

A muscular man with a beard and short dark hair is shown from the chest up, wearing a black ribbed tank top. He is looking off to the right with a serious expression. The background is an airfield at sunset, with a small airplane on the tarmac and a house in the distance. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow.

# TRUSTING CASSIDY

SILVERSTONE

Susan Stoker

*NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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# TRUSTING CASSIDY

Silverstone, Book 4

Susan Stoker



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# **TRUSTING CASSIDY**

# Chapter One

“Do you, Carson Rhodes, take Skylar Reid as your wife? Will you love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, in sickness and health, forsaking all others, and be faithful to her for as long as you both shall live?”

“Yes. A thousand times, yes.”

Bull’s response was as heartfelt as anything Gramps had ever heard. The great room of Silverstone Towing was packed as everyone watched Bull and Skylar finally get married. Gramps glanced to the left and saw Smoke and Molly waiting their turn to walk down the aisle.

The ladies had agreed to have a double wedding ceremony right there at the garage. The timing was rushed a bit, as both Bull and Smoke wanted to tie the knot before they headed down to Jamaica on their next mission.

The last year or so had taught all four Silverstone men that nothing was guaranteed in life. While they were proud of the job they did, it also came with the potential for a very high price tag—their lives.

It wasn’t something any of them wanted to risk, though all four were prepared to give up everything if it meant making the world a safer place. But now that Bull, Eagle, and Smoke had women they loved more than they could’ve ever imagined, their missions had taken on a different feel.

Gramps sensed things would be changing for Silverstone in the very near future, and he wasn’t upset about it. He was forty-five, and his body was letting him know in subtle—and not-so-subtle—ways that he wasn’t as young as he used to be. And now Molly was expecting. And Eagle and Taylor already had a beautiful little boy. Heading off to the ends of the earth to eliminate bad guys had a hell of a lot of strings now. And the last thing any of them wanted was to have to come back to Indiana and break the news to one of the women that the love of their life hadn’t returned with them.

So changes were coming.

But there was a big mission to complete before the team would have *that* conversation.

Cassidy Hewitt.

Gramps's stomach lurched at the thought of her name.

The two of them went way back. He'd known her when she was a freshman in high school and he was a senior, nearly thirty years ago. Even then he'd been drawn to her. He'd seen her now and then since he'd graduated from high school, mainly when he had gone back to El Paso for short visits with his parents, and the chemistry between them had lingered. She'd also written him when he'd been deployed in the Army, and he'd loved hearing from her each and every time.

She'd gotten married, had a child, and then divorced. Then, for some reason, she'd gone to Jamaica. And that had gotten her into her current predicament. The one that Silverstone was going to get her out of.

"Do you, Skylar Reid, take Carson Rhodes as your husband? Will you love him, comfort him, honor and keep him, in sickness and health, forsaking all others, and be faithful to him for as long as you both shall live?"

"I will," Skylar said with a huge smile on her face.

"By the power vested in me by the State of Indiana, it's my honor to declare you husband and wife. Bull, you may kiss your bride," Bart said. He was one of Silverstone Towing's employees, and Skylar and Molly had asked if he might want to officiate. The big burly man had cried and immediately agreed. He'd researched and taken the necessary steps to get ordained, and now he was standing in front of the group grinning like a fool while doing the honors to marry Bull and Skylar.

Bull smiled at his new wife, then bent Skylar over his arm and kissed her. He ignored the catcalls from his friends and employees and took his time showing his wife how happy he was that she was now his, legally.

“Enough!” Smoke called out, clearly impatient. “Some of us still need to get married, you know!”

Everyone laughed, and Bull brought Skylar upright. He put his hands on either side of her face and whispered something to her. She nodded, and they both turned toward the group.

“Mr. and Mrs. Rhodes!” Bart announced.

Then Skylar and Bull walked back down the aisle—which was really nothing more than a short space between two groups of people. Skylar stopped to kiss her parents, who were grinning from ear to ear, then headed for the back of the room.

After a moment, Leigh—another one of their drivers—hit play on her phone, and the wedding march once more sounded through the speakers.

Molly was glowing, Gramps could see that from where he was standing near the kitchen. It was obvious being pregnant agreed with her, and he couldn't be happier for Smoke. When the team had first met Molly, she'd been in rough shape. After she'd been kidnapped, starved, and thrown in a hole to die while in Nigeria for her job, they'd all wondered if she'd be able to bounce back. And not only had she done so, she'd flourished.

It was Molly who'd suggested sharing a wedding day with Skylar. The women had decided to have the ceremony at Silverstone Towing, where their friends and families could hang out in a relaxed atmosphere and rejoice in their love. They hadn't wanted anything stuffy or formal. And this was as laid back as it could get.

When Smoke and Molly were standing in front of Bart, he began the second ceremony of the day. Gramps couldn't be happier for his friends. No matter how impatient he was to get to Jamaica and see for himself that Cassidy and her son were alive and well, he didn't begrudge his friends this special moment.

Bart once more spoke of love and happiness, of soul mates, and then both Molly and Smoke vowed to love each

other through thick and thin, sickness and health. When Bart pronounced them husband and wife and invited Smoke to kiss her, instead of bending Molly backward, he got down on his knees and pressed a gentle kiss to her belly.

Everyone knew she was a few months pregnant, and what Molly and Smoke had gone through to get to this point. There wasn't a dry eye in the building. Then Smoke stood and kissed Molly so passionately, even Gramps was a bit embarrassed.

After the legal papers were signed and Bart had packed them away to submit to the courts the next day, the party really began. All the Silverstone Towing employees and their families had been invited. As had Tiana, Maria, Susan, and other neighbors from Southpoint Apartments, where Skylar had lived before moving in with Bull. There were also teachers from Skylar's school and other people Gramps didn't know.

It was a festive atmosphere, but Gramps wasn't surprised when Bull and Smoke took their wives home before the party was over. They were leaving for Jamaica the next day, and both wanted a wedding night to remember before they had to get back to business.

Gramps regretted they had to leave their wives so soon, but Cassidy's last letter wouldn't leave his mind. She'd begged the FBI—who she'd been sending the letters to—to do something to help her. She was obviously desperate, and Gramps didn't want to think about what she might do in that state.

"You okay?" Eagle asked as he rested a hip against the wall next to him.

"Yeah," Gramps told him.

"You sure?"

Gramps looked over at his friend. "I'm sure. Everyone needed this. After everything that happened with Sky, then Taylor and Molly, it's good to see everyone so carefree and happy."

"Agreed. Everyone except for you."

"I'm happy for them," Gramps assured him.



“I know you are, but you can’t stop thinking about Cassidy.”

Gramps didn’t reply, as there was nothing really to say. He *was* thinking about Cassidy.

“She’s the one who got away, isn’t she?” Eagle asked.

Gramps sighed. “She can’t be the one who got away if she was never mine in the first place.”

“Regrets are a bitch,” Eagle said. “I regret taking that damn scenic route to Bloomington every damn day. But . . . things have a way of working out how they’re supposed to.”

Gramps knew what his friend was saying. The serial killer who’d set his sights on Taylor had forced Eagle to crash on that scenic route before chasing her through the woods. Eagle had found them and killed the man, preventing him from hurting Taylor or anyone else. But Gramps wasn’t sure his situation with Cassidy would have a happy ending. They really didn’t even know each other. Not as adults.

“I need you to promise me something,” Gramps told Eagle.

“Anything.”

“Promise me that if the shit hits the fan, you won’t do anything stupid. I can handle Michael Coke and his cronies, get Cassidy and her son, and get the hell out of there. But if anything goes wrong . . . I need to know that you, Smoke, and Bull will be safe, that you’ll get home to your wives.”

“If you’re asking us to just leave you there to die, you’re fucking insane,” Eagle told him, his voice lowering in his ire. “We’re a team, and *nothing* will ever change that.”

“You’ve got a kid, man,” Gramps said. “You want Kevin to grow up without a dad? I sure as hell don’t. And Taylor needs you. You’re perfect for each other.”

“What I’m not going to do is sacrifice one of my best friends,” Eagle growled. “We talked about this when we decided that you’d be going in undercover. Just because you’re the one on the front line doesn’t mean you’re expendable.”

Gramps sighed and looked down at the tile under his feet.

“What’s wrong? Talk to me,” Eagle ordered.

“I’ve just got a bad feeling. I can’t put my finger on why. Our plan is solid. I’ll go in and try to broker a deal to get shipments directly to my ‘organization’ in Dallas. We already know Coke is desperate to get his finger into more pies in the States. He was practically falling over himself to agree to the meet. But despite you guys posing as my lieutenants, he’s not going to want you tromping all over his estate, so I’m almost certainly going to have to go in alone. And there’re so many fucking unknowns. More so than we usually have, and that’s making me very nervous.”

Eagle put his hand on Gramps’s shoulder, and Gramps looked into the eyes of one of the three men he trusted with his life. “You’ve got this. Do you think Smoke, Bull, and I would’ve agreed to let you go in alone if we didn’t think you could handle it? You know Cassidy. You have a connection, you’ve said it yourself. She’s smart. Smart enough to be able to figure out a way to smuggle letters to the fucking FBI right under a drug kingpin’s nose. She’s not going to blow your cover, I know it.”

“She’s got a kid,” Gramps said.

“She does,” Eagle agreed. “And?”

Gramps didn’t know what his point was. No, that was a lie. He did know, he just wasn’t ready to admit it out loud.

He was terrified for Cassidy’s son.

In the past, it had always been his own life on the line. He’d never been personally involved with anyone in a mission. But he knew Cassidy, knew how much she loved her child, and he couldn’t help but think about all the ways this mission could go wrong. The last thing he wanted was to do something that might get Mario, her boy, hurt or killed.

“If you’re having second thoughts—”

“I’m not,” Gramps said. “I just . . . on previous missions, it was just the four of us. Now it’s so much more than that. There’s Skylar, and Taylor and Kevin, and Molly and her

unborn child. And everyone here at Silverstone Towing. Now Cassidy and Mario. There's so much more at stake now."

"Agreed. And if you think you're the only one who's feeling this way, you're wrong," Eagle said quietly. "After Jamaica, we need to sit down and reassess."

"You think Willis is gonna be all right with us . . . reassessing?" Gramps asked.

"Don't give a shit what the government thinks. They aren't the ones putting their asses on the line. They go home to their families every night and aren't sneaking into foreign countries and coming face to face with evil."

That was very true.

"Silverstone Towing makes enough money for us to live on," Eagle said. "We can find other ways to keep the world safe if we want to. We weren't going to be able to do this forever," Eagle argued.

Gramps looked at his friend. They'd been through hell together, and Eagle was more like a brother than simply a friend. "I just don't want you to do anything that will get you killed. Or Smoke. Or Bull. I won't be able to face any of your wives to tell them that you aren't coming back. If this is truly our last mission, that would be the ultimate kick in the teeth."

"We're all coming back," Eagle vowed. "I don't give a shit that we're married and you aren't. That doesn't make our lives more important than yours, Gramps."

Gramps didn't agree, but he didn't argue the point. "All I'm asking is that you don't do anything crazy."

"We won't," Eagle said after a moment.

"Won't what?" Taylor asked, sidling up to her husband. She had their son bundled up in her arms, and the huge smile she turned her husband's way made Gramps all the more determined to do everything in his power to make sure Eagle returned to her.

"Won't be gone too long," Eagle said smoothly, without missing a beat. "How's Kev doing?"

“Good,” Taylor said. “I was afraid all the excitement would be too much for him, but he’s slept through most of it.”

“Which means he’ll be up all night,” Eagle said with a grimace.

Taylor chuckled. “He’s getting better at sleeping at night,” she protested. “And he knows he’s got his daddy wrapped around his little finger. I swear half the time when he wakes up, it’s not because he’s hungry, but because he wants to reassure himself that you’re still there.”

Gramps had been just as relieved as his friends when it seemed their son hadn’t inherited his mother’s prosopagnosia condition. He clearly recognized his mom’s and dad’s faces.

Eagle looked at his watch, then asked his wife, “You about ready to go?”

“Only if you are,” she said.

In response, Eagle turned to Gramps. “We got this,” he said, then gave him a chin lift and, with his arm around Taylor’s shoulders, walked toward the door.

Gramps stayed at the party for a while longer, not wanting to go home to his small empty house and stew about the upcoming mission. But eventually the families went home, and Gramps had no choice but to do the same. He knew he needed some sleep because he suspected he’d never be able to relax while in Jamaica. He’d need to be on his toes every minute of every day.

After saying goodbye to his employees, he headed home. Gramps lived in an older neighborhood not too far from Silverstone Towing. He’d met most of his neighbors. They were hardworking people, some with children, some older couples whose kids were grown and had long since moved away. It was also a diverse area, which Gramps loved. In El Paso, his Hispanic heritage hadn’t been anything unusual, but up here in Indiana, he’d definitely experienced his share of discrimination. He’d been told, “Go back to where you came from!” more than once, and he knew they hadn’t meant Texas.

His mother was full-blooded Mexican, and his father was white. They'd met when he'd been stationed at Fort Bliss in El Paso. He'd loved her enough to get out of the Army and move permanently to Texas. Gramps supposed they had been happy at one time, but now they mostly argued and avoided spending any real time together. It was the main reason Gramps hadn't been back to El Paso to visit in a very long time. After both his grandparents had died, there just hadn't seemed to be much of a point.

Of course, now he wondered . . . if he'd visited more, might things between himself and Cassidy have changed? Maybe she wouldn't have married that asshole. Maybe she wouldn't have moved to Jamaica. And maybe she wouldn't be in the situation she'd found herself in.

But he couldn't change the past. All he could do was forge ahead. And tomorrow he'd be going to Jamaica. He didn't know what awaited him, didn't know if Cassidy would recognize him. If she'd do or say something that would blow his cover. But no matter what, he'd do whatever it took to get her and her son home safely.

## Chapter Two

Cassidy sat in a chair by the window and stared out into the Jamaican night. There wasn't much to look at, as her room was at the back of the huge mansion and overlooked nothing but shacks as far as the eye could see. At the moment, she could make out the dozens and dozens of small fires people had lit in their yards. Some were probably used for cooking food, others were light sources. She didn't know what the locals did at night . . . but she knew she'd be safer out there on the streets fending for herself, and Mario, than she was locked inside this opulent home.

When she'd first arrived in Jamaica, everything had been exciting and new. She had been offered a job as a live-in teacher and nanny and had been thrilled she'd gotten so lucky to have found something so quickly. But in the weeks and months after she'd been hired, she'd realized things weren't as rosy as they'd first seemed.

She'd first noticed her and Mario's passports were missing. They weren't in the drawer she remembered putting them in. When she'd gone to her boss, Michael Coke, to express concern about the cleaning staff possibly taking them, he'd told her that he'd put them away for safekeeping. She'd been surprised, but hadn't wanted to make a fuss so early in her employment. She'd let it go. She regretted that now.

Then she'd been told she wasn't allowed to leave the mansion grounds without an escort.

Shortly thereafter, she'd been informed if she *did* leave the grounds, she wasn't allowed to take her son with her . . . for their safety, of course.

Little by little, Cassidy had realized she was essentially a prisoner in the grand house.

She'd been so naive when she'd first arrived in the small country. All she'd wanted was to get out of El Paso for a while. Everyone in the neighborhood had known her and her ex-husband, and everywhere she'd gone, people had told her

that she'd been an idiot to divorce him. That he was the best thing that could happen to someone like her . . . a kid whose parents had immigrated to the States from Mexico.

Which was stupid. Her parents were awesome. They worked their asses off, and Cassidy was proud of her heritage. What she should've done was find a nice, humble blue-collar man to marry instead of being dazzled by Alfred and all the money he liked to throw around to impress her.

She'd often been told she was pretty. She was fairly tall, and while not super skinny, she wasn't overweight either. In her opinion, her best feature was her hair. It was long and wavy, and she adored the rich dark-brown color.

Despite that, she hadn't thought she was pretty enough for the man she'd *truly* longed for.

So she'd settled. Settled for marriage to a man she'd convinced herself she loved, but in retrospect, he had made her feel even worse about herself. She'd married Alfred because friends had convinced her that he was a great catch, that she couldn't do better. They were sure he'd take care of her, and her life would be easy.

What she'd gotten was belittlement. And emotional abuse. A day hadn't gone by when Alfred hadn't told her how lucky she was to be with him. When he hadn't yelled at her for being a terrible mother.

But that wasn't what had pushed her over the edge. She was used to people looking down on her because of where her parents came from. The last straw was when Alfred had turned on Mario. When he'd told their four-year-old that playing with dolls was for sissies. That not wanting to play flag football was embarrassing for *Alfred*, and Mario needed to man up.

Cassidy wasn't sorry she'd divorced the small-minded asshole, she was only sorry she'd stooped to marrying him in the first place, and that she'd waited so long to kick him to the curb. She'd changed back to her maiden name, not wanting Alfred's last name, Pepper, any longer than she had to have it.

And afterward, when she couldn't even go to the grocery store without someone telling her she'd made a mistake in dumping Alfred, Cassidy'd had enough. It hadn't helped when her parents also seemed disappointed over her decision to leave him. They loved her, wanted the best for her, but the fact that they couldn't understand how he was tearing her apart day by day hurt. A lot.

She'd said goodbye to her parents and headed to Jamaica with the high hopes of using her teaching degree in a new place, where she could both "find herself" and provide an atmosphere in which her son wouldn't constantly be disparaged.

She'd needed some breathing room. So Cassidy had traveled to the tropical paradise to regroup before figuring out where she truly wanted to settle with Mario.

When she'd almost immediately been offered the nanny/homeschool teaching job, she'd jumped at the chance. Naively giving up her freedoms one by one. And now, five years later, she and Mario were still there. As trapped as they'd been in El Paso living in Alfred's house. Except now things were much more dire.

Michael Coke was a drug dealer. The highest man on the totem pole. He had dozens of lieutenants ready and willing to do whatever he commanded. And the number of bodyguards was insane. Michael was rarely ever alone.

But there was a good reason for all the security. People either loved or hated the man. Loved him because he was a well-paying employer. And in a country like Jamaica, where the unemployment rate was around ten percent and poverty was a huge issue, being employed meant everything.

But behind his benevolent appearance was a ruthless man who didn't care about anything but money. All his actions were done with making more money in mind. Yes, he paid well, but he demanded unwavering loyalty from his employees, and if anyone stepped out of line even a little bit, Michael had them killed. Or he threatened the person's family. And the money he so generously gave to those in his



community came with strings. He expected everyone to look the other way about the illegal things going on in their neighborhoods.

So Michael was treated like royalty by some, and like the worst villain in the world by others. Everyone who lived in the mansion, however, was supportive of their boss . . . they had to be. If they weren't, they'd simply disappear without a trace.

Cassidy pretty much ignored, and was ignored by, most of the other employees. She was solely responsible for dealing with the children, and she was okay with that. At the moment, there were five kids she looked after, ages seven to fourteen. The fourteen-year-old was around less and less, and Cassidy knew he was being integrated into Michael's drug organization. It depressed her—and scared her to death—but there was literally nothing she could do about it.

The head of his security force, Lloyd Robinson, was one of the employees Cassidy went out of her way to avoid the most. He frightened her. She didn't like the way he looked at her, as if he was a heartbeat away from backing her into a room and taking what he so obviously wanted. He claimed to have connections of his own. Made it clear on more than one occasion that Michael *owned* her and her son, and she'd never get out of Jamaica. That even if she somehow managed to get out of the house with Mario, they wouldn't be able to fly out of the country because her name was on a "no-fly" list.

He'd bragged of being the one to take her passport all those years ago. Lloyd had searched her room while she'd been teaching, found her and Mario's passports, and confiscated them.

She wasn't allowed to have a phone or access to a computer. Had to use Lloyd's phone to call home, and he stood next to her during each one, making sure she didn't tell her parents anything she shouldn't. She had to lie to her mom and dad, tell them how happy they were, how great Jamaica was. It made her physically sick, and she'd gradually lessened the number of calls home, not wanting to lie to her parents any more than she already had.

Life in Michael's household had become more and more stifling. It wasn't just Lloyd who scared Cassidy; Michael himself had been requesting her presence more and more. Demanding she eat dinner with him and his guests, which wasn't something she'd had to suffer in the past. Sometimes she'd have to dress up and put on makeup, forced to play the part of an empty-headed Barbie doll, pretending to enjoy herself. Other times it was more casual, yet always with smiles and praise for Michael, as if to prove to guests what a great boss he was for allowing his employees the privilege of eating with him.

Cassidy did it without outward protest. She did it to protect herself and her son, to give herself one more day to come up with an idea to get them out of the mess she'd gotten them into.

It seemed as if her whole life was one bad decision after another. If she ever made it out of here, she was going to move someplace where no one knew anything about her or her stupid mistakes and start over.

Certain she'd never get away from Michael or out from under Lloyd's watchful eye by herself, Cassidy had reached out to the FBI. She didn't know anyone who worked there, of course, but she figured they might be interested in what she knew about Michael and his drug operation. So she wrote a letter. Then another. Then another.

She told them everything she knew. Gave them names. Dates. Proof of Michael's drug trafficking. But as the months passed with no sign of aid, and nothing seeming out of the ordinary in Michael's operation, Cassidy began to despair. All the risks she'd taken to smuggle the letters out and get them mailed without Lloyd or one of her babysitters noticing hadn't resulted in anyone coming to help her.

She was depressed. Cassidy had to get her son out from under Michael's thumb. Get herself out.

She'd sent one last letter. Begging anyone to help her. But that had been over a month ago. No one was coming. Because she was nobody. A Mexican American living in Jamaica

who'd made her bed, and now she had to either lie in it . . . or burn the fucking thing to the ground.

