.*

*I wasn’t always mean like Zion, but you learn to be mean on the inside. You do it for survival. You do it to protect those who are too weak to protect themselves. And you do it to put shitheads like Zion in their place.*

*“Quite a grip you’ve got,” I say. “But it won’t get you anywhere here. Stay away from all of them...or I’ll fucking kill you.”*

*My words aren’t even menacing. I say them matter-of-factly. I’ve found they have more effect that way.*

*Let them think I’m a little off my rocker. Let them think whatever they want.*

*All I need to do is watch my back, and the backs of the rest of the men on my block.*

*Not too difficult.*

*Not for Savage.*

**SAVANNAH**

“**Y**ou’re not coming anywhere near me!” I glance around quickly, looking for something, anything, to use as a weapon.

I pick up the Jane Austen I was reading, using it as a shield.

“Put that down, Savvy,” Miles says. “Eat your damned dinner. I can’t have you fainting from hunger.”

He’s right. I can’t faint. I want to be completely conscious for whatever he has in mind for me. If I’m unconscious, I can’t fight back.

“Eat,” he says again.

I take the tray and set it on the small table in the living area.

A fork.

Good.

And a spoon.

No knife.

The salmon is flaky and doesn't require a knife. Not that he would have given me one anyway.

I force myself to ingest the food. All of it. And the water.

I rise. "I have to go to the bathroom."

He blocks the door to the bedroom. "You're not going anywhere."

"Would you rather I piss on you?"

I regret my words as soon as I say them. With my luck, I just turned Miles on with that threat.

"Fine. Go."

I head into the bedroom to the bathroom and close the door.

Of course there's no lock.

And of course he can see everything I'm doing anyway.

Fucking cameras.

Is it really that important to watch me take a crap?

And I'm glad I ate the food. Already I'm feeling stronger. Healthier.

I made a deal, and I'll see it through, but I won't make this easy or enjoyable for him.

Then I laugh out loud.

Enjoyable for *him*? He's already enjoying this. Whether I lie like a dead fish or fight him to the end, he'll enjoy it. He'll get off.



I flush the toilet and look in the mirror once more. I see myself as whoever is watching me sees me.

A pawn.

A weakling.

A mere thing.

I can't escape. I made my choice.

I chose the wellbeing of Falcon over my own wellbeing.

And as much as I hate what's about to happen to me, I can't bring myself to regret it.

I leave the bathroom, enter the bedroom—

Miles is there already, standing by the bed, naked, his hard cock jutting out and ready.

I swallow, forcing the food to remain in my stomach.

I lie on the bed, and he lifts my satin gown, hovers over me, his face menacing.

“Tonight you're mine, Savannah Gallo. Welcome to hell.”

FALCON AND SAVANNAH'S story concludes in *Seductive Sin!*



GET YOUR BONUS CONTENT [HERE!](#)

Read Leif and Kelly's story in *Opal* and *Phoenix*

Excerpt from *Opal*:

### **Kelly**

I've regressed.

It's clear as day.

I was getting somewhere with therapy. But now? I'm back to accusing people. Treating people badly. Blaming everyone else for the circumstances of my life.

It's funny. I see it unfolding right before me, like a movie on the screen at the cinema.

Regression.

Back to the old Kelly.

Back to Opal.

But I don't want to be Opal anymore.

And I don't want to be Kelly either.

Kelly had to learn to fend for herself, to scrape moldy food from the bottoms of containers she found in the trash to ease the ache of hunger.

I know I shouldn't be acting this way. The whole island situation was Derek Wolfe's doing, not his children's. These people are here to help me. Even Aspen is here to help me.

Why do I act this way?

I need to see Macy.

But before then, I need to sit through this meeting and see what they can do for me.

So I listen—but only with one ear.

Because images emerge in my brain, and though I try to wipe them away, I'm not that strong yet.

\*

*The closet is dark.*

*I don't know how long I've been in here, and my tummy is growling for food. I'm thirsty too, and my mouth is dry. My throat is hurting from the screaming and the crying.*

*I was a bad girl. And what do bad girls get? They get locked in the dark closet, after they get spanked.*

*My butt hurts from the spanking, but not like it used to. I'm older now. I just turned ten, and Mama even got me a birthday cake.*

*She put ten candles on it, lit them, and sang happy birthday to me.*

*Before she knocked me on the back of my head, pulled me into her lap, spanked me, and then shoved me into the closet.*

*I sigh in relief when the door opens, and I shield my eyes against the light.*

*"Come on out now, sweetheart." Mama's voice is soft and kind.*

*This is my mama. Sweet as syrup in one minute, violent and destructive the next.*