Mario made a sound in his bed, and Cassidy turned to look at him. His head was thrashing back and forth, as if he was having a nightmare. He'd begun to have them frequently, which was one more thing adding to the guilt on her shoulders.

She walked over and lay down next to her son. She pulled him into her arms, thankful that he immediately stilled.

"It's okay, Mario. Mama's here."

He woke and looked up at her. His eyes were filled with so much pain, Cassidy wanted to cry. "I don't like it here," he whispered.

Cassidy had long suspected that her room was bugged. Lloyd had made enough comments about things she'd said to her son to make her realize that she had no privacy. She'd taught Mario that if he wanted to tell her something personal, he had to do it when they were outside playing on the grounds of the mansion, or he had to whisper. She also had music playing from the beat-up radio on the table next to her bed. It was on twenty-four seven, without fail. The Jamaican music she'd once loved now gave her nightmares, but she didn't dare turn it off.

She put her lips next to his ear and whispered back, "I know, love. I don't either. I'm going to get us out of here."

"But how?" he asked, wise beyond his eleven years. "Lloyd won't let us into the city together. And now when I deliver packages, they say if I am caught, they will hurt you."

Cassidy's stomach lurched. Lloyd and others in the organization had been slowly teaching Mario how to move drugs around the city for export, but she had no idea how to stop it. Yet hearing that they were using *her* to threaten him made her resolve firm.

"You keep on doing whatever they tell you to," she told him.

"But it's wrong," he whined.

“I know. But you aren’t doing it willingly,” she said, trying to reassure him. “Listen to me, Mario. Are you listening?”

“Yes, Mama.”

“I don’t know how we’re going to get out of here, but we are. We have to be ready at a moment’s notice to just leave. To bring nothing with us. Are you willing to do that?”

He nodded. “As long as I have you, I don’t need anything else.”

Cassidy’s eyes filled with tears. Mario was the best thing to ever happen to her.

She knew he was different from other boys. Instead of wanting to roughhouse and wrestle when he was younger, he’d been content to sit by her side and read. He was fascinated by dancing of all kinds. Hip-hop, ballet, jazz, tap, ballroom . . . it didn’t matter what it was, if someone was dancing, Mario’s attention was glued to them. Other kids who had come and gone from the mansion had made fun of him, but Cassidy did what she could to encourage his interests. Many a night they’d danced together alone in their room. She wasn’t the best dancer, but she did her best to teach him what she could.

“I love you, Mario,” she said softly.

“I love you, too, Mama.”

“Go to sleep. I’ve got you.”

He nodded, and even though it took a while, eventually Cassidy felt his even breaths against her arm.

She was done waiting. She’d given the FBI time to help her, but it looked like she was on her own . . . just as she’d always been. Cassidy had no idea how she was going to get out of Michael’s mansion, or out of the hands of his supporters, but she had to. Her life, and her son’s, depended on it.



Three nights later, Cassidy was no closer to an idea for getting them out. She was on edge and scared every second of every

day, afraid Lloyd or one of the others in the house was going to be able to read something on her face and know she was planning to escape. She'd done her best to avoid contact with anyone other than the children under her care and the employees she couldn't steer clear of.

Lloyd had come to the schoolroom to collect Mario that morning, and her son still wasn't back from whatever errand he'd been sent on, which freaked Cassidy out. When a knock sounded on her bedroom door, she practically ran to open it.

"Cassidy," Lloyd said, staring down at her.

He'd always given her the creeps. Even when she hadn't known what she was getting herself into all those years ago. It was the way he looked at her.

Currently, his dark skin shone with sweat, as if he'd just gotten done working out. She knew he spent a lot of time in the gym on the lower level of the mansion. He prided himself on his looks. On being muscular and stronger than others. He wasn't all that tall, maybe only an inch or so taller than her own five-nine. But the emptiness in his eyes made her shiver. Some women might find his brown gaze soulful or deep, but whenever Cassidy looked at him, she just saw an eagerness to inflict pain.

"Come with me," Lloyd said.

It wasn't a question, and Cassidy knew she had no choice but to do as he ordered. "Is it Mario? Is he okay?"

Lloyd frowned. "Of course he is. Why wouldn't he be?"

"Well, I haven't seen him in a while. Is he back from his errand?"

"You coddle that boy too much," Lloyd told her, without answering her question.

Cassidy wanted to push, wanted to ask where Mario was and what he'd been doing all day, but she knew Lloyd wouldn't answer her. He never did. He liked keeping her off kilter when it came to her son. Liked using him as a bargaining chip. Lloyd, and everyone else, knew that Mario was her one weakness, and they exploited it as much as they could.

Lloyd took hold of her bicep and marched her out of her room and down the hall. Cassidy winced. Everyone who worked security in the house manhandled the other employees. Grabbing their arms, like Lloyd did now, was their signature move.

It didn't used to bother her so much, but lately Lloyd and his cronies seemed to take pleasure in holding her a bit too tight. In knowing they were bruising her with their grips. Complaining did no good; it only made them smirk and hold on tighter.

"You're eating with Michael tonight," Lloyd said, not giving her a choice. "You're expected to be on your best behavior because we have a very important guest. I would advise you not to do or say anything that would embarrass Michael or his business. Understand?"

Cassidy nodded. She'd been through this more than enough times now. When Michael was trying to impress someone, he paraded some of his female employees before his guests. She didn't know if he was trying to imply that they were his harem or what; she never dared ask. She kept her head down and ate whatever was put in front of her, whether she liked it or not.

She'd politely refused the salted cod that had been served to her once and quickly learned that saying no to *anything* Michael offered was strictly forbidden. She'd been served nothing but salted cod every day for a month after that. It was either eat it or starve. She'd learned her lesson well.

"Keep your mouth shut unless you're asked a direct question. You're nothing but a decoration. Got it?"

"Yes," she said, hating Lloyd with everything in her. Michael Coke was far worse than his head of security, but at least she didn't have to deal with him quite as often.

Lloyd stopped before entering the large dining room and dropped his hand. Cassidy resisted the urge to reach up and rub her arm where he'd been gripping her.

“Michael agrees with me that your son is getting too old to sleep with his mommy every night. But if you behave yourself at dinner, I’ll suggest that we let him stay with you for a while longer.”

Cassidy stiffened. They were going to separate her from Mario? No. She wouldn’t let that happen.

Instead of protesting, however, she simply nodded. Doing anything else would make Lloyd take Mario from her immediately, just out of spite and to prove that he could.

She didn’t look up at him, knowing he’d be able to see the hate in her eyes, as he pushed open the door to the dining room.

Cassidy walked in, keeping her eyes to the floor and using her peripheral vision to find her way to one of the chairs.

“You’re late,” Michael told her in an annoyed tone.

Cassidy wanted to retort that she hadn’t known she was supposed to eat with him in the first place, had just been led straight to the dining room, but she knew better. “I’m sorry to have kept you waiting,” she said politely.

“Cooyah when I’m talking to you,” Michael barked.

Cassidy’s head came up. *Cooyah* meant “pay attention,” but sometimes the kingpin wanted people to look at him, and other times he rebuked them for meeting his gaze. He was never consistent, which meant she had no idea what to do when she was around him.

There were other people in the room, everyone waiting to be seated, but she didn’t dare take her eyes from Michael. He had a dangerous aura around him. Cassidy had sensed it the first time she’d met him, but had convinced herself she was imagining things. After living in the house only a short amount of time, she’d discovered how right she’d been. She’d seen him kill one of his employees—shoot him in the head—when he’d suspected the man had double-crossed him.

Michael was the youngest of the Coke siblings, and the only one remaining. His father had been killed in a car accident, and his brother and sister had both been murdered.

Cassidy suspected many of the children she'd watched over and taught were descendants of the Coke family, but had never asked outright.

Tonight, he was wearing a pair of black jeans and a black shirt. His nostrils flared as he studied her, and it was all Cassidy could do not to squirm under his gaze. He had a way of making her want to crawl under the table and hide, but instead, she squared her shoulders and swallowed hard.

“G, this is our resident nanny and teacher, Cassidy Hewitt. I figured you might like her since she's one of your kind. Be polite, and say hello to my guest, Cassidy.”

Turning, Cassidy now saw there were several other women in the room. One was a woman Michael was currently seeing. He didn't date, but he seemed to favor this woman more than the others. She was Jamaican, with the most beautiful brown skin Cassidy had ever seen. But the woman was cold, and it was obvious she was only with Michael because of what he could give her . . . namely, expensive clothes, shoes, and jewelry. Also in attendance was a white woman Cassidy had never seen before, and two other Black women. Lloyd had stepped up to a nearby chair, and two more of Michael's trusted lieutenants were also present.

Cassidy turned to the man who'd been introduced as G. He was several seats down from her and on the other side of the table—but the second she met his gaze, she froze.

The man was tall. Very tall. He seemed to tower over everyone else standing at the table. He had a scruffy beard with silver streaks, and his dark hair was a bit too long on top and messy. He was wearing a pair of jeans and a polo shirt with the collar pulled up. His biceps bulged against the material, and she could see a smattering of chest hair through the open buttons at his throat. His nose was slightly crooked, as if it had been broken several times.

But the thing that had her frozen where she stood was the fact that she *knew* this man.

Leonardo Zanardi. Leo.



Once upon a time, she'd had the worst crush on him. He was a senior when she was a freshman in high school, and she'd written all over her notebooks *Cassidy + Leo = LUV*.

She wasn't sure if she was hallucinating or if she'd finally gone crazy, because there was no way Leo was in Jamaica, being hosted as an honored guest at a drug lord's house.

"Does she talk?" asked the man Michael called G, one eyebrow raised.

Cassidy saw Lloyd take a step back from his spot at the table and knew if he got his hands on her, she'd regret it.

"I'm sorry, sir. Yes, I speak. It's very nice to meet you."

Cassidy had no idea what was going on, but until she did, she wasn't going to say anything that might get her—or Leo—into trouble.

"She's pretty, yuh nuh tink?"

Over time, Cassidy had gotten used to Michael's little habit. He would speak patois, the native creole language of Jamaica, then the next second, he would speak perfect, grammatically correct English. She figured it was one more way he kept people on their toes around him.

"Yes. Very. It's nice to meet you," Leo said with a small nod.

Finally, everyone pulled their chairs out and sat. Cassidy's heart was beating a million miles an hour. She was extremely confused about Leo's presence, but kept her thoughts to herself. He didn't give any clue that he recognized her, but she couldn't help thinking he was aware of exactly who she was.

As she ate her jerk chicken with callaloo—a green, leafy vegetable similar to spinach—Cassidy listened intently to the conversations going on around her. She learned that Leo—who Michael was still calling G, for some reason—was there on a special trip. They were negotiating something, and Cassidy could only assume it had to do with drugs.

That thought disturbed her immensely. She'd hoped Leo was one of the good guys. That maybe he was even there to

save her. But the longer the talk went on, and as she noted how chummy he was with both Michael and Lloyd, the more depressed Cassidy got. Indications were pointing toward Leo—the man she'd wanted practically her entire life—being heavily involved in drugs.

All Cassidy wanted was to go back to her room, cuddle with Mario, and sleep. At least when she was asleep, she didn't have the weight of all her horrible decisions bearing down on her. But Michael had other plans.

“Take a walk with Cassidy,” Michael told Leo. “Get to know her.”

Leo smiled lazily and nodded. “I think I will, thank you.”

“But stay on the grounds. It's dangerous out there dis time of night.”

“Understood.” He pushed his chair back and came toward Cassidy with a smile on his face. Without asking, Leo wrapped a hand around her arm and lifted her to her feet as easily as he would a child.

Cassidy generally didn't think about her height. She was fairly tall for a woman, but around Leo, she'd always felt small. He towered over her by at least six inches. She'd asked him once why he didn't play basketball, and he'd merely snorted and told her he had no interest in the sport.

She noticed that he didn't ask if she *wanted* to take a walk with him. When Michael Coke gave permission, it was a done deal. Hating the situation she was in all the more, and still worrying about Mario, Cassidy stumbled as Leo led her out of the dining room. He steadied her by firming his grip. His hold reminded her of the way Lloyd and all his security cronies manhandled her on a regular basis.

She jerked her arm out of Leo's grip once they were out of sight of the dining room. It was one thing to be headstrong, but she wasn't willing to risk Mario's safety with such blatant disrespect in front of Michael. He could make both their lives a living hell. Well, more than they already were.

Most people would think she had it good living in the mansion. She had food to eat and a warm bed, and pretty much all her needs were taken care of. But looks could be deceiving. If she didn't do what Michael wanted—namely, take a walk with Leo—she'd eventually pay the price.

“Easy, Cass,” Leo said in a tone so low, she thought she'd imagined the words. “You're safe with me.”

Cassidy couldn't help but snort at that. She wasn't safe with him. She wasn't safe anywhere. She couldn't go where she wanted, when she wanted. She had no money, everything she earned went toward her “room and board.” Basically she was working for free, with little hope of being able to escape her current situation. And what made it all worse was that she'd done it to herself.

Leo didn't say anything else, but he didn't touch her again either. They walked side by side down the hall toward a door that led outside, into the walled gardens around the mansion. He held open the door for her and gestured to the left once they'd cleared it.

Cassidy was terribly confused. She had no idea what in the world Leo Zanardi was doing in Jamaica. Talking to Michael Coke, one of the country's most ruthless drug lords. Out of all the people in the entire world who might show up at her employer's dinner table, she never would've guessed it would be her lifelong crush.

She desperately wanted to ask if he'd help get her and Mario out of the country, but Cassidy had no idea if she could trust him. He was, after all, extremely chummy with her captors.

“May I hold your hand?” Leo asked in the same deep, rumbly voice she remembered. When she hesitated, he went on. “I'm sure there are cameras out here, and it would look better if it seemed as if we were getting along.”

Still not sure of his motives, Cassidy nodded anyway. He was right, cameras *were* everywhere. One of Lloyd's security staff would surely be watching them as well . . . and it was clear Michael expected her to be nice to his guest.

“Thank you, Cass,” Leo said, wrapping his hand around hers.

It felt good. Way too good. And safe. Cassidy wanted to latch on to him with both hands and beg him to help her, but she pressed her lips together, not willing to risk it until she knew what the hell was going on.

They walked in silence toward the outer wall of the complex. They couldn't go anywhere on the grounds without being in line of sight of one of the cameras, but Cassidy was fairly certain this far away, they wouldn't be overheard. She'd taken Mario out here more times than she could count to talk to him without the threat of someone listening.

Did Leo somehow know that? Or was his stopping here, almost the exact spot where she spoke to her son, merely a coincidence? Had he chosen this out-of-the-way spot to try to take advantage of her?

Cassidy was ashamed of the thought. This was Leo, after all. But she'd learned most people had ulterior motives. She couldn't trust anyone.

“I'm here because of your letters,” Leo said in a tone barely above a whisper.

Cassidy stared up at him, startled. She took a step closer, but he squeezed her hand.

“Steady, Cass, they're watching.”

Blinking, she inhaled deeply through her nose, trying to compose herself. “So you're here to . . . what?” she asked after a moment.

“Get you and your son home. Kill Coke if possible. Spare someone else from being in your shoes.”

Cassidy wanted to cry. She remembered that Leo had always been blunt. He never played games, said exactly what was on his mind. “How?” she asked.

He looked a little sheepish then. “Well, that part's a bit more complicated,” he admitted. “We've got some connections with the FBI, and they helped set up my cover

story. I'm here as a dealer from Dallas wanting to get in on Coke's distribution channel. You're gonna hear me say a lot of shit that simply isn't true, stuff that'll upset you. I need you to just go with it. Can you trust me enough to do that?"

"I'll do whatever I have to in order to get out of here," she reassured him.

Leo looked grim. "I was hoping that if I showed you a bit of interest, Coke would think he could use you to gain my favor, and it looks like that's working." He wrinkled his nose then. "With the way he was eyeballin' us, I wouldn't be surprised if he tries to whore you out to me."

Cassidy inhaled sharply. "What?"

"I take it he hasn't tried that before?"

"No!" she exclaimed.

"Take a breath," Leo said easily. He then leaned down and nuzzled the hair by her ear. It tickled, and Cassidy found herself wanting to lean into him. Wanting to beg him to take her away right that second. But she didn't know where Mario was, and she would never leave without him. She locked her knees and settled for resting her hands on his waist as he stayed close.

"Coke's a piece of shit," Leo whispered harshly. "But we need to play the game until the time's right. So I'll ask again. Can you trust me?"

Cassidy closed her eyes and spoke from her heart. "Leo, I've trusted you since I was fourteen and you stuck up for me at that football game, when those upperclassmen had cornered me. I've been so scared. I just want to go home, but I don't know how I can. Lloyd took our passports when we first moved into the mansion, and I have no money."

"Look at me, Cass," Leo said.

She looked up into his beautiful brown eyes. She'd never been this close to Leo before. Had fantasized about him taking her in his arms back in high school, declaring his undying love, but of course that hadn't happened. Amazingly, he smelled really good. His beard was scruffy, and this close she

could see more streaks of gray than she'd noticed at the table earlier. But that only made him more attractive to her. He wasn't a kid trying to be a man.

He seemed larger than life, and because of his time in the military, she suspected it was very possible he could get her and Mario out of their predicament.

She was being awfully trusting of a man she hadn't spoken to in years, but she was willing to do so if there was a glimmer of hope for an escape. The fact that she *knew* Leo was icing on the cake.

"I don't know how this is gonna go, but I'm confident that my cover is tight. Coke's not gonna know I'm not exactly who he thinks I am . . . namely, a drug dealer. My team is here, three other men who have my back, and yours and Mario's. We just need to play this smart. Don't let on that you know me from back home. Don't do anything that will make Coke or anyone else in the house suspicious." He gave her a wry look as he went on. "I kinda bragged about my legendary Latino sex appeal, hoping he might push us together. But no matter what happens, you're safe with me."

"What do you think is gonna happen?" Cassidy asked, nervous now.

"I want to get myself invited to stay at the house," Leo admitted. "And one way that might happen is if I'm sleeping in your bed."

Cassidy's mouth fell open. "But Mario sleeps in my room," she protested.

Leo frowned. "Shit. Okay, we'll think of something. The last thing I want is Coke separating the two of you."

Cassidy couldn't help but melt into the man in relief. He pulled her into his embrace, and she clung to him as if he was the only thing keeping her afloat. "You said you have a team?" she asked softly after a moment.

"Yeah. Bull, Eagle, and Smoke. You can trust them just as much as you trust me. Coke thinks they're my lieutenants, and he refused to let them into the house, saying he has his own

guards. They're outside the walls, though, waiting and watching. They're lying low—this isn't exactly a safe neighborhood. If all goes according to plan, we'll be on our way home sooner rather than later."

"Home," Cassidy breathed. "I don't even know where that is anymore."

"El Paso?" Leo asked.

"No. Alfred is there. Along with all his friends. I can't go anywhere without someone telling me how much I fucked up by divorcing him. It's why I came here. To start fresh. And look how *this* turned out."

"You talk to your folks about what's going on?" Leo asked.

"I can't. I'm only allowed to call them every now and then, and Lloyd is right there, listening every time. They think I'm having a grand old time down here, but I think my mom's disappointed that I haven't brought Mario to see them. I've fucked up everything, Leo."

"We're gonna get you back to the States, Cass. I'm going to do everything in my power to make that happen."

Cassidy looked up, but didn't back away from him. "If things go wrong, promise you'll get Mario out of here. I can handle anything as long as I know my son is safe."

"We're going to get you *both* out of here," Leo said.

And looking into his eyes, seeing the sincerity and confidence there, Cassidy believed him.

"Looks like you two are pretty chummy," a voice said from behind her.

Cassidy stiffened and would've backed away from Leo, but he wouldn't let her go.

"We are, and it'd be nice if you gave us some privacy to continue to get to know each other," Leo said in a tone much harsher than she'd ever heard from him before. Granted, Cassidy hadn't exactly hung out with the man she was currently plastered against, but still . . .

Lloyd stepped closer and shrugged. “Michael says you’ve been out here long enough, G.”

“Things were just gettin’ good,” Leo complained.

“Then don’t let me stop you,” Lloyd said as he leaned a hip against a nearby tree and folded his arms across his chest.

Cassidy stiffened. A part of her hadn’t really believed Michael would actually give her to a man to try to grease the wheels of a business deal, but evidence was indicating that really was the case.

Leo’s fingers moved under her chin, and he lifted her face to his. He didn’t say anything as he slowly lowered his head.

Cassidy licked her lips nervously but didn’t pull away. If Leo needed her to act as if she wanted his advances—and if that’s what she had to do to get out of this gilded cage—she’d do it.

Hell, who was she kidding? She’d fantasized about kissing Leonardo Zanardi almost her whole life. He’d always been it for her. The big crush. The guy who’d gotten away. The one man who she truly thought she’d be compatible with.

His lips brushed over hers once, twice. He was gentle and easy with her. It was . . . nice. Not earth shattering, but lovely all the same.

Then he shifted, bringing one hand up and grabbing a fistful of her hair, wrapping the other around her back. He yanked on her hair, and she gasped in surprise. He wasn’t hurting her, but he was definitely being more forceful than she’d expected.

His lips came down on hers again, but this time, he wasn’t going easy and slow. His tongue speared into her mouth, and he took what he wanted.

Cassidy’s nipples hardened, and goose bumps broke out on her arms. Even though it probably looked as if Leo was overpowering her, he was still handling her with care. Nothing about his kiss was scary or hurtful. His grip on her hair was tight, not painful. She loved that he’d taken control, that she



didn't have to do anything but hang on as he took what he wanted . . . giving Lloyd a good show in the process.

When he finally lifted his lips from hers, Cassidy stared at him, knowing her confusion and desire were probably easy to read in her expression.

“Now that’s what I call a kiss. If I’d had any inclination the Mexican bitch wasn’t frigid, I might’ve taken a turn before now.”

As if a switch had been thrown, Leo suddenly moved. He pushed Cassidy behind him and strode toward Lloyd. He grabbed his shirt and slammed him against the tree he’d been so lazily leaning against seconds earlier.

“Don’t touch her, *amigo*. She’s mine as long as I’m here. Got it?”

“Yeah, yeah, I gotcha,” Lloyd said. “As long as you’re here, you can use her.”

He didn’t say any more, but Cassidy wasn’t an idiot. She could hear what he *didn’t* say. That as soon as Leo had made his deal and left, Lloyd was going to take what he wanted.

Leo didn’t say anything else, just strode back to Cassidy and put his arm around her shoulders, pulling her into his side. He walked past Lloyd without a glance in his direction, as if the other man was of no consequence. But every muscle in his body was tense, and Cassidy wasn’t sure what to do or say to help the situation.

As they neared the door to the house, Lloyd said, “Michael would like to talk some more tonight.”

“I’m tired,” Leo said tightly. “He’s gonna have to wait until tomorrow.”

“He wants to talk *now*,” Lloyd said.

Leo turned. “And *I* said I’m tired,” he repeated. “I respect your boss and would very much like things between us to work out. But after having my nice evening interrupted, I’m gonna have to pass. If this is the way all his potential business

partners are treated—giving them a taste of heaven, then snatching it away—I might just rethink this trip.”

Cassidy did her best not to stiffen. She knew Leo was playing a role, but she didn't want him to do anything that might piss off Michael. That would risk him not being invited back.

But she needn't have worried. Leo obviously knew how to play Lloyd.

“I apologize for the interruption earlier. I was simply concerned for your well-being,” Lloyd muttered.

Leo snorted. “As if this little filly could do anything to hurt me. Doesn't sound like you have much respect for me.”

“Women can be lethal,” Lloyd sneered. “The most innocent-looking ones can be the most dangerous.”

Leo chuckled. It was a low, mean sound that made the hair on the back of Cassidy's neck stand up. “You just have to know how to tame 'em,” he said. “Right, sweetheart?”

Before Cassidy could answer, he'd tipped her head up to his and kissed her again, not giving her any say in the matter. She knew it was all part of the role he was playing, but she hated that Lloyd was watching something so intimate. It was silly, it was only a kiss—and it was fake—but it meant something to her. Hope.

As if Leo knew she was uncomfortable, he ended the kiss abruptly, then looked back to Lloyd. “Please thank Michael for introducing me to the nanny. I've missed my homeland, and she's just what I need to bring back some good memories. If you'd back up and give me a second, I'd appreciate it.”

The two men stared at each other for a strained moment. Neither was backing down, and for a second, Cassidy thought Lloyd was going to crack and let his true personality come out, but eventually he nodded and said, “I'll wait inside for you both.”

He stepped into the house but left the door open. As far as giving them privacy, it was a farce, though Cassidy wasn't going to complain.

Leo turned his back to the door, and the camera placed above it, and leaned toward her. His lips brushed her ear as he said, "You did good, Cass. I'm proud of you. I'm sorry I was so rough. I'll be back. Hang in there." He kissed her again, another light brush of his lips against hers, but this time it felt like so much more. It felt like a promise.

Then he let go of her, turned his back on her, and strode into the house.

Cassidy felt cold without the heat of his arms around her, but she followed behind him meekly. Leo didn't look back as Martin, one of Lloyd's security staff, escorted him away from her.

"It looks like your son has finally returned. You really ought to tell him to be more careful, Cassidy. He could get himself in trouble wandering around the city by himself. You wouldn't want something to happen to him, would you?" Lloyd drawled.

She shivered at the threat in the man's tone. Instead of telling him how much she hated him, she merely shook her head. It wouldn't be good to piss off Lloyd if she was close to getting out of there.

"If I'd known how hot you burned, I might've asked Michael for a turn before now," Lloyd smirked, repeating what he'd said earlier.

Feeling as if her head was going to explode, Cassidy turned away from him, toward her room. She was scared to death of Lloyd but wouldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing how badly she was shaking.

"When G's gone, you're mine," Lloyd said quietly as she walked away.

The second she turned the corner, Cassidy broke into a jog to put as much space between her and the head of security as she could. She'd never felt less safe than she did right that moment, which was saying a lot, because she was living in a powder keg of danger and violence.

She burst into the room she shared with Mario, and it took everything in her not to immediately start crying when she saw her son sitting on her bed. She immediately went to him and hugged him tight.

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah,” Mario said softly. “Mama?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“I hate it here!” Then he burst into tears.

All Cassidy could do was rock her baby boy. She wanted to tell him about Leo. That he would get them out safe and sound. That soon their suffering would be over . . . but she kept her mouth shut. She trusted Mario, but he was still only a boy. She couldn't risk his saying something to the wrong person that would make their escape more difficult.

Gradually over the next hour, she learned about Mario's day. How he'd been forced to deliver a stash of drugs for distribution. How he'd been driven miles away and told to get out of the car and to find his own way back to the mansion.

This was no life for a child. Especially not *her* child.

All she could do was close her eyes and pray that her old high school friend would somehow be able to free them before the nooses around both their necks tightened even more.

# Chapter Three

“It’s bad,” Gramps told his teammates later that evening.

He and the others were sitting in a large suite in a five-star hotel in the center of Kingston. If they were going to convince Coke they were big players in the Texas drug market, they had to act like they had money to burn, hence the expensive-as-hell hotel.

“But she’s all right?” Bull asked.

Gramps nodded. “For now. Scared, but as brave as I remember her being. Coke gave me carte blanche to do what I wanted with her.”

“He *said* that?” Smoke asked.

“Of course not. But he implied it. He had several other women at dinner, pretty much for me to choose from. I’m sure he only invited Cassidy because she’s Hispanic, like me. I could literally see the glee in his eyes when I showed an interest in her. Practically shoved us out the door to ‘get to know each other’ as we walked around the grounds.”

The first time Gramps had laid eyes on Cassidy in Coke’s dining room, he’d had to physically restrain himself from going to her. She’d been pretty when she was fifteen, but the more recent pictures he’d seen hadn’t done her justice.

Cassidy Hewitt was beautiful. Her long brown hair had been pulled away from her face and had hung down her back. Her hazel eyes had been filled with worry and fear, which he hated. She was skinnier than he thought she should be, but he knew that was probably because of her situation. He imagined when she filled out, she’d be even more irresistible. She was taller than his friends’ wives . . . and he couldn’t help thinking she was the perfect height when he held her in his arms.

His thoughts were jerked back to the present when Bull asked, “Did you get a chance to talk to her about what’s going on?”

“A bit.”

“And Mario? Did you see him?” Eagle asked.

“No. And that’s another reason we need to step this up. Something’s up with her son. Before Cassidy arrived, Coke mentioned the boy briefly, and when I asked if he’d be joining us, he said he wasn’t home. Cassidy was definitely upset about it,” Gramps explained.

“So what’s the plan?”

“Coke’s a piece of shit, but he’s not dumb,” Gramps said. “I mean, we knew that after reading all the intel, but he’s a bit too eager to make this deal. I’m not sure if that means other distro channels have been shut down and he’s desperate to start something else up, or what. But that’ll work in our favor, I think. The head of security is an asshole. He was spying on us during our walk, although he was too far away to hear what we were talking about. He’s going to be an issue.”

“I thought you’d stay longer tonight,” Bull noted.

“I’d planned on it,” Gramps said. “But Coke was eager to talk. I think it’s best if I string him along. Make him chomp at the bit, so to speak, to get the deal going. I can use the fact that he told me to have fun with Cassidy against him for a while, then when he’s a little more desperate—enough to agree to anything—I’ll make my move. But we’ll need to remove Mario from the equation before then. The last thing we want is for Lloyd or anyone else in that fucking house to use him as collateral.”

“Agreed. Where do you think he was today?” Smoke asked.

“I don’t know. But I’m guessing I can get more details out of Coke when we’re hangin’ out. I’m sure he’s gonna want to know how things between me and Cassidy are going. I’ll bring up her son then.”

“You still going to try to get an invitation to stay at the house?” Bull asked.

“Yeah. I think he’ll jump at the chance to continue to distance me from you guys. Although Cassidy told me that she

and Mario share a room, so that'll be tricky. The last thing I want is for someone to separate the two of them because of me."

"Since Coke likes to separate Mario and Cassidy anyway, we're gonna need to come up with a plan to somehow extract them at the same time," Eagle said.

"I'm still thinking about that, but I've got an idea. It won't be easy, and it's risky as fuck. There's a possibility it'll upset Cassidy . . . but if it gets her and her son out of here, I'll do what I have to do."

Bull, Smoke, and Eagle all leaned forward eagerly.

"We're listening," Smoke said.

It took another hour and a half for Silverstone to discuss the plan and possible backup scenarios. The risk for shit to go wrong was higher than normal, but everyone agreed that considering how often Cassidy and her son were separated, it was the best shot they had of getting them out of the organization's clutches while also taking out Coke.

"I'll talk to our connection here in Kingston and get what you need," Eagle told Gramps.

"And I'll be point on the kid," Smoke volunteered. "If he steps foot outside that house, I'll be on him."

"No moving until I give the word," Gramps warned.

"Of course not. But I'm not going to sit back and let him get hurt right before we rescue him," Smoke said a little huffily.

Gramps nodded gratefully at his friend.

"And I'll have your six," Bull said. "I can't follow you into the house, but I'll be listening. If anything goes wrong, send me a signal, and I'll find a way to get you out. I'll set the place on fucking fire if I have to."

Gramps nodded again. They all wore special watches with radio transmitters. Bull could listen to everything he was saying and record a conversation with the touch of a button.

He'd been on countless missions with these men. He'd relied on them as much as they'd relied on him. He knew without question that if shit hit the fan, they'd do whatever it took to extract him. If he were here by himself, he wouldn't take such chances with Cassidy's and her son's lives. But since his team had his back, he was confident—as much as he could be in the current situation—that he'd be successful in getting them out of the country.

Yet something was missing. He didn't have the same . . . enthusiasm . . . for the mission that he'd felt for others. That heady sense that he was about to make a difference. Coke was a piece of shit, there was no doubt about it, and he needed to be stopped. But they all knew as soon as he was eliminated, someone else would rise up to take his place. That was how things worked.

It sucked, and Gramps was tired. He knew his friends were too.

When they'd started Silverstone, they'd agreed to continue until they all felt as if they were done. That time had come. Bull was eager to get back to Skylar. Eagle also missed his wife, and when they weren't discussing business, he couldn't talk about anything other than how amazing his son was. Gramps had overheard Smoke talking with Eagle about being a father and asking what he should expect of Molly now that she was pregnant.

And Gramps couldn't get the kisses he'd shared with Cassidy out of his head . . .

*Shared* probably wasn't the best word; *taken from her* was more appropriate. But she hadn't flinched. Hadn't strained to get away from him. Part of that could've been because that asshole Lloyd was watching and she was playing her part . . . but he didn't think so.

He hadn't missed the goose bumps on her arms after they'd kissed. He'd tried to rein himself in, but the second he'd felt her melt into him when he'd fisted her hair, he'd lost it. He'd kissed her the way he'd regretted not kissing her all those years.



They were both in their forties. He'd pretty much given up on love. But as he'd held Cassidy, all the feelings he'd pushed down over the years had come to the forefront. He wanted what his friends had. Someone to go home to at the end of a long day. Someone to laugh with. Someone to just coexist in the same space with.

Gramps didn't know what kind of father he'd be, probably a shitty one, but for Cassidy—and for Mario, a kid he hadn't even met—he wanted to try.

Gramps and his friends were going to have a long conversation about the future of Silverstone when they got home. No one wanted to be the first person to say they wanted out, but it was time.

Now that he was coming to terms with the fact that things weren't the same as they'd been even a year and a half ago, Gramps felt lighter. Freer. They weren't out of danger, had to see this mission through, but when they got home to Indianapolis, things would definitely need to change.

“What are you thinking about so hard over there?” Bull asked.

Gramps shrugged. “This and that.”

“We've got this,” Smoke said confidently.

“We do,” Gramps agreed.

As the night progressed, and the team got settled, Gramps couldn't stop thinking about what the next few days would bring. This mission was very personal for him—and he refused to fail.



The next morning, Gramps made himself wait until ten to head to Coke's mansion. He didn't want to look too eager, but he also wanted to make sure Coke knew he was serious about working with him and wasn't blowing him off. Of course, he also wanted to see Cassidy and make sure she was all right.

Before he knew it, he was sitting in a very opulent office with Coke.

“I take it you had a good evening last night?” Coke asked.

Gramps slouched in the extremely comfortable chair and shrugged. “The evening started out well enough, but it was interrupted. Then my hotel . . . the fucking tourists around here are loud and obnoxious.”

Coke jumped at the opening Gramps had left him.

“You’re more than welcome to stay here,” he offered nonchalantly.

“I’ll think about it,” Gramps replied, not wanting to seem too eager.

“I’m sure I can provide many ways to make you more comfortable,” Coke said. “Maybe you’d like to sample the product you’ll hopefully be purchasing? Or perhaps a certain lady’s company can be arranged.”

Gramps pretended to mull over his offer. He hated how easy it seemed to be for Coke to pimp out Cassidy. Either the man had done the same with other women, or he was very desperate for Gramps’s business. He supposed it was probably a mix of both.

“I can’t deny that Cassidy intrigues me,” he said with a sly smile. “It’s been a while since I’ve had the company of one of my own, if you know what I mean. But I don’t like sloppy seconds . . .” Gramps let his voice trail off.

“No worries on that front. Cassidy’s been the nanny and teacher for the last five years. She keeps to herself and is a bit too . . . headstrong for my clients’ tastes.” Coke leaned forward, as if telling Gramps something in confidence. “And I have it on good authority that she hasn’t been fucked since she got here.”

“How can you know that?” Gramps put just a touch of skepticism in his tone.

“I take very good care of my employees,” Coke bragged. “I keep my eye on them . . . for their own protection, you know. Kingston is a dangerous city, and I wouldn’t want anything happening to those who are living under my roof.”

Gramps managed to keep the look of disdain off his face. Barely. The asshole probably had cameras in Cassidy's room so he could spy on her anytime, day or night. "I understand. And I appreciate the info. I'm picky when it comes to my women."

"That's good. Good," Coke said. "There is one slight issue that you should probably know about her, though."

"What's that?" Gramps asked.

"The kid. I mentioned him last night. He's not young—I mean, he's eleven or twelve, or somewhere around there. But she's babied him to the point that he's pathetic."

"I don't give a shit about kids," Gramps lied. "I'll be fucking her, not the brat."

"Right," Coke said. He stood and went over to a very extensive liquor cabinet against one of the walls. "You want to test the product?" he asked as he opened a small door and pulled out a baggie of white powder.

"Appreciate it, but I don't touch the stuff. Learned my lesson with one of my lieutenants. He was hooked bad, and for a while it was fine. Until I caught him stealing the merchandise. I had to get rid of him."

Coke raised a brow.

Gramps knew what he wanted. "I slit his throat from ear to ear," he said matter-of-factly. "Delivered his ears and ring finger to his old lady. She got the hint. Kept her mouth shut and moved out of Dallas. I've got regular clients who are more than willing to test my stash for quality. They get free shit, and in return, I'm reassured that I'm not being fucked over." He glared at Coke as he said the last part.

"Hey, I don't fuck over my clients," Coke protested. He put the cocaine back into the cabinet and pulled out a glass. He held it up. "How about some Jamaican rum?"

"Now you're talkin'," Gramps said with a nod. He didn't want to drink with this asshole, but as it was his plan to get chummy, he smiled as Coke handed him the glass. He took a

sip and had to admit Coke wasn't wrong, it was good rum . . . even if it wasn't yet noon.

"So . . . shall we talk business?" Coke asked as he sat behind his desk once more.

It was obvious the man was impatient, but Gramps wanted to put him off for a bit longer . . . and he wanted to see Cassidy again. He took another sip of the rum, then shrugged. "What's the hurry? If I didn't know better, I'd think you were desperate to make a deal."

"No, no, no," Coke said. "I thought *you* wanted to get it done."

Gramps shrugged again. "What I want is to see that Hispanic filly again."

"Ah, I understand," Coke said, smiling suggestively.

It made Gramps want to punch him, but since he was the one who'd mentioned Cassidy, he forced himself to stay seated.

"I believe she's in the schoolroom this morning," Coke informed him.

"You have a lot of kids here?"

"Some. I don't allow them anymore, but a few years ago I was more lenient."

"Why don't you get rid of 'em?" Gramps asked, genuinely curious.

"Honestly?" Coke asked.

"I prefer it," Gramps told him.

"Because the bitches, their mothers, know too much. And by allowing them to move in with their brats, I make them dependent on me. They have a good life here behind the walls of my mansion, much better than they'd have out there." Coke gestured toward the window with his head before continuing. "I thought having women around would be good for the staff, too, but instead, it's just a pain in the ass. The ones shared by my men are catty and jealous of each other, causing me

headaches. I now insist anyone who gets pregnant must have an abortion, so feel free to fuck her without a condom. If she gets pregnant, there will be no consequences.”

Gramps wanted to beat the shit out of the smug man in front of him, but he forced himself to nod as if relieved by what he was hearing.

Coke went on. “As the brats get older, they’re incorporated into my organization. Once all the kids are old enough, your piece of tail will be given a choice . . . stay on with a new job title or be eliminated.”

Gramps refused to flinch. “Sounds like a smart business decision.”

“It’s worked out well,” Coke said with a shrug. “Bitch will either pay her way by fucking anyone who wants her, or who I give her to, or she’ll die. She’s been here too long, knows too much. I can’t just let her go, she’d have the cops on my ass in a heartbeat.”

“And her son?”

“He’s a batty bwoy, but he’ll work for me one way or another.”

“A batty bwoy?” Gramps asked.

“A homosexual,” Coke said with a look of disgust.

“How do you know? He’s young, right?”

“It’s obvious,” Coke said derisively. “It doesn’t matter. He can either move product, or he can suck cock to his heart’s content. But he stays. Cassidy made the mistake of bringing him with her when she accepted the job, so he’s mine now to do with as I please. I could kill him, but he’s good for keeping her in line.”

Gramps had heard enough for that morning. Coke was a heartless bastard, and he couldn’t wait to take him out. “I’m assuming she doesn’t know of your plans,” he said wryly.

Coke laughed. “Nope. But she will soon enough. You should feel grateful that you’re getting a piece of her before I give her to my men. I’ve seen the way Lloyd looks at her. He

hates her, but that won't prevent him from taking what he wants."

"Speaking of which . . . I'd appreciate it if you called him off while I'm here," Gramps said.

"He's just making sure she doesn't get out of line."

"You don't think I can handle her?" Gramps asked, putting a bit of irritation in his tone.

"That's not what I said," Coke replied.

"I don't want him spying on me," Gramps told the other man. "Now that I know where things stand with her, I can manage keeping her under my thumb without any assistance from Lloyd or the rest of your security team."

"I'm sure you can, and I trust you," Coke soothed. "I did my research on you; I wouldn't have let you into my home if I hadn't. You have the kind of reputation I respect, G. But you understand if I can't risk her swaying you with some bleeding-heart story. I'll tell Lloyd to leave you alone when you're on the grounds, but at no point will you be allowed to leave my property with both her and the brat."

Gramps chugged the rest of the rum and put the glass down on a table next to his chair. "Sounds fine to me. I have no use for the kid. And it's not as if I'll be datin' the bitch. I do like to woo my ladies, though, make them desperate for my cock before I give it to 'em."

"You don't like it when they fight?" Coke asked.

"Not really. I'd prefer them to be compliant and take what I give, rather than force myself on them."

"Shame. You don't know what you're missing," Coke said with a grin. "But I'll talk to Lloyd. The offer to stay here still stands."

"You got a room near Cassidy's?" Gramps asked, trying to ignore the fact that Coke just admitted he liked to take women by force. Fucking asshole.

"Across the hall," Coke assured him.

“That’ll do. ’Preciate the hospitality. If you’ll excuse me, I’ve got a woman to tame,” Gramps told him.

Coke swallowed the last of his own drink and stood along with Gramps. “As I said, she’s in the schoolroom. Don’t be afraid to interrupt her. The brats she’s with won’t need to remember anything she’s teaching them anyway. They’ll learn all they need to know from my men once they start working full time.”

“Will do. And you said I could take her into Kingston, right?” Gramps asked.

“Yes. But the boy stays here.”

“No problem. Don’t give a shit about him,” Gramps reiterated, lying through his teeth. “Don’t know what my plans are for the day, but I’m sure I’ll be rejuvenated by the morning,” he said with a wink.

Coke’s eyes gleamed. “You think so?”

“Yep. I’ll have the bitch riding my dick by tonight without any problems. It’s been a long time since I’ve had such prime Latina pussy. Tomorrow, we can discuss the terms of what will hopefully be a long and prosperous partnership between us.”

“Sounds good. If you’re around, dinner’s at eight.”

“I’m sure I’ll be preoccupied, but thank you,” Gramps said politely, not wanting to expose Cassidy to any more of this asshole than she’d already suffered. He had no idea if she knew what Coke had in store for her, but she was right to be concerned. He hated that she’d risked herself, and Mario, by sending the letters to the FBI, but her instincts were dead on. If he and Silverstone hadn’t arrived when they had, she and Mario would’ve both been living through a horrific ordeal very soon. The faster he could put Silverstone’s plan in motion, the better.