*She never leaves any marks on me that can be seen. Only where my clothes cover them. Or on the top of the head where they're camouflaged by my orange hair.*

*The orange hair I hate.*

*The orange hair that the kids make fun of.*

*"Come here, sweetheart."*

*I run into her arms, just like I always do.*

*Because I love my mama. And I know my mama loves me. She tells me so every day. Between beatings and locking me in the closet.*

*"I'm so sorry, sweetheart. But you know you have to be a good girl. You know Mama has to punish you when you're bad."*

*I nod and choke out a sob against her breast. I know better than to ask what I did. That will only set her off again.*

*But I don't know what I did. I never know what I do.*

*The closet she locks me in is in the spare room. Not my own closet, where at least I'd have the comfort of my clothes. Just an empty space with wood floor and walls.*

*I follow her out to the kitchen, where a lone gift sits on the table, wrapped in plain red paper. When I look closer, I see that it's not plain. There's a slightly darker red snowflake pattern on it. It's Christmas wrap. But it was nice of Mama to go to the effort. We don't have a lot of money, so I'm lucky I'm getting a present at all.*

*I don't dare touch it, though. I've learned to never make assumptions where Mama is concerned.*

*"Well..." she says. "Go ahead."*

*I move toward the gift, but I still don't touch it.*

*"Open your present, Kelly. It's your birthday, after all."*

*I grab the present off the table and rip it open. It's a cardboard shoebox. New shoes, maybe? I remove the lid.*

*I gasp out loud.*

*Inside the shoebox is my volleyball. It's been deflated.*

*Mama smiles. "Do you like it?"*

*"I don't understand," I say. "Why did you take all the air out of my volleyball?"*

*"I didn't just let the air out," Mama says. "I poked holes in it so you can't use it anymore."*

*Tears well in my eyes.*

*"You've been spending too much time playing volleyball after school," Mama continues. "I need you home. Things don't get done around here if you're not here to do them."*

*I gulp back the tears. I stopped crying over Mama's cruelty long ago, but this is beyond callous, even for her.*

*"But I love playing with the other girls after school."*

*Mama's face twists into a snarl. "Kelly, I went to all the trouble to get you a gift that will help you to be a better person. A better daughter. You might show a bit more appreciation."*

*Appreciation? Sadness sweeps through me. I can't cry. I won't cry.*

*Perhaps she's right. Maybe I'm being selfish. I suppose I don't need my own ball. All the other girls have their own, and we only need one ball to play.*

*But I saved up money, collected box tops.*

*And I went around to all the neighbors, asking if they needed any chores done. I made a few bucks that way.*

*I gulp again. If I start crying, it may set her off.*

*And I'll end up back in the closet.*

*So I simply set the box down on the table and look up at my mother. "Thank you for the present, Mama. It was very thoughtful of you."*

*"You're very welcome, sweetheart. Happy birthday."*

Continue [Opal](#).

## A NOTE FROM HELEN

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading *Sweet Sin*. If you want to find out about my current backlist and future releases, please visit my website, like my Facebook page, and [join my mailing list](#). If you're a fan, please join my Facebook street team (Hardt & Soul) to help spread the word about my books. I regularly do awesome giveaways for my street team members.

If you enjoyed the story, please take the time to leave a review. I welcome all feedback.

I wish you all the best!

Helen

Sign up for my newsletter here:

<http://www.helenhardt.com/signup>



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'm so excited about this new series! For a while now, I've wanted to create a hero as compelling as Talon Steel, Rock Wolfe and Braden Black combined. I believe I've found him in Falcon Bellamy. You're not going to believe what's in store for Falcon and Savannah!

Thank you so much to the following individuals who helped make this story shine: My editor (and son!), Eric McConnell; my cover artist, Amanda Shepard of Shepard Originals; Troy Duran and Angelina Rocca for loaning their amazing voices to Falcon and Savannah; and my awesome beta readers, Karen Aguilera, Serena Drummond, Linda Pantlin Dunn, and Angela Tyler. You all rock!

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*#1 New York Times, #1 USA Today, and #1 Wall Street Journal* bestselling author Helen Hardt's passion for the written word began with the books her mother read to her at bedtime. She wrote her first story at age six and hasn't stopped since. In addition to being an award-winning author of romantic fiction, she's a mother, an attorney, a black belt in Taekwondo, a grammar geek, an appreciator of fine red wine, and a lover of Ben and Jerry's ice cream. She writes from her home in Colorado, where she lives with her family. Helen loves to hear from readers.

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