He hoped Eagle would be able to get his hands on what they needed to end this once and for all. If not, Gramps would have to put Coke off another day . . . something he was no longer sure he could do.

Coke walked over to the door to the office and opened it. Lloyd, the ever-present watchdog, immediately straightened.

“Lloyd, I need to talk to you,” Coke told him. Then he nodded at Gramps. “Down the hall, turn right, then take the first left. The schoolroom is at the end of the hall. You can’t miss it.”

“Thanks,” Gramps told him, turning to go.

“Uh, sir, let me call Martin—” Lloyd began.

“No need. That’s part of what we need to talk about,” Coke interrupted.

Gramps could hear Lloyd protesting as the door to the office shut behind him and Coke. He had no illusions that he’d have privacy. Every inch of the mansion was covered by security cameras, and he was probably being watched as he headed down the hall to where he hoped he’d find Cassidy. But not having Lloyd on his heels would give him more opportunities to talk to her privately.

The mansion was immaculate and very obviously had cost millions to build. Compared to the poverty of many people living in Kingston, it was almost obscene. But it wasn’t hard to understand the loyalty of the men and women who worked for Coke. If they wanted the gravy train to continue, they needed to keep their king happy and safe. Anyone who went against the party line was a threat to their way of life.

The more time Gramps spent in this mansion, the more he wanted to leave. Jamaica was a beautiful country, but like nearly every place on earth, it harbored evil. Most of the locals were generous, hardworking, and truly good, but unfortunately all it took was a few bad eggs to contaminate those around them. Maybe Lloyd would’ve been a good man if he hadn’t gotten sucked in by Coke. But all the maybes in the world wouldn’t change things now. The best thing Gramps could do was get Cassidy and Mario away from this place, take out Coke, and pray light overcame all the dark in this mansion. He didn’t think it would be that easy, but once he was out, it was up to those who were left to do the right thing.



Gramps heard Cassidy before he saw her. The doors in the hallway were all shut, but he could hear her speaking as he approached what he believed was the schoolroom. Knowing Coke and others were watching, he reached for the knob and did what was expected of him—walked into the room as if he didn't care that Cassidy might be in the middle of a lesson.

Six heads turned to stare at him as he entered. Five boys were sitting at desks, and Cassidy was standing at a chalkboard.

“School's done for the day,” he announced.

The boys whooped for joy and immediately jumped up from their desks. Without a second glance at their teacher, they ran past Gramps and out into the hall.

“No, wait!” Cassidy called, but the boys ignored her.

She sighed and frowned at Gramps. “I wasn't done with today's lesson,” she scolded.

He walked up to her, ever aware of the cameras, and put his hand on her nape, pulling her into his body until they were plastered together from hips to chest. He lowered his voice and said, “I'm sorry, but things are happening fast, and I told Coke I'd like to spend the day with you. He had no problem with that.”

Cassidy opened her mouth to respond, but before she could, the remaining boy stalked up to them. He kicked Gramps in the leg, hard. “Let go of her!” he growled.

Looking down at the boy, Gramps couldn't help but grin. He would've known this was Cassidy's son even if he wasn't the only Hispanic boy in the class. He had Cassidy's beautiful hazel eyes and facial features. His olive skin glowed with the kind of good health only a kid could have. He was skinny, probably too skinny for a kid his age. He was scowling up at Gramps, but the fear in his face was easy to see. He was brave, sticking up for his mom even if he was afraid of the consequences.

He wasn't supposed to give a shit about children, but Gramps still couldn't let Mario believe he was going to hurt

his mother. Letting go of Cassidy, he crouched so he could look Mario in the eyes. He also kept his voice low so it wouldn't be heard on the cameras. "I would no sooner hurt your mom than put a loaded gun to my own head and pull the trigger."

It was a bit harsh, but he needed to get through to the boy, and he figured being overly blunt would accomplish that more quickly than if he was gentle.

"You grabbed her," Mario accused.

"I did, but I didn't hurt her," Gramps told him.

Cassidy knelt down next to him and put her arm around her son, whispering, "He's my friend, Mario. I trust him."

Mario's eyes nearly bugged out of his head at her words. "You do?"

Cassidy nodded. "Yes. And you can too. I swear it."

Gramps wasn't sure of the undercurrents flowing between mother and son, but it was obvious that Cassidy's saying she trusted him meant far more than the simple words might suggest.

"Okay," Mario said reluctantly, after a long pause.

It was clear to Gramps that he was going to have to prove himself to the young man, and he had no problem with that. What he'd seen and heard made him vow yet again to do whatever it took to get him and his mother to safety.

"What are you doing here?" Cassidy asked.

They were still crouching on the floor, but Gramps didn't stand. He wanted Mario to hear the conversation.

"I've been given the green light to spend the day with you, without Lloyd following our every move," Gramps told her.

It was almost comical how both Mario's and Cassidy's eyes widened in the same way.

"You have?" she asked.

“Yeah. I thought maybe you could give me a tour of the place . . . a very thorough tour, if you know what I mean. Then we can play things by ear after that.” Gramps wanted to take Cassidy off the mansion’s grounds, which meant leaving Mario behind. That didn’t sit well with him, but it was important she met the rest of Silverstone and truly understood that they were here to help.

“Oh, yeah . . . sounds good,” Cassidy said uncertainly. She stood, but before Gramps followed her lead, he turned to Mario.

“I’m going to want to touch your mom quite a bit today. I might hold her hand or put my arm around her shoulders. There’s a good possibility that I’m going to kiss her too. But at no time will I force her to do anything she doesn’t want to do. I’m going to ask you to trust me, even when I haven’t proven that you can . . . yet. There are things happening that you won’t understand, and your mom will explain everything to you when it’s safe to do so. Will you trust me with your mother’s well-being?”

Gramps knew he was pushing hard, but he had little choice. He couldn’t spend the day fighting Mario while pretending to move his physical relationship forward with his mother. Coke, and everyone else, had to believe Cassidy had fallen under his spell and was sleeping in his bed tonight.

The intelligence was easy to see in Mario’s eyes. He didn’t trust him, but he trusted his mother. He looked from Gramps up to Cassidy, then back to him. “I know I’m just a kid, but if you do anything to hurt her, I’ll make you regret it.”

It was a bluff, since there was no way the kid could ever really hurt him, but Gramps nodded solemnly all the same. “I understand. And, Mario?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re a good man for looking after your mom.” Gramps wasn’t simply trying to butter him up. He could tell that the boy was doing all he could in a situation that was out of his control, all to try to help his mother.

“It’s not enough,” Mario whispered. For a second, Gramps thought he was going to cry, but Mario blinked back his tears and straightened his spine. “Just know I’ll be watching you guys, and if I think you’re hurting her at all, I’m gonna say somethin’.”

“Sounds like a deal,” Gramps said, then stood. He reached for Cassidy’s hand. “Ready?”

She had her lips pressed together tightly, as if trying to suppress an intense emotion. But she nodded and took hold of his hand. Mario grabbed her other hand, and the three of them walked out of the schoolroom together.

## Chapter Four

“So this gate’s always locked?” Leo asked as he nonchalantly leaned against the outer wall that surrounded the back property of Michael Coke’s mansion.

“Yes. They all are,” Cassidy told him.

Then he surprised her by reaching out and grabbing her hand and pulling her toward him. She lost her balance and fell against his chest, letting out a small *oof* as she bounced off his chest.

“Easy,” Leo said, holding her hips against his own. To anyone watching, his move probably looked a bit aggressive. While he was holding her firmly, he wasn’t hurting her.

He’d done this kind of thing several times over the last two hours. Hauled her into his space as if he had every right. Cassidy didn’t complain. She knew what he was doing, making it very clear to anyone watching that he was in control. And she made sure not to protest in any way, shape, or form. If Michael wanted her to make his guest happy, she would do so.

Although she had to admit, it wasn’t a hardship. She liked Leo’s hands on her. She liked how he made her feel . . . safe and protected. She hadn’t felt that way in a very, very long time.

Mario wasn’t happy about Leo touching her so much, but he was also smart enough to keep his complaints to himself. When she’d told Mario she trusted Gramps . . . he knew it was a huge deal. They’d had a long conversation about a year and a half ago in which they’d agreed they couldn’t trust *anyone* in this house. No one.

But if they ever found someone they *could* trust, Cassidy would ask him, or her, to help them escape.

She wasn’t sure Mario had remembered the conversation until earlier, when she’d told him she trusted Leo. She wanted to sit down and tell her son everything Leo had told her, that he was working undercover, but she also didn’t want to do

anything that might put Leo in danger. If someone suspected everything wasn't as it seemed, they might interrogate Mario. If the boy didn't know anything, he couldn't spill any secrets.

As soon as they were safe, though, she'd tell him everything. Mario deserved that. He was living in the same hell she was. Suffering just the same as she was. Probably more.

"Mario, I want you to go over there, pick up that stick, and start playing with it," Leo said in a soft but firm tone.

"Play with it how?" Mario asked.

Cassidy winced. She hated that her kid didn't even know how to play like other kids his age.

"Bang it against stuff. See if you can break it by hitting it against a tree. Draw circles in the dirt. See if you can touch the top of the wall with it if you jump," Leo suggested.

"You want me to be a decoy while you guys talk, don't you?" Mario asked.

"Knew you were smart. Yes, that's what I want," Leo said.

Mario and Leo stared at each other for a long moment before her son finally nodded and went to pick up the good-sized stick.

Leo turned her so she could still see Mario, but he didn't shift her away from him in the process. They were still plastered together, and Cassidy couldn't remember when she'd liked something more. "Talk to me about the security out here," Leo said to her quietly.

His words brought home the fact that this wasn't a date. They weren't enjoying a day out watching her son play. Leo was undercover in a drug dealer's home, and one wrong move could get all of them killed.

"As far as I know, Lloyd's people patrol the grounds twenty-four hours a day. Once I came out here around three in the morning, because I wanted to see if I might be able to sneak out, and was stopped by one of the guards. He wanted to know what I was doing. I claimed I simply couldn't sleep and

wanted some fresh air. I don't know if he bought it or not, but I found out what I needed to know . . . that I wasn't going to be able to sneak out in the middle of the night."

"What kind of weapons do they carry?"

"I don't know what kind of guns they are, but everyone has a rifle. And they've got knives strapped to their legs. I even saw a pistol in a holster on Martin's hip once."

"Do the employees in the house do drugs?" Leo asked.

"I'm not sure. I haven't seen anyone actually shooting up or snorting cocaine, but that doesn't mean they don't do it. I do my best to stay away from everyone as much as possible. Every now and then, Michael parades me in front of guests, like he did last night with you, but every other time I've been allowed to go back to my room. I'm followed like I'm a thief, and if I step out of line even a little bit, I'm reprimanded, and they threaten to take Mario away from me. I . . . I told the FBI all of this in the letters I wrote. Didn't you read them?"

"I did," Leo said. "But I wasn't sure if anything had changed since you wrote the letters. And I have to say . . . I'm kinda pissed at you about those."

"About what? The letters?" Cassidy asked.

"Yeah. It was dangerous as fuck to write that shit down. What if someone had found one? Intercepted you when you went to mail it? These aren't men to fuck with, Cass. Believe me when I say they have no problem killing you or Mario. They won't hesitate. As long as you're useful to them, they'll keep you around, but the second they find out you're narcing on them, you're as good as dead."

Cassidy stiffened in his hold. "What was I supposed to do? I know better than you what everyone around here is capable of."

"No, you don't," he said, his tone hard and steely.

"Yes, I do," she insisted. "I'm the one living it. I'm the one who sees what Coke *really* is. He stole *my* passport. He's keeping *me* hostage. He shot one of the guards right in front of me! What do *you* know about that kind of evil?"

Leo brought one hand up, grabbing hold of her chin to lift it so she had no choice but to look him in the eyes. His hold was firm but not painful. “I know too much about evil, Cass . . . but you’re right. You know a lot more about this particular evil than I do because you’ve lived with it for years. I just hate the risk you took, even though I know it brought me to you.”

Cassidy shivered at the helplessness and anger she saw in Leo’s eyes. It struck her then that she had no idea what he did for a living. She knew he’d gotten out of the Army—that was one of the last things her parents had heard and passed on to her. She hadn’t even questioned what he was doing in Jamaica and how he was going to rescue her. She’d been too relieved to see him, to know that her letters to the FBI had reached someone who was willing to help.

“I’m sorry too,” she whispered. “I didn’t mean to be a bitch.”

“Fuck,” Leo breathed and closed his eyes. He didn’t take his hand from her chin, and Cassidy waited for him to look at her once more. He opened his eyes and said, “You weren’t being a bitch. I was out of line.”

“I was desperate,” Cassidy said softly. “I knew writing everything down was dangerous, but I’m not an idiot. I know my time as a teacher is coming to an end. It’s obvious, since Michael hasn’t brought any additional children into the house. I’m only allowed to teach them in the mornings, then one of the security guys comes and takes them away. I know they’re being groomed to work for Michael’s organization. It was one of the main reasons I reached out. To try to save Mario.”

“Sending those letters was brave as fuck, despite the risk. I know you did what you had to do.”

“Watch this!” Mario shouted from nearby.

Cassidy turned her head after Leo let go of her and watched as her son jumped as high as he could and knocked his stick against a branch high above his head. “Good job, Mario!” she told him.

“Look at me, Cassidy,” Leo ordered.



As if drawn by a magnet, Cassidy turned to meet Leo's gaze.

"We have a lot to talk about, but now's not the time. You *can* trust me, just as you told Mario. My team and I will get you both out of here, no matter how many guards there are or how many weapons they have."

"How?" she whispered.

Instead of answering, Leo shifted a hand beneath her shirt so his warm palm rested on the bare skin of her lower back. He dropped his head and kissed her at the same time, making Cassidy moan low in her throat.

Leo Zanardi was her weakness, and it was as if he knew it, taking advantage of their electric chemistry to avoid answering her questions.

"I see you're still getting along just fine," Lloyd said.

Cassidy tensed, but Leo didn't let go of her. He merely lifted his head and glared at the man who'd dared to interrupt them—again.

As if he knew how pissed Leo was, Lloyd held up his hands. "I was sent by the boss. He's got an errand for Mario here."

Cassidy opened her mouth to protest, but Leo spoke over her. "Sounds good. I was going to take Cassidy for a romantic dinner in Kingston anyway."

She looked up at Leo in surprise, then to her son. Mario's shoulders were hunched, as if that could protect him from whatever job he would be sent on. He looked at her with despair. He knew she couldn't help him, that he'd have to do whatever was ordered of him.

Cassidy wanted to grab him, hold him close, and tell Lloyd that he wasn't going to put a hand on her son, but they both knew she was as helpless as Mario.

"Tell Coke I expect to see Mario later tonight when we get back," Leo told Lloyd with a glare. "The way to a woman's heart is through her flesh and blood. Understand?"

Cassidy held her breath. Leo sounded so different when he was dealing with Lloyd. Harder. Unyielding. Scary.

“Of course. If the brat doesn’t like you, neither will the mom. You like G, right, Mario?” Lloyd asked the boy, reaching out and whacking the kid in the shoulder with his fist.

Mario stumbled sideways and dropped his eyes. “Yeah, whatever.”

Cassidy wanted to talk to him before he left, but Lloyd stepped behind Mario and put his hand on his shoulder. “Have fun while you’re enjoying our beautiful city. But be careful, it’s dangerous out there,” he said in a tone that sounded more like a threat than a friendly warning. Then he pushed Mario toward the house without looking back at Cassidy and Leo.

She whimpered, not realizing she’d made a sound until Leo stepped behind her and put his chin on her shoulder, wrapping an arm around her, plastering her back to his chest. “They aren’t going to hurt him,” Leo soothed. “I made my point loud and clear. They’ll bring him to you tonight, if only to make sure I’m kept happy. They can’t afford to piss me off,” he reassured her.

“Why? What do they want from you?” Cassidy asked, not taking her eyes from the spot she’d last seen her son.

“Not here,” Leo said. “I’ve been given permission to take you off the grounds for the rest of the day, and that’s what I’m going to do.”

“I’m not hungry,” she told him, knowing if she tried to eat anything, she’d probably throw it up because she was too worried about Mario.

“We aren’t going to eat,” Leo told her. “Come on.” He put a hand on her nape and pushed her to walk in front of him, kind of like Lloyd had done with Mario.

Cassidy realized that she really didn’t know Leo. Didn’t know *this* Leo, the guy who’d shown up to do some sort of deal with Michael Coke, notorious drug dealer. He said he had a team, but she hadn’t seen anyone. For all she knew, he was

as bad as Michael, and if she went with him, she'd be put in a worse situation than she was now.

Just as she made the decision to struggle, to pull herself out of his grasp, he leaned down, and his warm breath fanned her ear as he said, "It's for show, Cass. Everyone expects me to treat you like shit, but I'm not going to hurt you, no way in hell." His thumb caressed the side of her neck, hidden under the unruly brown hair cascading over her shoulders.

So she pressed her lips together and gave him a tiny nod. She let him propel her through the house. They passed several members of the security force, who merely smirked. No one tried to stop them. No one verbalized threats against her or Mario if she didn't return. She'd been allowed to leave on her own in the past—that was how she was able to mail the letters she'd smuggled out to the FBI—but it had also been made very clear that if she didn't return, Mario would pay the price. They'd found her weakness and used it against her every chance they could.

It was confusing how everyone seemed to defer to Leo, but she supposed if they all thought he was some drug lord, and someone who their boss wanted to make a deal with, it made sense.

The second they walked outside the gates of the estate, it seemed as if the air was cleaner somehow. Cassidy felt as if she could breathe easier. Leo kept his hand on her nape as they walked down the street away from her prison.

"Don't look back," Leo said, as if he could read her mind.

She wanted to. Wanted to see if anyone was following them. Wanted to see if she could catch another glimpse of Mario. But she knew she couldn't. Lloyd might've said he was needed for an errand, but as long as she was outside the gates, he would be inside them. That's just how things were. That was her terrible reality.

They headed for a nondescript black sedan. He held open the door for her and, after she'd sat, jogged around the front to get into the driver's seat. He pulled away from the curb as if he didn't have a care in the world.

“Are they following us?” she whispered. It was crazy to still be talking so quietly, but she’d gotten used to doing so, knowing there were cameras everywhere in Michael’s house.

“Of course,” Leo said carelessly.

“Oh . . . so you *want* them to follow us?” she said.

“Nope. But I’ll lose ’em. Have patience.”

His words made her scrunch up her nose. “Patience? Leo, I’ve been biding my time for the last four years. Trying to figure out the best time and place to make my escape. I’m all out of patience.”

To her surprise, Leo turned to her and smiled. It changed the whole countenance of his face. Suddenly he was no longer the scary G who had come to meet with Michael—he was the boy she remembered from high school. The guy who loved playing tricks on people. He had wrinkles next to his eyes that he hadn’t had before, and his dark beard made her wonder how it might feel against her skin.

Leo had aged extremely well . . . and it made her uncomfortable. She’d never been the kind of woman who was overly concerned about her looks or weight, but seeing Leo lower his guard a fraction made her realize that wherever he lived, women probably threw themselves at him. He was muscular and good looking, and who could resist that twinkle in his eye when he was feeling mischievous?

“What’re you thinking?” he asked.

“Are you married? Have a girlfriend?” she blurted.

Leo frowned. “Why?”

“Does she know what you’re doing? That you’re kissing me and pretending to be into me? That’s not right, Leo. I mean, I appreciate you helping me more than I can say, and I’ll forever be in your debt, but I don’t like the thought of you touching me behind someone’s back.”

“Then don’t think about it,” Leo said easily.

Just when she was about to lose her mind, Leo reached over and put his hand on her thigh. “Before you unleash that

Latin temper I know you have, there isn't anyone in my life," he said. "I'm single. Have been for years. I've never found anyone who can put up with me long term."

Cassidy couldn't help but gawk at that. "Seriously?"

"Yup. I'm moody. Grumpy. I can't ever remember birthdays or anniversaries . . . the important dates that women think I should. I've been called self-centered and selfish more than once, and they aren't wrong. I like what I like and don't suffer fools easily. But I'll tell you this, Cass: I've never—and I mean *never*—cheated on a woman I'm seeing. If I'm dating someone, I'm with her one hundred percent. I wouldn't touch you like I have, or kiss you, if I wasn't single."

Feeling relieved, Cassidy nodded. "I don't remember you as being selfish," she told him. "I remember at your graduation, you bought flowers for both the valedictorian and salutatorian."

He shrugged. "I was proud of them. They worked hard, a lot harder than I did, and deserved to beat me out for those honors."

Cassidy recalled that he'd been third in his high school class. She added *smart* to the list of things about him that impressed her.

"I remember *you* having a hell of a temper. You never hesitated to stand up to bullies. Remember that time you chewed out the quarterback for making a joke about one of the girls in the band?"

"Yeah, he was an asshole," Cassidy said. "Making fun of her for being overweight was a dick move, and I didn't want him to get away with it."

"So . . .," Leo began when she didn't continue. "Your ex? What happened there?"

Cassidy sighed. Leo was driving through the Kingston traffic confidently, as if he drove on the opposite side of the road all the time. He wove in and out of the lanes between cars with only inches to spare. She decided that her nerves were better off if she didn't watch where he was going. She turned

her attention to Leo. “Alfred was older than me, and he loved to get on me about my temper. Said it wasn’t becoming. He said it embarrassed him. And I didn’t want to do that. So I reined it in. When I saw something that disturbed me, I did my best to ignore it.

“I’m ashamed of that, because there were many times I should’ve stepped up and intervened when I saw someone being publicly shamed. People making comments about overweight people using the electric carts at the store, laughing when someone short couldn’t reach something on a shelf. Making derogatory comments about gay and lesbian couples holding hands. Things like that. I guess I just buried it. And by the time I realized that suppressing those feelings had changed me into a person I didn’t really like, it was too late. Alfred had me under his thumb. Then I had Mario, and I concentrated on being the best mother I could be, and blocked out everything and everyone else.

“He’d tell anyone who would listen how he wasn’t racist. How he employed several undocumented men. He bragged that they worked twice as hard as his other employees. He even used *me* as an example of how ‘color blind’ he was. After all, he’d married a Hispanic chick, so that had to mean he was a paragon of virtue, right?” Cassidy rolled her eyes. “The truth of the matter was that he hated my heritage. Didn’t want anything to do with my family’s traditions and refused to let Mario participate in anything ‘ethnic’ that my family might want to do with him. And he treated those undocumented employees like shit. He threatened to turn them in to the authorities if they didn’t work harder, faster, or longer hours than everyone else. And he paid them way less too. I’m ashamed I stayed with him as long as I did.”

Cassidy’s eyes filled with tears as she thought back to the life she used to lead in El Paso. “I hid most of what was going on from my parents. Put up with his shit because it was what was expected of me. But when he turned on Mario, I was done.”

“What’d he do?” Leo asked.

Cassidy took comfort in the anger she heard in his voice. It was obvious it wasn't directed at her. "Alfred had enrolled Mario in a flag football league for little kids. He was only four, and he hated it. I promised I'd buy him a doll if he at least tried. I didn't tell Alfred about it, but he saw Mario playing with the Barbie one afternoon when he came home early from work and told his son that he was an embarrassment. That playing with dolls was for girls. He yelled at Mario for twenty minutes straight, telling him he needed to man up and quit being such a sissy. That was it for me. I could take him emotionally abusing me, but not Mario.

"I went the next day and filed for divorce. I lived with my folks for a while, but I could tell they were disappointed my marriage had ended. I also hated running into acquaintances around town who looked at me with such disdain. My so-called friends sided with Alfred. So I left El Paso. I wanted to start over. But I'm obviously an idiot, because look at me now."

"You're not an idiot," Leo said. "I'm proud of you."

Cassidy scoffed. "*Proud* of me? Leo, I stayed with a man who abused me—and my son as well. Which not only makes me an idiot—it makes me a horrible mother."

"Wrong. You were doing the best you could in a shitty circumstance. It's not a crime to do what you can to make your marriage work. Alfred was the idiot in that situation. One, for being small minded and bigoted, and two, for not seeing the amazing woman he had at his side. If you were mine, I'd bend over backward to make sure you were not only happy, but thriving. I'd honor your heritage, *our* heritage, and do whatever it took to make sure Mario felt safe to be exactly who he is."

Cassidy bit her lip, then blurted, "I think he's gay."

"Mario?"

She nodded.

"So?" Leo asked. "You ashamed of that?"

“No!” Cassidy declared loudly. “But I also didn’t want that for him.”

“You’re going to have to explain that better,” Leo said after a long silence.

Cassidy couldn’t deny that hearing how irritated Leo sounded was actually a relief. He was offended on *Mario*’s behalf. She fell a little bit in love with him at that moment. It had been a long time since someone had championed her son, and it felt really good.

“I don’t *know* that he’s gay,” she said. “He’s only eleven. He hasn’t shown any interest in girls *or* boys yet, but it’s not hard to guess. He liked to play with my makeup when we lived in Texas. He’s drawn to sparkly and flashy things. Doesn’t care in the least about sports or trucks, or anything little boys are supposed to find fun. He hates being dirty, and bubble baths are one of his favorite things. When the Summer Olympics were on last time, I had a hard time prying him away from the gymnastics events. He loves dancing more than anything in the world. I wish I could get him into a program—he’d be in his element.”

“And you don’t want that for him?” Leo prompted.

“Not for the reasons you might think,” Cassidy admitted. “I don’t care who he loves. I don’t care if he’s gay, bisexual, in a polyamorous relationship, if he’s asexual, or if he wants to live on a commune in a nudist colony. I just hate that his life is going to be more difficult because of his sexual orientation.”

The harsh look on Leo’s face relaxed a bit.

Cassidy went on. “I love Mario. He’s literally the best thing I’ve ever done. But after such a hard start to his life, I want nothing but good things for him. And being gay is hard. Not as difficult as it used to be, but it’s not a walk in the park either. I love him regardless, though, and I want him to be happy.”

“I think with a mother like you in his corner, who supports him no matter who he chooses to be with, he’s gonna flourish.”



Cassidy swallowed hard. “You don’t . . . think less of him?”

“Because he might be gay? Fuck no,” Leo assured her. “I admit that twenty years ago, I wasn’t as open minded as I am now. But I’ve seen a lot of bad shit in my lifetime. And someone loving a person of the same gender isn’t something I even think about anymore. What do I care? It doesn’t affect me, and as far as I’m concerned, more love in this world is never a bad thing. What I *do* care about is people who beat up on their spouse, no matter what their gender. About someone imprisoning others just because he can. Selling women and children for sex. Killing people for the fun of it. There are so many more things to worry about in today’s society than what others do in their bedroom. If Mario wants to dance, or flip himself around in a gymnastics gym, good for him.”

Cassidy closed her eyes, but the tears escaped anyway. She’d had a conversation like this with Alfred right before she’d left him, and her ex had been appalled and adamant that no child of his was ever going to be a homosexual. Leo, after a single day, accepted Mario exactly how he was, and he didn’t even really *know* him.

She felt his fingers on her cheek, gently brushing away her tears. She opened her eyes to see his brow furrowed and a look of such worry on his face, it almost made her smile. Almost.

“Thank you. I needed to hear all that.”

“Good. You ready to meet my team?”

Cassidy looked in front of her in surprise. She didn’t recognize where they were, but that wasn’t very surprising, as she didn’t know Kingston well since she wasn’t allowed out and about too much. She turned to look behind her, but all she saw were other cars on the road. She wouldn’t know if one of them held members of Michael’s security force. “Is it safe?”

“Yes. I lost our tail a while back.”

“Seriously? I thought men weren’t good at multitasking,” she said.

Leo chuckled. "I'm not saying I can read a book and watch TV at the same time, but evading bad guys while chatting with my girl? Piece of cake."

He pulled the sedan into an alley behind a run-down and, frankly, pretty scary-looking motel. Pulling the keys from the ignition, he turned to her. "My team isn't staying here, but it's a good place to meet. Coke would never expect us to be at a place like this, and it's far enough from his territory that it shouldn't get back to him. You're going to have to climb out this side."

Looking to her right, Cassidy snorted. Leo had parked against a concrete wall at the edge of the alley. *Right* next to the wall. She wouldn't have been able to open the car door if she'd wanted to. But all the other cars in the alley were parked the same way. They blended in perfectly with their surroundings. After Leo stepped out of the vehicle, Cassidy awkwardly scooted over the center console. Within seconds, she was standing next to Leo, and he had her hand in his, and they were walking toward a door.

It opened as they approached, and Cassidy looked up in surprise.

A man with dirty-blond hair and the most amazing blue eyes stood in front of them, holding the door open.

"Thanks, Eagle," Leo said.

"Of course," Eagle responded.

Then Leo turned and said, "Thanks for the assist."

Startled, Cassidy looked over her shoulder and saw another man had come up behind them. He was only a few inches taller than her five-nine and had short black hair.

"Anytime, Gramps. Although you didn't need much help from me. It was kind of fun to get between you and your tail and drive really slow. The asshole seemed pretty frustrated with my touristy driving."

All three men chuckled as Leo guided Cassidy into the building. They walked down a hall and entered a room on their

right. She wrinkled her nose as soon as they stepped inside. There was a funk in the air that Cassidy couldn't identify.

“Cassidy, I'd like you to meet two of my three teammates. This is Bull, so named because he always hits his target. And this is Eagle.”

“It's nice to meet you,” Cassidy said politely. She wasn't sure what to think of the other men. They were both tall and muscular and looked as if they could more than take care of themselves in any situation they were put into. But it wasn't as if they could fight all of Michael's security forces. Three against the dozens of people who worked inside the mansion wasn't exactly even odds.

“She's skeptical,” Bull said with a grin.

“Hilarious,” Eagle agreed. Even Leo seemed to be laughing at her.

Cassidy stiffened. She didn't like being the butt of the joke, especially when she had no idea what was so funny.

“We aren't laughing at you,” Leo told her, pulling her over to a table. A towel had been draped over one of the chairs, and he gestured for her to sit. “I'll explain everything, and you'll understand how the four of us can—and will—break you out of here.”

Cassidy sat gingerly on the edge of the chair. She'd gotten comfortable with Leo, but then again, she knew him. Well, knew the man he used to be. She didn't know Bull and Eagle. “Wait, you said four, but there's only three of you here.”

“Smoke's watching Coke's house,” Eagle said. “He'll report back to us anything we need to know. We're safe.”

And just like that, Cassidy felt herself relaxing somewhat. Leo's friends had weird names, but it was obvious they were all there to help her, and it hit home how much she owed them.

Bull and Eagle leaned against the walls nearby, and Leo pulled up a chair near her. For the next thirty minutes, he explained what he'd been doing in the five years since he'd gotten out of the Army. He told her about Silverstone and his

friends, and what they did, and he talked about Silverstone Towing back in Indianapolis.

By the time he stopped speaking, her head was spinning. It was shocking enough to learn Leo had been in Special Forces, let alone what he'd been doing since. Though she had to admit . . . she was extremely relieved as well. "I know you said you'd read the letters I sent to the FBI, but for some reason . . . I still kind of thought you'd accidentally run into me," she admitted sheepishly.

Leo smiled and shook his head. "No. We've been researching Michael Coke and his organization for quite a while now. We know what he's capable of. We're working with the FBI and Homeland Security, and even the DEA."

"So you're really going to kill Michael?" Cassidy asked.

"If possible, yes."

"How?"

"That's not your concern," Bull said, pushing off the wall and crouching near her chair.

Cassidy appreciated that he was getting down to her level since she was sitting. She'd learned to hate how everyone talked down to her, literally and figuratively. Standing over her and telling her how things were going to be.

"I want to help," she protested. "When I first got the job, I thought Michael was really nice. But I quickly realized that he hides his evil side very well. He was the one who ordered Lloyd to take our passports, the one who decided Mario and I weren't allowed outside the walls of the mansion at the same time."

Bull nodded. "I'm sure he's behind everything you and Mario have suffered through, but we're going to end it. Soon."

"Does it bother you?" Eagle asked.

Cassidy turned her head to look at the other man. "Does what bother me?"

"The fact that Gramps is gonna kill Coke?"

Cassidy turned back to Leo. “I can’t believe *Gramps* is your nickname.”

Leo grinned.

“That’s just wrong. Seriously,” she complained.

“He’s the oldest,” Bull said from his spot next to her.

“So? Look at him. Does he look like a grandpa to you?”

No one answered her question, and all three had silly little smirks on their faces. Cassidy rolled her eyes. “Well, you will never hear that name cross my lips when I’m talking about or to you. No way in hell.”

“Skylar, Taylor, and Molly call him that. Is it gonna bother you?” Eagle asked.

“Who are they?”

“Their wives,” Leo answered.

Cassidy’s eyes widened. “You guys are all married?”

“Yup. Eagle has a little boy, and Smoke’s wife is expecting,” Leo informed her.

“Wow. I mean, that’s great. I just didn’t expect it, that’s all. You guys are all so . . .” Her voice trailed off. She didn’t know how to describe the badass men standing around her. At least not in a way that wouldn’t offend them.

But Bull merely chuckled. “Believe me, we were all just as surprised as you when we realized that we loved them more than life itself.”

Eagle nodded from his spot against the wall. She was oddly pleased to learn these strangers seemed to be so in love with their wives. Alfred had never said anything complimentary about her to others, at least not that she knew of. Then she remembered what they were discussing. She looked at Leo. “I will *not* call you Gramps. You’ll always be Leo to me. I don’t care what other people call you. Because believe me, even with you rocking that gray-in-your-beard thing, the last thing I think when I look at you is *grandfather*.”

It seemed as if Leo wanted to say something, but Eagle spoke before he could. “Right, so . . . we’ve got your back, and Gramps’s. He’s got a tracker in his watch. We know where he is at all times and can hear every word he says. He’s been recording his conversations with Coke as well. We’ve got a plan, but executing it depends on Coke himself. Gramps is gonna make his move as soon as he can, but we need you to be ready and on your toes. Can you do that?”

“Yes,” Cassidy said without hesitation.

“You probably won’t be able to bring anything with you when you leave,” Bull warned.

Cassidy shrugged. “I don’t want anything. And Mario and I have already discussed that exact thing. I knew if we had to make a break for it in the middle of the night or something, we wouldn’t be able to carry anything. Are you going to be able to find our passports?”

In response, Leo got up and walked over to a bag sitting on the floor nearby. He rummaged in it for a while, then came back. He put two objects on the table in front of her. “No need to find the passports that Coke confiscated. They’d be expired anyway.”

Cassidy could only stare at the two dark-blue US passports on the table. It surprised her how emotional she became at seeing them. They were her ticket out of Jamaica. Without them, she’d felt adrift, knowing that it would be almost impossible to leave. She reached out and lifted the cover of the passport on top, and saw Mario’s face looking back at her. Somehow they’d gotten a picture of her son—a relatively recent one, at that. “How?” she asked, looking up at Leo.

“We told you that we’ve been working with the FBI. They had one of their connections here take his picture with a zoom lens when he was out working for Coke.”

“Lloyd said that Mario and I were on a no-fly list.”

Eagle snorted. “He’s a fucking liar.”

Relief almost overwhelmed Cassidy. For so long, she'd felt as if she would never get off the island, but a sliver of hope bloomed inside her now. She swallowed around the huge lump in her throat. "This is really happening," she said softly.

"It is," Leo agreed.

Everything was moving extremely fast, but as far as she was concerned, it couldn't happen fast enough. "Thank you," she told Leo. Then she looked at Eagle and Bull. "Thank you. So much."

"Don't thank us until we're on that plane on our way out of here," Bull said dryly. He stood up, nodding at her as he did.

"We have some time to kill," Leo said, drawing her attention back to him. "We need to be gone long enough for Coke to think you and I are getting it on."

Cassidy blushed, but nodded. She wasn't an idiot. With the way Leo had been touching her and making sure Lloyd and everyone else saw, she wasn't surprised that's what everyone assumed.

"You play gin rummy?" Bull asked.

"It's been a while, but yes," Cassidy told him.

"Good. Maybe I can finally beat someone," Bull joked. "My wife is a gin rummy master, and she never lets me win."

Everyone laughed, and Cassidy leaned back in the chair. She watched as the three men got settled around the table. They joked with each other, and she could see how close they were. She could almost forget where she was, forget about the situation she'd gotten herself and her son into. Almost.

# Chapter Five

Gramps led Cassidy back toward the huge mansion. He hated to do it. He wanted to stash her in the plane and sneak in and snatch Mario, but he knew that would be suicide. Cassidy was his ticket into the mansion, and she'd never agree to hide out while her son was still in danger.

The longer he was around her, the more Gramps respected and admired Cassidy. Yes, she'd made some bad decisions in her life, like everyone. But she was doing everything in her power to fix those mistakes, and to make sure her son didn't pay for them any longer.

He felt bad for berating her earlier about writing the letters to the FBI. It had been a huge risk, but like she'd said, she'd been desperate, and ultimately those letters had led him to her.

Smoke had reported that Mario hadn't left the mansion all afternoon, which was a relief. Gramps was well aware that didn't mean the boy hadn't been tormented, but at least he wasn't wandering around Kingston.

The second they got close to the front doors of the mansion, they opened. Lloyd and Martin were standing there, smirking.

"Have a good afternoon?" Lloyd sneered.

Gramps wanted to punch him, but he had a role to play. He threw his arm around Cassidy's shoulders and pulled her against him. One of her hands landed on his stomach, and the other gripped his shirt at the back. "Oh yeah. Didn't we, sweetcakes?"

"Uh . . . yes," Cassidy responded a little uncertainly.

He hated that he had to embarrass her but knew it would throw off Lloyd. "Sorry we're a little later than I expected," Gramps said. "You know how it is . . . we lost track of time."

"Interesting," Martin said, lust easy to see in his eyes.



Gramps ignored him, doing his best to act as if he didn't care what Martin thought. "If you don't mind, I think we'll head upstairs," Gramps said.

"Michael would like to see you," Lloyd informed him.

Inside, Gramps smiled. He bet the drug kingpin was getting antsy to talk business. He brought his hand up and mentally apologized to Cassidy as he palmed one of her tits. "I think he'll understand why I need to postpone our talks until tomorrow. Probably after lunch," he said suggestively.

Cassidy hadn't pulled away from him, but she stiffened. Without asking permission, he strode into the house and headed for the stairs toward Cassidy's room. He didn't look back, but was ready for either one of the men to say or do something to try to stop him.

They didn't.

Gramps walked Cassidy up the stairs and down a few hallways to her room. When they arrived, he squeezed her shoulders. "Sorry," he whispered in a tone so low he wasn't sure she heard him.

But when she tightened her arm around his waist, he knew she had.

He held open the door for her and closed it as soon as they stepped inside her room. There was a radio on, with music playing.

"Mama!" Mario exclaimed as he ran toward her.

Cassidy opened her arms and embraced her son. It was as if they'd been separated from each other for days rather than hours. But Gramps had a feeling every reunion was emotional because of the uncertainty they lived in on a regular basis.

"Are you okay?" Cassidy asked.

"Yeah."

"What did you do today?" she asked.

Mario shrugged, but refused to meet his mom's gaze. "Nothing much."

Cassidy wouldn't let him get away with that. "Talk to me, son."

Mario sighed. "Martin was in charge of teaching us how to fight today."

Cassidy inhaled sharply. "Fight?" She put her finger under his chin and lifted his head so he had no choice but to look at her. "Oh, honey," she said sadly.

Gramps stiffened. He hadn't moved from his place by the door, but he could clearly see the boy had a black eye and several bruises on his face.

"I'm so sorry," Cassidy said.

Mario shrugged. "I suck at it."

"*Good*," Cassidy said heatedly.

"It's *not* good, Mama," Mario told her.

Gramps couldn't stay silent any longer. He walked over to where Cassidy was standing with Mario, and he got down on his haunches in front of the boy. "When I was in middle school, I got beat up almost every day," he said.

Mario's eyes widened, and Gramps could see him looking at the muscles bulging in his T-shirt. "You did?"

"Yeah. I didn't start really growing until high school. Anyway, there was this older kid who lived in my neighborhood and rode the bus with me. He liked to call me names, and tell me to go back to where I came from. He didn't like that I was Hispanic and, because he was bigger than me, decided I was a good target to pick on."

"What did you do?" Mario asked.

"I got beat up every day—that's what I did," Gramps told him. "I didn't want to fight. I didn't understand why the kid didn't like me. He didn't even *know* me. And I didn't understand why he didn't like my Mexican heritage. One of his best friends was Mexican. It made no sense to me. It took me a while to understand that sometimes people are just assholes."

“Language,” Cassidy chided.

Gramps glanced over at her and nodded. He was sure Mario had heard worse, but he would respect Cassidy’s wishes when it came to swearing around her son.

“Did you beat him up when you got bigger?” Mario asked.

Gramps shook his head. “No.”

“Why not?”

“Because he wasn’t worth my time or effort,” Gramps said. “There will be people in this world who will always look down on you because of the way you look, because you’re biracial, because of what you wear, because of your size, and a million other reasons. But you have to know in here”—Gramps gently tapped Mario’s chest—“that *they’re* the ones with the problem. Not you. Stooping to their level, beating them up simply because you can, isn’t the answer. Now . . . I’m not saying you shouldn’t defend yourself. Because you absolutely can and should. If you want, I can show you some things you can do, even if you’re smaller than someone else, to protect yourself.”

Mario’s eyes got big again. “You will?”

“Absolutely.”

“Awesome.” Then he looked up at his mom. “How was *your* day?”

“It was okay. But I missed you,” Cassidy told him.

Mother and son hugged each other once more before Cassidy stepped back. “G is going to hang out with us tonight—I hope that’s okay.”

Gramps had already reminded her that she needed to call him G whenever they were in the mansion. All their lives could depend on it.

Mario nodded, but Gramps could tell he wasn’t all that thrilled to share his mother.

“Your mom tells me that you’re a heck of a dancer,” Gramps said. “Maybe you can show me?”

It wasn’t until Cassidy nodded encouragingly at him that Mario nodded.

Hours later, after Mario had showed off what he could do, and after they’d watched a movie on the television, and after Mario had finally fallen asleep in his small bed in the corner of the room, Gramps pulled Cassidy into his arms as they lay on her mattress.

The music still played from the radio, masking their words from anyone who might be listening or watching. Cassidy’s head was resting on his shoulder, and he had his arm around her, holding her tightly against him.

“He’s a good kid,” Gramps said after a long moment.

He felt Cassidy sigh. “He really is. I know he hasn’t hit the nasty teenage years yet, but he’s so eager to please that I don’t think he’s going to be a handful when he gets older.”

“He really can dance,” Gramps told her, remembering how Mario had cut a rug earlier.

“I know. I want to get him into something organized, have someone teach him more, but it’s impossible here.”

“I bet there are some good classes in Indianapolis,” Gramps blurted.

He’d been thinking about it all day and couldn’t keep quiet anymore. And not just because he hoped Silverstone’s plan would come to fruition tomorrow, which meant she’d have to make a decision about where she wanted to go once they arrived back in the States.

“What?” she asked, tilting her head back and staring up at him.

“Come to Indianapolis,” Gramps said, making it clear where he stood on the matter. “You said it yourself—you left El Paso because of your asshole ex. You think things are gonna be different if you go back there? They likely won’t. You can come to Indy and start over. I can help you find a job

. . . hell, I'm sure we can find something for you to do at Silverstone if you want. I want to introduce you to Skylar, Taylor, and Molly. I know you'll like them. And we can find Mario a kick-ass dance class. Maybe gymnastics, too, if he's still interested." Gramps knew he was babbling, and he pressed his lips together to make himself shut up.

"I . . . I don't know what to say," Cassidy said.

"Say yes," he urged. "No one's saying you have to stay there forever, but wouldn't it be nice to start over in a city where you know someone?"

"I don't want to take advantage," she told him.

Gramps rolled until she was under him. He speared one hand into her hair and held her still. "Take advantage," he urged. "I want you to. I want to get to know you better, Cass. I want to watch you blossom without having to worry about Coke or Lloyd or anyone else. I want you to be free to do what you want, when you want. I want to see Mario come out of his shell. I want you both to be safe, and I can help you with that. Say yes, Cass. At least for now."

"I don't have any money. We don't have any belongings. We have *nothing*, Leo."

"I know the other women will help with finding you clothes and stuff. Lord knows they like to shop, especially if it's for someone else. I already said I'd help you find a job. And you can live with me until you get on your feet." The offer popped out before Gramps thought twice. He'd never lived with a woman before, but he suspected living with Cassidy and Mario wouldn't be a hardship.

But she shook her head. "No. I need my own place."

He frowned.

"It's not that I don't appreciate it. And I know it's crazy, but after being held prisoner here, I need . . . I need to be independent."

Gramps understood. He didn't particularly like it, but he understood. "Okay."

“Okay?” she asked, tilting her head. “Just like that—okay?”

“Yeah, Cass. You’re an adult. I can’t force you to do anything. But I’m willing to do just about whatever it takes to help you get back on your feet.”

“I won’t be able to afford something fancy,” she warned. “And as much as I hate it, I’ll have to borrow some money, just at first.”

“I know, and it’s fine. Skylar has a friend, Tiana, who used to be her neighbor. I bet she could help get you an apartment where she lives.”

Gramps couldn’t believe he was recommending Cassidy and Mario live at Southpoint Apartments, but he knew without a doubt that Tiana and Maria, Skylar’s old neighbors, would take Cassidy under their wings. Tiana had some dubious connections with a gang, but Silverstone would forever be in her debt after what she’d done for Skylar and Bull . . . namely, used those connections to make Skylar’s kidnapper pay for his crime with his life.

“Are you sure there isn’t anything I can do to help you tomorrow?” Cassidy asked, bringing Gramps out of his musings.

“No. The best thing you can do is roll with the punches. Know that I would never hurt you, no matter what I say or do.”

“You’re making me nervous,” she admitted.

Cassidy should be nervous. Gramps wasn’t sure how things were going to go with Coke. He and Silverstone, along with the FBI, had worked out several different scenarios as to how things might go with Coke. Gramps glanced at the jacket he’d placed over a chair earlier. Inside his pocket was a flask . . . holding what they all hoped Gramps would use in an ideal scenario.

Coke was a man who liked control. He liked to win at all costs. So after hashing out a deal tomorrow, a deal that would never come to fruition, Gramps hoped he could egg the man

into doing something he normally wouldn't . . . all in the name of showing off.

But Coke could refuse to step up to the plate, and if that happened, Gramps would have to improvise. One thing Gramps and Silverstone were good at was moving to plans B, C, and D if necessary. Once the deal with Coke was made, Gramps would be leaving the house—and he planned on doing it with both Cassidy and Mario.

Gramps didn't respond to Cassidy's statement—he simply rolled back over and pulled her with him. She ended up on her side next to him, her head back on his shoulder. He knew he should probably get up and take Cassidy across the hall to the room Coke had given him to use. He should pretend they were making love all night, but he couldn't make himself move. He didn't want Mario to wake up and wonder where his mom had gone. And he hated degrading Cassidy for whoever was watching.

When Lloyd and Martin had looked at her, almost licking their lips in anticipation, it had taken everything in Gramps not to beat the hell out of them right then and there. He hated that because of him and the role he was playing, the men in this house now felt as if it was open season on Cassidy. He was the only thing standing between her and the sex-starved jackals. And given half a chance, they'd take what they wanted, with no regard to her well-being. That wasn't going to happen. Not on his watch.

He had one shot to make this op work.

“Leo?” Cassidy asked.

“Yeah?”

“No matter what happens tomorrow, get Mario out. Even if that means leaving me behind.”

There wasn't a chance in hell of that happening, but Gramps nodded anyway. “Okay,” he told her, lying through his teeth, giving Cassidy what she needed to hear.

In seconds, she was sound asleep against him, her deep, even breaths wafting against the skin of his neck. Gramps

didn't close his eyes. He didn't sleep. He stayed awake, going over all the different scenarios as to how things could go tomorrow. Keeping watch over the woman he'd never forgotten. Who he'd never thought he'd get a second chance with.

He had regrets, lots of them. Most having to do with Cassidy. He wasn't going to fuck this up. No way.



# Chapter Six

A loud knock on the door woke Cassidy with a start. She immediately realized she wasn't alone in her bed. Looking over at the clock, she was shocked to find it was nine in the morning. She hadn't slept in so late in years.

The pounding on the door came again, and she looked over at Mario. He was sitting straight up in his bed, his eyes wide, staring first at her and Leo in the bed, then at the door.

"Hang on a sec," Leo barked. Then he turned to her and asked quietly, "You good?"

Was she good? She'd just slept more soundly than she had in forever, and she had a feeling it was because Leo had held her in his arms all night. Cassidy managed a small nod.

Then he did something that melted her heart. He climbed out of bed and went over to Mario's cot. He knelt beside it and asked, "Did you sleep all right?"

Mario nodded.

"Good."

But the boy didn't relax. "You slept with my mom," he accused.

Leo simply nodded. "I did."

Mario frowned and looked at Cassidy. "He didn't hurt you?"

Cassidy shook her head immediately. "No, honey. Not at all."

"Why are you wearing your clothes?" Mario asked Leo.

"I guess we fell asleep with them on," he responded.

Mario nodded as if that made complete sense.

"You've got ten seconds, and I'm coming in!" Lloyd yelled from the hallway.

Leo stood up and strolled over to the door as if he hadn't a care in the world. Cassidy hated when Lloyd or Martin woke them up. Usually it was much earlier than this, to inform her of some distasteful duty she or Mario had to do that day.

Leo cracked the door open, not letting Lloyd see inside the room. "What do you want?" he asked in a mean tone that made the hair stand up on Cassidy's arms. She'd gotten used to the soft and easy Leo, not this man he morphed into when dealing with Michael or his security forces.

"I need Mario," Lloyd said.

"Give us a second," Leo told him, then shut the door in his face.

Cassidy was up and out of bed before he'd turned around. "No!" she exclaimed.

But Leo ignored her. Instead, he walked over to where Mario was standing next to his bed. He put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "You know what they want you for?" he asked.

Mario shrugged, but his face had paled. "I haven't made a delivery for a day or so—that's probably it."

Leo nodded.

Cassidy walked over to the pair, wanting to snatch her son up and protect him from Lloyd. From this house. From the life she'd forced him into.

"Right. Listen to me. Are you listening?" Leo asked as he once again knelt so he could be on Mario's level.

The boy nodded.

"I'm sorry you have to do this. You should be sitting in a classroom learning, or dancing, or any other number of things. Be smart out there. Do what you're told, and keep your head down. Can you do that?"

Mario looked at Leo, then up at his mother. He met Leo's gaze once more. "You'll take care of my mom? You won't hit her or hurt her while I'm gone?"

"You have my word," Leo told her son.

Cassidy's heart hurt. Mario shouldn't have to worry about that kind of thing. He should be laughing and sassing her. Dancing his heart out and having fun. He was too young to have the weight of the world on his shoulders, but because of her, he did.

Leo must've been satisfied with Mario's nod in response to his vow, because he stood and kind of pushed him lightly toward the bathroom. "Go do your thing. I'll tell Lloyd you'll be out soon."

"He doesn't like to wait," Mario said hesitatingly.

"I'll talk to him. It's fine. Go on," Leo said.

Mario walked quickly toward the attached bathroom and shut the door. Cassidy immediately turned to Leo. "Maybe you can convince Lloyd to let him stay with me today."

Leo pressed his lips together and shook his head. "He's not going to listen to me, Cass. Mario'll be okay. He's a smart kid."

Cassidy's shoulders slumped. "I hate this," she whispered. "I did this to him."

"No, you didn't," Leo said, pulling her into him.

Cassidy was getting used to him hauling her against his body, and she had to admit that she liked it. She felt safer when she was near him.

"You came here wanting a fresh start. In good faith, you accepted a job you thought would be safe for you both," he told her.

"Yeah, but I should've known it was too good to be true."

"Maybe, maybe not, but you certainly didn't ask to be held prisoner."

No, she didn't.

Lloyd pounded on the door again, and Leo sighed.

"Showtime," he whispered, then leaned down and brushed his lips against hers. "I had a good time last night. Best date I've had in ages. Be strong, Cass. For just a little bit longer."

Her lips tingled with his touch, but she felt cold when he dropped his arms and headed for the door. She stood in the middle of the room a little uncertainly. But before Leo opened the door, he motioned to the bathroom with his head.

Nodding, Cassidy walked quickly to the bathroom and escaped inside. It was cowardly to let Leo deal with Lloyd, but she didn't like the way the man looked at her. It made her skin crawl.

"Mama?" Mario asked when she entered the room, and Cassidy put her arm around him and hugged him tight for a second. "Go on and shower, Mario. Quickly, though."

He pouted a bit, but did as he was told, heading for the shower, stripping out of his clothes as he went. She shamelessly listened through the half-open door as she heard the shower turn on.

"Fuckin' her when her kid's in the room is ballsy, G. I like it," Lloyd drawled.

Cassidy winced and was glad she'd sent Mario to shower so he wouldn't hear this conversation.

"Of course I didn't," Leo told him with disgust. "Besides, we were both too tired from earlier to do much more than fall into bed and sleep."

"Yeah?" Lloyd asked. "Where'd you go with her?"

"Not sure that's any business of yours," Leo said.

"Everything that happens in this house is my business," Lloyd retorted. "I've got eyes on everyone. No one makes a move that I don't know about."

"Well, I don't like an audience when I'm with a lady," Leo told him. "Never been into voyeurism."

"So, where'd you go?" Lloyd asked again.

There was a slight pause, and Cassidy could just imagine Leo glaring at Lloyd when he spoke. "All you need to know, and all you care about anyway, is that I fucked her ten different ways to Sunday. There's nothing like Latina pussy. It's been a while for me. And I didn't want you or your

flunkies following because you have a habit of interruptin' us. Get over the fact that I was able to lose the asshole you sent to shadow me."

"Michael isn't going to be happy," Lloyd growled.

"Bullshit. He gave Cassidy to me because he wants my business, and he's not going to care that I spent the afternoon balls deep inside her. In fact, I bet he'll be pleased. What he *won't* be happy with is you gettin' in my face about it. I brought her back, sore but in one piece. What's your *real* problem? You upset that you didn't get to watch? That you couldn't get your rocks off by spyin' on us?"

"Fuck you," Lloyd said.

Cassidy was blushing at Leo's blunt words . . . even if a tiny part of her was turned on by the thought of him taking her like he'd claimed. She'd crushed on Leo forever. Hearing him talk about their supposed sexual tryst made a shiver go through her.

"No, fuck *you*," Leo returned. "I had shit I wanted to do to her this morning, and now she's worried about that brat of hers. What're the big plans for him today? And no, I don't give a shit, but I'm askin' so I can calm her the fuck down before I take her again."

"You might have Michael wrapped around your finger, but I'm not so easily swayed by the possibility of a lucrative partnership," Lloyd said. "I'm not telling you shit. You'll have to convince the bitch to suck your cock some other way. What I do with the boy is no one's concern but my own. Now get him out here, or I'll make sure Michael knows you're being . . . disagreeable."

Cassidy's stomach lurched. She wanted to grab Mario and hide, but there was nowhere to go.

Leo simply laughed at Lloyd. "Disagreeable? Shit, man, whatever. Coke's not gonna like you tattling like a baby. But if you want to, have at it."

Cassidy had heard enough. She didn't want to let Mario go with Lloyd, but they didn't have a choice. Luckily, Mario

had finished with his shower and was already getting dressed. “Hurry, son,” Cassidy said softly.

“I’m almost ready, Mama,” her precious boy said. In many ways, he was braver than her. She knew he did what was ordered of him simply to try to protect her. It broke her heart, and she swore that if they got out of this situation, she’d spend the rest of her days making sure he had as carefree a life as she could give him.

When he was finished dressing, Cassidy hugged him tight, then leaned over and said, “Be safe today. I hate that you have to do what you do, but we both know you don’t have a choice. Come back to me safe, okay?”

“I will, Mama. And you be careful too.”

Her heart almost broke all over again. Mario was worrying about her when he should be thinking about himself. She hugged him tightly again, then opened the bathroom door.

Leo and Lloyd were facing off just inside the bedroom. Leo had his arms crossed, and Lloyd just looked pissed.

“It’s about time,” Lloyd barked when he saw them. “Get over here, boy—time for you to earn your keep. And since you decided to be lazy this morning and not get your ass up in time for breakfast, you’ll go hungry until your work is done.”

“Yes, sir,” Mario said in a subdued tone.

The second he got close to Lloyd, the man grabbed his arm and wrenched it upward. Mario squeaked but didn’t otherwise protest. They left the room without another word, and Cassidy wanted to cry.

“He’ll be all right,” Leo whispered as he wrapped his arm around her shoulders. Cassidy turned into him and did her best to control herself.

Leo reached out and slammed the door. Then he walked them back to the bathroom and slammed that door too.

Cassidy stiffened against him.

“Easy, Cass. You’re safe. I have no doubt that lecherous bastard is gonna check the cameras to see what we do now that

Mario's gone. Smoke and mirrors, that's all this is."

She nodded.

"It's fucked up that they've got your room bugged in the first place, but that's a battle I can't fight at the moment. There aren't any cameras in the bathroom—I checked earlier—so we've got more privacy here than anywhere else. Turn around and face the door."

Without a word, she did as he asked. She'd been appalled when she'd found the cameras in her room, but when she'd complained, Lloyd had laughed and told her that she was lucky to have a roof over her head and food to eat. That it was the price she had to pay for living in such luxury.

She'd wanted to retort that she'd gladly give it all up if she could just have her and Mario's passports back, but Lloyd had leaned in and hissed, "We own you, bitch. Get used to it."

And she supposed he was right. If what Leo had said was true, and she had no reason to doubt him, Michael really had given her to Leo to use however he wished. It was a miracle he hadn't done something like that before now. Maybe they really had needed someone to look after the kids, but now that they were getting older, she'd have to earn her keep some other way.

She'd rather die than become a sex slave for Michael and his cronies.

The shower turned on once again, and Cassidy flinched.

"It's okay," Leo said, and she felt his hard body—his fully clothed body—against her back. He'd turned on the shower to make it seem as if they were having sex in there. He put an arm diagonally around her chest and rested his chin on her shoulder, much as he had the day before. He didn't say anything, just held her as the room filled with steam from the shower. Eventually, she relaxed against him until he was practically holding her up.

"I want to go home," she whispered.

"And I'm gonna get you there," he told her. "You just gotta trust me."

“I do.”

Leo was the first ray of hope she'd had in years, but she'd learned the hard way that the only person she could *really* count on was herself. She closed her eyes and prayed that Leo wouldn't let her down. She wanted her life back, and more importantly, she wanted Mario to be free. To be an eleven-year-old kid whose biggest worries were things like getting a pair of the most popular shoes and what she was making for dinner.



Gramps had put off his meeting with Coke for another four hours. He'd holed up in Cassidy's room with her, trying to distract her. Keeping their backs to the cameras and the music on loud enough that their conversation wouldn't be overheard, they'd talked about mutual acquaintances in El Paso, and she'd told him funny stories about Mario.

He'd brought them into the bathroom more than once to make anyone watching think he was fucking her behind the door. Gramps hated doing so, however, because it was degrading to Cassidy. She'd taken it in stride, telling him that she'd do whatever it took to help him with his mission.

He wanted to stay in the room with her all day, keeping her safe, but he needed to meet with Coke. Move the mission forward. Mario being taken outside the mansion walls was the first step. He'd hoped that would happen. Now Gramps had no doubt that Smoke would be on the boy, that he'd do what needed to be done.

The ball was in motion, and Gramps had to pick it up and run with it.

He left Cassidy in her room. She'd wanted to come with him, but Gramps knew it would be safer if she stayed put. He didn't want Lloyd's men to come to the conclusion, now that she'd been with him, that she was fair game for anyone else who wanted a shot.

Martin had appeared seemingly out of nowhere within seconds of Gramps stepping outside of Cassidy's room. He'd obviously been waiting and watching for him.



“You must be hungry,” he told Gramps. “I’ve been instructed to escort you to the boss’s office, and to see what you might like to eat. I can bring it to you.”

“Surprise me,” Gramps said. “Something Jamaican. Your native food is delicious.”

Martin nodded and gestured for Gramps to precede him down the hall.

Despite not liking having the man at his back, Gramps strode forward as if he wasn’t in a hurry. They arrived at Coke’s office door, and Martin knocked once. Without waiting for a response, he opened it, and Gramps walked in.

Coke was sitting behind his desk, his hands steepled under his chin, as if deep in thought. He didn’t bother to stand when Gramps entered.

The door shut behind them, and instead of sitting in the chair directly in front of the desk, Gramps strolled around the room, as if this was a social visit. He examined the books on the shelves and opened the liquor cabinet, not surprised to see it well stocked with Jamaican rum and not much else. He ran a finger over the globe in the corner, sending it spinning.

“You’re a cocky son of a bitch,” Coke observed.

Gramps merely shrugged. “I’m feeling mellow,” he said after a moment. “Courtesy of the fine piece of ass you gave me to enjoy.”

“So you succeeded in making her want you, huh?” Coke asked.

Gramps nodded smugly. “I might’ve needed a little help, but yes.” He saw the look of curiosity in the other man’s eyes before he pretended to be bored once again.

“A little help?” Coke couldn’t help but ask.

“Yeah. I told you earlier that I didn’t care much for unwilling women, and I wasn’t lying. But giving them a bit of help to calm down? To jump-start their libido? To keep them going all night? Yeah, *that* I’m not opposed to.”

“Molly?” Coke asked.

He was referring to MDMA, or ecstasy. Gramps nodded. "The serotonin triggers their hormones and makes chicks beg for cock. It also makes them trust more easily. Putty in my hands," Gramps said with a grin.

"That why you're just now comin' out of her room?" Coke asked.

Gramps knew the man had been keeping tabs on him. If he hadn't already known for sure, his hunch would've just been confirmed. "Woulda stayed longer. Appreciate you taking the brat out of the picture, but I wanted to respect you and your time," Gramps simpered.

"I don't want to get between a man and his pussy," Coke said.

"Business is more important," Gramps said, playing his part.

Coke nodded respectfully at him. His body language said he'd lost some of the stiffness and distrust he'd had when Gramps had first entered the room. He stood up from behind the desk and headed for the liquor cabinet. "Drink?"

"Of course," Gramps said. He needed to play this smart. The last thing he wanted to do was get drunk before negotiations, but given his plans for later . . . Coke was playing right into his hands.

The drug kingpin poured two shots of rum and settled on the leather couch. Gramps sat on the other end.

For the next two hours, they negotiated back and forth, sharing minor details about their organizations. Gramps held out for more product for less money, but in the end, Coke was more than satisfied. He believed he'd just procured several million dollars in return for Gramps being the only distributor in the Dallas area. It was all bullshit, but Coke would hopefully never find out . . . since he'd be dead.

This kind of mission was unheard of for Silverstone. Their usual MO was to sneak in and ambush their target and get the hell out. Sitting down, negotiating a bogus deal, and coming

face to face with the enemy was certainly out of the ordinary. But it was working . . . so far.

Gramps still had to secure Cassidy's and Mario's releases. Coke wasn't going to let him just walk out with them, not without more negotiations. But Gramps was confident he could buy them. The man was obsessed with money, and getting another couple million bucks for two people he didn't give a shit about would be hard for him to resist. Or so Gramps hoped. If necessary, Bull was ready to provide a distraction so Gramps could just get out of the mansion with Cassidy and Mario.

He'd just opened his mouth to ease into the topic of money when there was a commotion outside the door. Recognizing Cassidy's voice, Gramps stood.

The door flew open, and Cassidy was there, Lloyd on her heels. He grabbed her arms, holding her so tightly she couldn't wrench herself out of his grasp.

"Where is he?" she yelled.

Coke merely raised an eyebrow.

"Mario! Where is he? Lloyd told me he's missing! That you sent him out on a job and he's disappeared. I want my son!"

It took everything within Gramps to keep his mouth shut, to not reassure Cassidy. He forced himself to sit back down on the leather couch, taking Coke's lead. The other man hadn't even flinched with the interruption. Hadn't moved from his spot on the couch.

"How should I know?" Coke asked. "I've been here all day."

"But you sent him out to deliver drugs! I *know* you did!" Cassidy screeched.

Coke sighed. "Women. So dramatic," he told Gramps.

Gramps forced himself to nod nonchalantly. Cassidy was completely losing her shit. For a slightly panicked moment, he

wondered why she would do *anything* to jeopardize her rescue—then it hit him.

He hadn't told her that Smoke was tailing her son. That he wouldn't let anything happen to him. She knew they had a plan, but he hadn't shared any of the specifics. She was risking everything out of desperation and love for her son.

This scene was definitely a hitch in their plans, but Gramps didn't let any of his thoughts show on his face. The others were listening; they'd go with the flow and change up the plan if necessary.

"Let me go! I need to go look for him!" Cassidy yelled at Lloyd as she struggled in his grasp, to no avail.

"She seems a little high strung, no?" Coke observed.

"It's her Hispanic heritage." Gramps smirked. "In bed, it's glorious. When she's riding my cock, it's a thing of beauty. Now . . . not so much."

"It's okay. I've got something to calm her down," Coke said as Cassidy ignored them, continuing to fight Lloyd. Coke put his glass on a table next to him and stood.

Gramps did as well. He opened his mouth to protest, but Coke was already moving toward Cassidy. He detoured to the liquor cabinet and pulled a syringe out of a drawer. It sickened Gramps that he had something like that so handy, ready to go at a moment's notice.

Coke strolled up to Cassidy, grabbed her jaw in his hand, and squeezed hard.

Cassidy whimpered in pain but stopped pulling against Lloyd.

"You disappoint me, Ms. Hewitt. I had such high hopes for you. You've been such a good employee all these years." He made a *tsk* sound before continuing. "But outbursts won't be tolerated. Mario belongs to *me* now. What happens to him is no concern of yours anymore. He'll do what I say, when I say it. Mommy can't protect him any longer. Do you understand?"

“No! We aren’t slaves. You don’t own us!” Cassidy cried, the desperation easy to hear in her tone.

“Wrong. I *do* own you. And if I were you, I’d be a little nicer to me and my staff.” Coke turned to Gramps. “G, you want to do the honors?”

“What is it?” Gramps asked. His mind was going a million miles an hour, trying to figure a way out of this fucked-up situation. He regretted not telling Cassidy this part of the plan. He’d wanted to keep her in the dark as much as possible for her own protection. But he’d screwed up. He should have at least told her Mario would be safe at all times. If he had, she wouldn’t be in this situation. Wouldn’t have risked her life to confront Coke.

“Flunitrazepam,” Coke told him.

Gramps nodded. He didn’t want to drug Cassidy, and would do whatever was necessary to prevent Coke from injecting her with meth or cocaine, but giving her a roofie wouldn’t hurt her in the long run. He hoped. “I approve,” he told Coke. “I’ve roofied a few girls in my time. I prefer them to be conscious and actively participating when I fuck them, but in my youth, I experimented with the date-rape drug. It’s very effective.”

Coke nodded. “It’s my preference. I don’t like when they fight—it’s too much work. Give me a nice unconscious girl to take how I want any day.”

Gramps felt sick as he walked toward Coke and a still struggling Cassidy. He took the syringe from the other man and made the mistake of meeting Cassidy’s gaze.

Regret swam in her eyes. She knew she’d messed up.

“I’m sorry,” she mouthed subtly.

Gramps knew he needed to get this done before she said something that would get them both killed. Coke and Lloyd wouldn’t hesitate to kill them if they suspected for a second he wasn’t who he said he was. Gramps had seen the pistol inside Coke’s jacket earlier, and Lloyd had a weapon in clear sight on his hip.

He lifted the syringe and, as gently as he could—which was difficult because she was still jerking in Lloyd’s grip—sank the needle into her upper arm.

“No!” Cassidy wailed. Her pupils had dilated, and panic set in.

Gramps didn’t answer, just prayed the drug would act fast and end this torture for them both.

“Please don’t hurt Mario—he’s innocent!” she begged Coke. “He’s only a kid!”

“And he’s *mine*,” Coke said with no compassion at all. “Take her away.”

“Can I give her to my men?” Lloyd asked.

Coke waved him off. “Don’t care.”

“Wait,” Gramps requested.

Cassidy was sagging in Lloyd’s grasp now, her eyes glazed over, and it was obvious she was no longer really with them.

“I was going to talk to you about her,” Gramps told Coke. “Make a deal for her.”

“What kind of deal?” Coke asked at the same time Lloyd began to protest.

Coke held up his palm to his head of security, effectively shutting him up.

“A monetary one,” Gramps said. “It’s been a long time since I’ve found a woman who gives it to me so good. Call it nostalgia for my homeland, but I’d be willing to buy her from you.”

“Leave her,” Coke ordered Lloyd.

“But, sir—” Lloyd began.

Coke merely raised an eyebrow at him, and Lloyd nodded. “Right.” He lowered Cassidy none too gently to the ground right inside the door, glared at Gramps, and then turned around and left.

Gramps immediately wanted to go to Cassidy, put a pillow under her head, and tell her he was sorry and that she was going to be all right, but he forced himself to head back to the couch.

It took another hour, but at the end of those sixty minutes, Gramps had bought himself a woman. He'd planned to make an offer for Mario, too, but that was off the table, now that Coke assumed he was missing. So he'd negotiated for Cassidy and did his best not to worry about her son.

He assumed—and prayed—his disappearance was a result of Smoke's intervention, but he had no way to verify that right now.

Haggling over Cassidy's purchase made him want to shower, to get the feeling of betrayal off him, but it was done. She remained where Lloyd had left her, in a heap by the door, as if she was nothing more than a piece of property. Which, to the man in front of him, she was. He'd managed to talk Coke down to half a million dollars, which seemed an obscene amount of money. But even ten bucks would've been too much, because everything about this was so wrong. Buying a human being made Gramps want to throw up.

He didn't let one ounce of what he was feeling show on his face.

It was time to end this. And end Coke once and for all.

Silverstone usually didn't concern themselves with drug dealers. There were so many, and drugs were in such high demand—as soon as one dealer was dealt with, two more sprang up to take their place. Gramps had no doubt someone would take over Coke's empire, one of his many lieutenants probably, but the FBI had relented and agreed to this mission because of Cassidy and her son.

Things would be chaotic in Coke's organization after his death, and maybe in the meantime the Jamaican police could clean up their city. But drug addicts needed their fixes, and so the drugs would continue to flow into the States, coming from countries like Jamaica, China, Colombia, Mexico, and all over the globe.

Still, Gramps wasn't going to let the hell Cassidy and her son had gone through be for naught. He was going to take Coke down, and take a lot of pleasure in doing so.

"I think we need to drink to our new partnership . . . and to lots of great sex in my future," Gramps said, smirking. He pulled a flask out of the pocket of his jacket. Eagle—and an FBI connection—had come through in a huge way. On the way out of the hotel the night before, Eagle had handed him the flask and explained how it worked.

"I agree. What do you have there?"

"Tequila, what else?" Gramps asked.

Coke laughed. "You Mexicans and your tequila."

"You Jamaicans and your rum," Gramps retorted.

Coke nodded. "Good point."

"Besides, I could drink a gallon of your rum and still be standing. Can't say the same for you and my tequila."

"You think so?" Coke asked.

"I know so," Gramps said with confidence.

"Would you be willing to wager on that?"

Mentally, Gramps pumped a fist in the air. Hook, line, and fucking sinker. He had this asshole. "Fuck yes," he said. "How much?"

"Two hundred thousand," Coke said.

Gramps pretended to think about it before nodding. "Seems reasonable. But before we both get too shit faced to think straight, I need you to tell your staff that she's mine." Gramps nodded at a passed-out Cassidy on the floor. "The last thing I want is trouble from Lloyd, or to be stopped by any of your other men who want a shot at her."

"Fair enough," Coke said. He pulled out a phone and typed something. In less than a minute, Lloyd opened the office door.

"Sir?"



“Cassidy now belongs to G. When he leaves here later, he’ll be taking her with him.”

Gramps could easily see the disappointment and fury in the other man’s eyes.

“No one fucks with him. He’s taking her off our hands. She’s not our problem anymore. Understand?” Coke asked.

“Yes, sir,” Lloyd bit out.

“Good. That is all.”

Lloyd shot another glare at Gramps, then backed out of the room, shutting the door behind him.

“Now, you know I trust you,” Coke said, and Gramps almost snorted. The man didn’t trust him in the least, and the feeling was mutual. “But I’m going to have to insist that you take the first shot of your tequila. I wouldn’t want you to poison me or anything.”

Gramps pretended to be offended. “If I killed you, I wouldn’t get my drugs,” he protested.

“Even so,” Coke said firmly.

Sighing as if he was annoyed, Gramps grabbed two new shot glasses from the liquor cabinet. Making sure Coke had a clear view, he filled both glasses with tequila from his flask. He carried them to the couch and handed one to Coke. “To new partnerships,” he said, lifting his glass in a toast.

Coke eyed him for a moment, then nodded.

Gramps swallowed the tequila and barely felt the burn as it slid down his throat. When he was done, Coke didn’t flinch as he drank down his shot as well.

“That *is* good,” Coke said.

“Let the games commence,” Gramps told him.

The next hour was spent bantering and doing shots. Gramps poured Coke’s, and the drug kingpin prepared Gramps’s. The room was spinning slightly, but Gramps forced himself to be patient. This was it. The culmination of months of research by his team—and years of captivity for Cassidy.

Thinking about Cassidy made him remember the despair on her face when he'd stuck the needle into her flesh. He wanted to look over at her, but kept his eyes firmly on Coke.

They were both sprawled on the couch now. The flask Gramps had brought with him was empty. It was only a matter of time.

"You win, G," Coke said grudgingly as he did his best to catch his breath. "Your tequila has . . . put me . . . on my ass."

Gramps shrugged. "I'm not so good myself. How 'bout we call it a draw?"

"Sporting . . . of you," Coke gasped.

It was the last thing the man would ever say. His body began to convulse as the potassium cyanide in the tequila did its job.

The flask Eagle had given him had two compartments. One with untainted alcohol, and the other with more than enough of the deadly compound to kill. Gramps had given Coke straight tequila for a while, loosening him up, allowing enough time to pass to make it look like he and Coke were getting along famously.

The last couple of shots he'd poured for Coke had been tainted. The other man had almost immediately succumbed to the drug.

Standing, Gramps hurried over to Cassidy. She hadn't moved since she'd been dropped on the ground, and he prayed she really *had* been roofied, that he hadn't given her something else. He pressed his fingers to her neck and sighed in relief when he felt a pulse.

He took a minute to quietly and surreptitiously speak close to the small microphone in his watch, knowing his team would hear him. "Coke's dead. Go to plan D. I'm gonna walk right out the front door with Cassidy. Stand by." They would've heard her freaking out, and everything that had transpired after that point.

Mentally apologizing to Cassidy, Gramps slowly dragged her to a chair nearby. He heaved her into it, then leaned over

and put his shoulder to her stomach, carefully picking her up.

He wove slightly on his feet. After drinking so much rum, he definitely wasn't in any shape to be defending himself or Cassidy. He prayed that Lloyd would heed Coke's order. Because it was time to leave here once and for all.

Not bothering to look back at the man who'd caused Cassidy so much pain, Gramps headed for the door. He opened it, and as expected, Lloyd appeared out of nowhere. The man kept very close tabs on his boss, which might've been admirable if he wasn't such an asshole.

"Looksh like we're done for the night," Gramps purposely slurred.

Lloyd sneered at him in disgust, then peered behind Gramps into the office.

Tensing, Gramps prepared to fight the other man to the death, a rush of adrenaline sobering him slightly. But Lloyd simply shut the office door, leaving what he thought was his passed-out boss to his drunken stupor.

Nodding at the man, Gramps headed for the door.

He shouldn't be driving, but that couldn't be helped right now. His goal was to get Cassidy out of the house. Lloyd followed, and when Gramps struggled with the front door, he sighed and leaned past him to open it.

"Thanksh," Gramps said.

"She must've been a hell of a good fuck," Lloyd muttered.

Gramps *really* wanted to beat the shit out of him. But, playing his role, he merely smiled. "Best I ever had," he declared loudly, then stepped out of the house. He held his breath as he stumbled exaggeratingly down the walkway. He passed a few men on the security force, but no one tried to stop him. No one made a move to prevent him from taking Cassidy.

Thankful he'd had the foresight to have Coke tell Lloyd that Cassidy was his, Gramps walked unmolested toward the black sedan he'd arrived in the evening before.

He opened the trunk, mentally apologizing to Cassidy yet again and promising to make it up to her, then rolled her in. His only consolation was that she wouldn't remember being thrown into the trunk as if she were nothing more than a sack of potatoes.

He nodded at Lloyd and the other men watching, then climbed behind the wheel and pulled out of the gates, which had been opened for him.

This time, no one followed. Now that he'd concluded his business with Coke, he was free to go where he wanted and do whatever he pleased. He wasn't their concern any longer.

Driving as carefully as he could and praying he didn't get pulled over by the police—it wouldn't be good to get stopped while driving drunk, with a drugged woman in the trunk—Gramps headed for the meeting place he and Silverstone had worked out in advance.

Turning into the alley, Gramps cut the engine and waited. No one drove by. No one came up behind him. It seemed as if he'd pulled it off. Poisoned Coke right under his security guards' noses and stolen Cassidy in the process.

A knock on the door startled Gramps so badly, he physically jerked to the side. "Fuck," he muttered as he opened the door.

"Losing your touch, Gramps?" Eagle asked.

"Fuck you."

Eagle's eyes widened. "Shit. You had to drink a lot more than we planned, didn't you?"

Gramps nodded. "I had to make things seem laid back and normal. Knew Lloyd was lurking nearby, and if I'd left ten minutes after we'd made our deal, he would've been suspicious. Tell me you have the boy," he asked as he moved to the trunk.

"Smoke's got him," Eagle confirmed.

Gramps closed his eyes for a second. "Thank God," he breathed. "If he was actually still inside that house, it wouldn't

have been good.”

“I take it our plan worked?” Eagle asked as he reached for Cassidy.

Gramps pushed him aside and gently lifted the bravest woman he’d ever known from the trunk. He cradled her carefully, one arm under her knees and the other around her back. This was probably going to be the last time she allowed him anywhere near her, and he wanted to savor it.

“It worked,” Gramps told his friend as they headed for a second black sedan parked on the street, close to the alley entrance. Eagle held open the back door, and Gramps quickly got inside, Cassidy still in his arms.

In less than a minute, they were moving.

“Bull’s behind us, watching for anyone who might be tailing, and Smoke’s with Mario at the airport. How long do you think we have before they find Coke?” Eagle asked.

Gramps couldn’t take his eyes off Cassidy’s face. She looked calm and relaxed, but the second she remembered—or was told—that he’d been the one to drug her, she’d probably not want anything to do with him. He was disgusted with himself. He hadn’t had a choice, but that didn’t change what he’d done.

“I’m not sure. I have no idea if they’ll risk waking him up to get him to his bed, or if they’ll just leave him there until morning,” Gramps said.

“Here’s to hoping they wait. The last thing we need is someone trying to stop our flight from leaving,” Eagle muttered.

Gramps nodded. Eagle wasn’t telling him anything he didn’t already know.

The plan had been for Smoke to grab Mario and get him to safety. Then Gramps would slip the poison into Coke’s drink and sneak Cassidy out of the house when Bull set off an explosive in the back, diverting everyone’s attention. But with the team listening, they’d been able to roll with the punches and stay on top of the situation as it had changed. Everything

had fallen into place almost perfectly, even if it hadn't happened exactly how they'd planned.

The private plane Willis, their FBI contact, had arranged for them was waiting at the airport, and they were leaving the country as soon as possible. Once Lloyd and the security force found Coke dead on his couch, shit was going to hit the fan, and Silverstone wanted to be as far away as they could when it happened.

Even if Lloyd didn't have his hands full with trying to keep the organization running, he wouldn't find "G" in Dallas if he looked. His cover had been fabricated by the FBI and the DEA. As soon as the wheels of the plane left the ground, they were all safe.

Gramps closed his eyes and willed the world to stop spinning. He needed to be clearheaded to make sure Mario didn't lose it when he saw his unconscious mother. He had to be sober to explain what he'd done to Cassidy. But he wasn't sure how he was going to do that. Drugging her had been the only option at the time . . . and it had been in her and Mario's best interests . . . but still, he wasn't sure she'd see it that way.

Even if she did, Gramps would have a hard time forgiving himself.

Sighing, Gramps pressed his forehead to her temple and breathed out a sigh of relief that it was almost over. Silverstone had taken out one more evil man and rescued two innocents in the process. That would have to be enough, no matter what happened when Cassidy woke up.

# Chapter Seven

Cassidy's head hurt. She opened her eyes and winced at the bright light.

"Mama?"

Hearing Mario's worried voice brought her out of her confused state faster than anything else might've. She opened her eyes wider and saw Mario hovering over her.

"Are you okay?"

"I . . . yeah." Cassidy looked around and saw she definitely wasn't in her room. "Where are we?"

"We're on a plane!" Mario said excitedly. "We're going to the States. We're free, Mama!"

Upon hearing that, Cassidy forced herself to sit up. She'd been lying across a row of seats in what she confirmed was indeed a plane. It wasn't huge, but it wasn't tiny either. There were several rows of leather seats, and Mario was kneeling on the floor next to her. He stood as she straightened and sat beside her. He latched on to her hand and squeezed it hard.

"A plane?" Cassidy murmured, feeling extremely confused. She didn't remember getting on a plane . . . or pretty much anything else, really. The last thing she remembered was . . .

*Mario!*

"You're here!" she gasped as she turned to her son. "Are you okay, baby? What happened? Where were you?"

"Lloyd gave me some stuff to deliver, and I didn't want to do it, but I didn't have a choice. Martin dropped me off in a scary part of Kingston and told me I had ten minutes and if I wasn't back in time, he'd leave me to get home on my own. I was really scared, but knew I had to do it. So I left the car and headed down the alley, and when I turned a corner, I was grabbed!"

Cassidy gasped again, but Mario continued before she could comment.

“Smoke got me and told me he was a good guy, and showed me a picture of him and Gramps to prove that he knew him. He said Gramps was going to get you out of Michael’s house and would meet up with us soon. He told me he and his friends were gonna get both of us out of Jamaica! He brought me back to his motel and gave me some food. Eagle even bought me a new T-shirt and a hat! We hung out for a while, and Smoke taught me how to play gin rummy, and then it was time to go, so we got into a car and went to the airport. They said we had to wait until it was dark so no one could see us leave, and we came to this plane, and there weren’t any lights on it *at all!* But I got to carry my passport all by myself because Eagle said I was responsible enough.

“Then Bull and Gramps came with you. But you were passed out, and Gramps was really worried. He’s drunk, too, but I didn’t say anything because he looked kinda mad about something. Then the lady pilot told us to hold on ’cause she was gonna go ‘hard and fast,’ and we zoomed down the runway and went almost straight up! It was *awesome!*”

Mario had spoken so fast, and said so much, Cassidy’s head was aching by the time he’d finished, her mouth as dry as cotton. Looking around, she saw that Leo’s friends were indeed on the plane with them. They each nodded at her when her gaze met theirs. She looked for Leo, spotting him in the first row of seats, but he hadn’t turned around.

She looked at Bull. “We’re really safe?”

“Yes,” Bull said. “We’ve got a little while yet until we land in Miami, but you’re safe. From there, we’ll catch another flight to Indianapolis, to throw off anyone who might be tracking this plane.”

Tears filled Cassidy’s eyes. She could hardly believe they were truly out of Jamaica. “And Michael?”

“He’s dead,” Mario said solemnly. “G . . . I mean Gramps killed him.”



Cassidy once more looked at Leo. He still didn't turn to see how she handled hearing about what had happened, and he didn't acknowledge Mario's statement.

Eagle got up from his seat and came over to her row. He sat next to her and said, "Mario, why don't you go practice gin rummy with Smoke? I know he's anxious to get home to his pregnant wife, and he's worrying about her. If you could distract him, that would be great."

"All right!" Mario said happily, scooting out in front of his mom and Eagle and heading for Smoke's row.

"What's going on?" Cassidy asked when he was out of earshot.

"It's normal for you to be confused," Eagle said. "What's the last thing you remember?"

Cassidy wracked her brain. "Being in my room. I was worried about Mario because of everything that was happening. Then Martin came in and told me that Mario was missing. That he hadn't returned from his job. And I . . . well, that's it. Everything else is gone. What happened? How did Leo kill Michael? And how did he get me out?"

Eagle looked from her to Leo, then back at her. "And I'm sure you're wondering why I'm the one explaining, and not Gramps."

Cassidy shrugged and nodded at the same time.

"Right. The bottom line is, the best-case scenario in our plan was to get Mario away from his escorts when he was outside the house. We know that they never let you both outside the gates at the same time. Smoke was tailing him, which we realize *now* we should've told you. I'm sorry. Anyway, when Smoke had a chance to snatch him, he did. It was very easy, actually, because like Mario said, Martin kicked him out of the car with enough drugs to put him in prison for life and told him to deliver them. Smoke ditched the drugs and brought him back to the same motel you visited, and we waited for Gramps."

“Wasn’t it risky to grab Mario when Leo was still at the mansion?” Cassidy asked.

“Yes. Things didn’t go quite according to plan. Bull was ready to cause a ruckus, if necessary, distracting everyone so Gramps could sneak out with you . . . but that didn’t happen.”

“What *did* happen? And how come I can’t remember anything?”

Eagle took a deep breath. “This is the hard part. So, you found out about Mario being missing . . . and you kind of freaked out. Again, our fault, since we didn’t tell you that Smoke had eyes on your son the entire time, and you stormed into Coke’s office, where he was meeting with Gramps. You were hysterical, and Gramps was afraid you were going to say something that would break his cover. Coke brought out a syringe and was going to inject you, to shut you up. After Gramps learned it was Rohypnol . . . *he* injected you.”

Cassidy stared at Eagle with wide eyes. “*What?* I was drugged?”

“Yeah. Roofied. It’s commonly known as the date-rape drug. Gramps would’ve broken cover if Coke planned on drugging you with anything else. But considering the precarious situation, and the fact he suspected Mario was safe with us, he allowed you to be injected.”

Cassidy looked up at Leo once more, but he still hadn’t turned around. She would’ve thought he was sleeping if she hadn’t seen him shift slightly.

“After you were knocked out, Gramps continued his negotiations with Coke. They began to drink together. Gramps drank Jamaican rum, and Coke was partaking of the finest Mexican tequila—supplied by us, of course. Long story short, Coke died from potassium cyanide poisoning, Gramps carried you out of the house . . . and here we are.”

Cassidy blinked, her head spinning. “Leo just carried me out of the house? And no one stopped him?”

Eagle cleared his throat and looked down at his lap. Cassidy braced for whatever he was going to tell her next.

“He and Coke made a deal, and Gramps made sure everyone in the house knew about it so he could leave with you after he’d poisoned Coke. He bought you.”

Cassidy frowned. “What?”

“Well, that’s not exactly true, as no money actually changed hands. He was supposed to set up a transfer today. Coke probably had plans to keep him in the mansion until the transfer was done.”

“Michael *sold* me?” Cassidy asked. “How is that even possible in this day and age?”

“It’s a lot easier, and more common, than you’d think,” Eagle said dryly. “If Gramps wasn’t there to get you and Mario out, you could be living a very different life right now. Coke had basically given you to his security force.”

Cassidy couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Michael was dead? Leo had poisoned him? And he’d drugged her? It made sense now, why she couldn’t remember anything . . . but it didn’t explain why Leo was ignoring her. After everything they’d been through in the last two days, she would’ve thought he’d be by her side when she woke. She supposed she should’ve known he was just there to do a job. That even though they had a history of sorts, what they’d shared didn’t actually mean anything. He was performing a role, like in a play. But this wasn’t a theater production—it was her life.

“For what it’s worth, he isn’t doing very well,” Eagle said, lowering his voice so only she could hear.

“What? Who?”

“Gramps. I’d say the alcohol isn’t helping either. He wasn’t happy he had to drug you. He didn’t tell you about Mario because he wasn’t sure it would happen the way we wanted, and he didn’t want to get your hopes up. And also, we needed any reaction to him being missing to be authentic. It would’ve raised too many suspicions if you weren’t upset about it. None of us thought you would burst into Coke’s office and demand he let you go out to find him, though. That was ballsy, and very risky for the op.

“Anyway . . . he’s afraid you won’t be able to forgive him. He was mumbling about how you looked at him when he held that syringe to your arm. He’s terrified you won’t be able to trust him the same way again.”

Cassidy’s heart was beating fast. She didn’t remember anything that happened in Michael’s office, but she didn’t like that Leo was beating himself up about it. She wasn’t happy that she’d been drugged, but she also wasn’t an idiot. If Leo had drugged her, it was because he hadn’t had a choice in the matter.

She didn’t remember what she’d done, but if she’d thought Mario was in trouble, she wasn’t surprised she’d risked everything to stand up to Michael.

Making a decision, she stood, then swayed on her feet.

“Easy,” Eagle warned, coming to his feet and steadying her.

“I need to talk to him,” Cassidy said.

“Maybe you should give him more time to sober up,” Eagle suggested.

“Maybe you should get out of my way,” Cassidy retorted. Inside, she was quaking. Eagle was a big man—not as tall as Leo, but she had no doubt if he didn’t want her speaking with his friend, he could easily stop her. But he merely nodded and stepped into the aisle.

Using the headrests to steady herself as she made her way up to the front, Cassidy stopped for a moment and watched Mario and Smoke playing cards. Her son didn’t seem traumatized in the least. In fact, he looked more relaxed around these badass men than she’d seen him in a very long time.

Guilt struck once more, but she pushed it down. She’d done what she’d thought was the right thing, getting Mario out of a situation with his father that had turned abusive. She hadn’t meant to trap him in another kind of hell.

Squaring her shoulders, she continued to the first row, noting how Leo’s friends had given him plenty of space. Since

there wasn't a flight attendant, they had a pretty good bubble of privacy in which to hash out the situation.

Cassidy didn't ask if she could sit next to him, she simply pushed past his legs and took the seat on his left. Leo looked like hell. The wrinkles around his eyes and mouth were more pronounced because of the way he was frowning. His forehead was deeply furrowed, and in the brief second his eyes met hers, she saw they were bloodshot.

"How much rum did you have to drink?" she asked gently.

"Too much," Leo said quietly.

He still wasn't looking at her.

"I don't remember what happened," Cassidy said, getting right to it. "Eagle told me, though. I don't hate you, Leo."

His shoulders seemed to slump even more. "You should."

"I don't," she repeated firmly. "Leo, my God . . . my son and I are sitting on a plane headed for the United States. Do you know how many times I've dreamed of this? Too many to count. But I never really thought it could happen. I wrote those letters to the FBI as a kind of Hail Mary. I didn't think there was a chance in hell that the government would actually send someone to help us. And when you showed up, I was shocked and scared . . . and so very grateful."

"I drugged you, Cassidy. Stuck a needle into your flesh and pushed the plunger. Coke said it was flunitrazepam, but honestly, it could've been anything. And even though it was part of the plan all along, I fucking *bought* you from him." Leo shook his head in disgust.

Cassidy hated the self-loathing she could hear in his voice. She put a hand on his arm. He stared at her fingers as if they were knives ready to plunge into him. She squeezed his forearm. "How much?"

He didn't hesitate. "Half a million."

Cassidy blinked in surprise. "That much?"

"I would've paid whatever he asked. Not that any money was ever going to actually change hands," he mumbled.

“Leo, look at me,” Cassidy said.

He refused.

Sighing, she started to stand, planning to straddle his lap so he couldn't ignore her, but the sudden movement made a sharp pain shoot through her head, and she groaned.

“What? What's wrong?” Leo gasped, looking at her in alarm.

Cassidy opened her mouth to tell him she was fine, that she'd just moved too quickly, but the next thing she knew, Leo had lifted the armrest between them and pulled her onto his lap. Her feet rested on the cushion she'd just been sitting on, Leo gently holding her head between his hands.

“Look at me—let me check your pupils. You probably shouldn't even be up and moving around yet.”

“I'm okay,” she told him, grabbing his wrists as he studied her eyes.

When the worried look didn't fade from his face, she leaned forward, forcing him to drop his hands. Cassidy rested her forehead against his shoulder, snuggling close, loving how she fit perfectly against him. His arms came around her and held her tightly.

“I'm not mad at you,” she repeated into the warm skin of his neck. “You did what you had to do. I'm free. More importantly, Mario's free. You risked your life to get me out of there, and I can't ever repay that.”

“I don't want your gratitude,” Leo growled.

Cassidy could smell the alcohol on his breath, but surprisingly it didn't turn her off. It simply reminded her of the lengths to which this man had gone in order to save her. “What *do* you want?” she whispered.

“I want you to be happy. You and Mario. I want you to live the life you were always meant to live. A safe one. One free of worries.”

“There is no such thing as a life without worries,” Cassidy informed him.

He snorted, and she felt his chest rumble as a result.

“Fine. One with fewer worries than you’ve had so far.”

“Me too,” Cassidy told him. A minute or two went by without either of them saying anything. Then she asked, “How *exactly* did you get me out of there? Eagle’s description wasn’t big on details.”

“After Coke was dead, I put you over my shoulder and simply walked out,” Leo told her.

“And Lloyd or Martin or any of the other guys didn’t stop you?”

“No. I made Coke inform his security staff that you now belonged to me and I could do with you what I wanted. They simply watched as I left.”

Cassidy smiled at that, but then her smile faded. “Do you think they know about Coke yet?”

“Probably.”

“They’re going to be furious.”

“Yup.”

“They’re going to want to kill you, Leo.”

“They might want to, but they’ll have to find me first.”

Cassidy picked her head up and looked at him worriedly.

“Not gonna happen, Cass. G doesn’t exist. The FBI’s cover story is ironclad. They can trace me to Dallas, but I’m obviously not there. No one knows who I am, and there’s no way they can track me to Indy.”

“What about your fingerprints?”

“They can try to use them to find me, but I’ve got enough connections that they won’t lead anywhere.”

“I wouldn’t be able to handle it if years down the line they tracked you down and you or any of your friends got hurt on account of me,” she admitted.

“I can’t say with one hundred percent certainty that it won’t happen, but the FBI does a damn good job of covering

their tracks. And honestly, the power vacuum Coke's death will create is going to take a long while to dissipate. Lloyd and his buddies might not even have jobs when the dust settles, and it'll take money to try to find me, not to mention to get to the States. You and Mario are safe. I'll do whatever it takes to make sure of that. Oh, and Bull called Skylar earlier, and she's going to get in touch with her friend at her old apartment complex to see about getting you and Mario a place to live. And don't be surprised if by the time we get there it's stocked with food and basic necessities for you and your son."

Cassidy frowned. "Seriously?"

"Yes. Although for the record, the offer to stay with me still stands."

As good as that idea sounded, Cassidy didn't want to be anyone's charity case. She'd made some dumb decisions in her life, and she felt a need to stand on her own two feet for once. To prove to herself that she wasn't a complete idiot and that she could do what it took to be a good mother to Mario.

*You can do that and still live with Leo*, her inner voice argued, but Cassidy ignored it.

"Thanks, but I think I need to be on my own for now."

Leo nodded.

"Thank you for what you did to get us out," she told him seriously. "You were probably a lot gentler with that needle than Coke would've been. And for buying me from him. And just . . . for everything."

"I hope you never remember what happened," Leo told her.

Cassidy shrugged. "If I do, I'm not going to change my mind about being grateful to you."

They stared at each other for a long moment before Cassidy rested her head back on his shoulder. "How much longer is the flight?"

"No clue."

"You have to be tired," she remarked.



“I am. And I’m fucking drunk, which I hate,” he grumbled.

Cassidy smiled. She couldn’t help it. He sounded a lot like Mario when he whined about something. “Maybe we could both nap a bit before we land,” she suggested.

“Yeah, maybe.”

Cassidy started to climb off his lap, but Leo’s arms tightened around her. “Stay,” he ordered softly. “Thinking about how close I came to losing you makes me crazy. All it would’ve taken is one wrong word, one wrong move, and we might not be sitting here right now.”

“But I am. We are. You did it, Leo. You outsmarted all of them. I always knew you should’ve been the valedictorian of your class.”

He chortled and leaned his head back on the headrest behind him. Cassidy took that as her cue to close her own eyes. She didn’t feel great, was still a bit muddleheaded from the drug in her system. She turned into Leo and relaxed. Truly relaxed for the first time in what seemed like years. She and Mario were finally safe.



Gramps tightened his hold on the woman in his arms and sighed deeply. He’d heard her wake up and talk to Mario. Had heard her talking to Eagle, but had been too chicken to go to her. To see for himself that she was all right. He wasn’t sorry for what he’d done as far as buying her from Coke and playing drinking games with the man, but he couldn’t forget the anguish he’d seen in her eyes as he’d injected her with the flunitrazepam.

He was grateful she couldn’t remember what had happened, but he knew he’d never forget it. He was going to replay it over and over. Cassidy had been through more shit than anyone should have to suffer, and he hated knowing that even if only for a short period of time, he’d added to the shit piled on her shoulders.

He wasn’t surprised she’d come to him on the plane. That she’d forgiven him for something she couldn’t even remember.

But he'd still do whatever he could to make it up to her.

Gramps hadn't really understood his friends' infatuation with their wives. He'd thought they'd all moved too fast, but he hadn't said anything because it had been their choice.

But now, holding Cassidy as she slept against him, he finally got it. He'd regretted letting his age keep him from asking her out in high school. He'd regretted even more not letting her know he was still interested years later. Then she'd gotten married, and he'd regretted letting her slip through his fingers. He'd let his job and the fact that she was still living in El Paso stand in his way. So many regrets.

But it seemed as if the universe was giving him a second chance. There were too many coincidences leading to their meeting back up for it to be merely a fluke. He'd play things by ear, help her get settled in an apartment, but he'd make sure she knew he wanted her. Wanted to date her. Wanted a relationship. No matter how long it might take to convince her he was serious, he'd wait. She was worth it.

Cassidy shifted against him, and Gramps again tightened his hold. He closed his eyes and sent up a prayer, thanking God for keeping her and Mario safe for him. He might be slow on the uptake, but he wasn't an idiot. Cassidy and her son were *his* now. His to protect. His to care for. His to love. It might take a while for them to completely trust him and come to love him back, but he'd give them whatever time they needed. They were worth it.



Lloyd Robinson stared down at his boss in disbelief. He didn't have to check his pulse to see if he was alive. It was more than obvious Michael Coke was dead.

"Fuck," he swore. This was not good. Life as he knew it was about to change, and not for the better. He'd had a cushy life as the head of Coke's security team, but blame for his death was going to fall directly on Lloyd's shoulders.

He'd tried to tell his boss not to trust G. That if something seemed too good to be true, it usually was.

But Coke had been too desperate for a new lucrative distribution channel for his drugs. More inroads into the States. Now everything would go to shit because there wasn't anyone to immediately take his place. Oh, lots of his lieutenants would *want* to take his place, but the power struggle was going to be long and bloody.

“Fuck!” Lloyd swore again, then turned for Coke's desk. He needed cash—lots of it. Before the others found out Coke was dead. Everyone was going to make a money grab. He was just lucky he had found Coke first, had a head start on getting the cash kept on hand.

This was all that bitch's fault. It *had* to be. It couldn't be a coincidence that her brat of a son had disappeared at the same time Coke had been killed by G. She had to have gotten word out to someone, and they'd sent G in to get her.

He rifled through the drawers in the desk, pocketing two pistols and a stack of cash. Lloyd stepped out of the office, snapping his fingers at Martin to follow him. Out of everyone on the security force, he could trust Martin. The man annoyed him to no end, but he was still reliable. He shut the office door, hoping to buy time before anyone else found their boss dead on his couch.

He strode up the stairs toward Cassidy's room. She had to have left something behind that would help him track her. But even if she hadn't—her room was searched fairly often—Lloyd would still find her and make her pay. One way or another, Cassidy Hewitt would regret whatever had happened in that office last night.

# Chapter Eight

Gramps watched Cassidy closely as she walked into her recently acquired apartment at the Southpoint Apartments complex. Her mouth fell open in shock. The space was completely furnished. Not only that—there were several bags of groceries on the counter, and he could see at least ten more bags sitting on the couch in the small living area.

“I . . . what . . . this apartment isn’t empty,” she said, stating the obvious.

“It’s not. This is all your stuff now,” Tiana told her with a smile. “After I talked to Skylar, and she told me why you needed an apartment pronto, I got together with Maria, Susan, and some of the others around here, and we all donated stuff we don’t need. The couch came from Goodwill down the street. Somebody was throwing out that table and chairs, and one of my friends snagged it for you. Skylar and her crew went shopping and got you the food and clothes. We have no clue if everything’ll fit, but if not, don’t sweat it—I’m sure Skylar will take you to the thrift shop later, and you can find stuff for yourself.”

“I . . . I don’t know what to say,” Cassidy said.

Gramps hadn’t previously been a huge fan of Tiana’s. He knew she used to run with the Vice Lords, but he had to admit that what she and the others in the complex had done was pretty damn awesome. Southpoint wasn’t in the best area of town, and he hated that he couldn’t have arranged to put her and Mario into one of the nicer complexes, but Bull had insisted that Tiana, Maria, and Susan would look after Cassidy and Mario. He had to believe that. “Just say thank you,” he urged Cassidy.

“Thank you!” she exclaimed immediately. “Seriously, thank you so much. I had no idea what we were going to do. Probably sleep on the floor for a while, right, Mario?”

Her son nodded.

“Why don’t you go over and check out the stuff in the bags?” Gramps suggested.

Mario’s eyes lit up, and he hurried over to the couch.

“Skylar apologizes for not being here this morning. She wanted to, but she had to teach,” Gramps told Cassidy. “And Taylor’s under deadline to get a book proofread. Molly had also planned to come, but she’s got morning sickness. I’d like to take you guys over to Silverstone Towing this afternoon, and you’ll meet them all then.”

“I’d really like that. You’ve told me so much about everyone that I feel as if I already know them. And I want to thank them for everything they’ve done for me and Mario on such short notice.”

Gramps loved seeing Cassidy so happy. It was striking home to him how stressed she’d been. Living in Coke’s house hadn’t been easy—she’d constantly been on her guard. But not even forty-eight hours after getting out of there, she visibly looked so much more relaxed.

They’d stopped in Miami for longer than they’d planned, but everyone had needed a break after the intensity of the previous few days. And Cassidy had still been feeling off kilter from the drugs in her system. So Smoke had rented three hotel rooms near the airport. Cassidy and Mario had insisted Gramps stay with them in their room, and they’d slept for eight hours straight.

Well . . . Gramps had spent a lot of those eight hours simply watching Cass and her son sleep. He was more thankful than he could say that everything had gone as well as it had.

The other Silverstone men had napped, called their wives, and set the ball in motion for Cassidy to walk into her new apartment almost as soon as they’d landed in Indianapolis. Bull, Eagle, and Smoke had left to reunite with their women, and Gramps had no problem taking Cass under his wing. After spending so much time with her and getting a glimpse into her inner strength, simply dropping her off and leaving wasn’t something he could manage right now.

“I’m sure you have things you need to do,” Cassidy said.

Gramps couldn’t read her tone. Didn’t know if she really wanted him to leave, or if she was saying that because she was feeling guilty for taking up too much of his time. The last thing he wanted to do was push himself on her if she truly needed some space, but he also didn’t want to leave yet.

Knowing he was being ridiculous, that Cassidy and Mario were perfectly safe in the apartment, that Tiana was there if they needed anything, he reluctantly nodded. There wasn’t anything he truly needed to do, though. He supposed he’d go back to his small house, unpack, do some laundry, and then . . .

Then just sit around wondering what Cassidy and Mario were doing. If they were settling in all right.

“I’ll come back around three thirty, if that’s okay,” he told her.

Cassidy nodded. “Of course. That gives us more than enough time to unpack everything. I suppose I’ll need to figure out the bus routes so I can get groceries and stuff for myself.”

Gramps wanted to tell her that he’d take her wherever she wanted to go, but Tiana spoke before he could.

“I can show you. There’s a stop near the entrance to the complex. It’s super easy.”

“Thank you,” Cassidy said with a huge smile.

Knowing that Cassidy didn’t truly *need* him was something he’d have to get used to. She’d managed to raise Mario for eleven years without him. She’d survived living in a drug dealer’s mansion for five years. She didn’t need him hovering.

Taking a deep breath, Gramps gave Tiana a chin lift, then headed for the door. Right as he opened it, he felt a hand on his back. Turning, he saw that Cassidy had followed him.

“Leo?”

“Yeah, Cass?”

“I . . . thank you. For the apartment, for getting us out of Jamaica, for being so great with Mario . . . just . . . I appreciate it.”

“I know you do,” Gramps told her. And he did. But the problem was that he didn’t really want her gratitude. He wanted more. *Everything*. But he had to let her stand on her own two feet. Make her own decisions. She had to acclimate to being back in the States, to not being under the watchful eyes of Coke and his security force. The last thing he wanted was to stifle her. He wanted her to soar, and she could only do that if she had the space to spread her wings.

“It’s gonna feel weird not to have you around,” she said hesitantly.

Gramps’s heart melted. “I’m gonna be around,” he said gruffly. “As much as you want me to be. Just because we’re back in the States doesn’t mean that’s it between us. I like you, Cass. I wouldn’t have suggested you come back to Indy if I didn’t want to continue to get to know you.”

The relief in her eyes was instant, and a balm to his soul. Taking a chance, Gramps stepped toward her and put his hand behind her neck. He pulled her close and hugged her tightly against his chest. He loved how she immediately wrapped her own arms around him and squeezed him back. She felt good against him.

Knowing his plan to give her space was going to be shot to hell if he stayed much longer, he pulled back. But he couldn’t resist leaning down and kissing her forehead. “I’ll get you and Mario phones while I’m out and about today.”

“Leo, no—it’s too much.”

Gramps merely shook his head. “It’s not. You both need to be able to stay in touch with each other at a moment’s notice. I think it’ll take a while until you guys feel safe, and being able to just shoot off a text will help. Not to mention, you’ll have access to me and the rest of the guys, and Skylar, Taylor, and Molly too. And I’m sure you want to contact your parents.”

“Why are you being so dang nice?” Cassidy tried to joke, even as her eyes teared up.

“Because you deserve it. Because *Mario* deserves it. Because there’s something about you that makes me long for what I couldn’t have when I was eighteen, and I’ve regretted not doing something about it for almost thirty years. I’m not going to fuck up a second chance. Have a good day. If you need me, Tiana has my number. Don’t hesitate to have her call if you need anything. I’ll see you later.”

Ignoring the way her eyes widened, Gramps forced himself to let go of her and head out of the apartment.

Gramps walked toward his dark-blue Nissan Frontier. The guys gave him shit about it, saying it wasn’t a pickup or an SUV, just some weird mishmash of both, but he loved it. He had room for passengers, and he could haul shit in the small bed if he needed to. Before pulling out of the lot, Gramps looked into the rearview mirror.

Cass and Mario’s apartment was on the second floor of the complex, on the far end of the row. Tiana was next to them, then Skylar’s old apartment—where a single mother now lived—then Maria’s place. They were safe.

Why he had a pit in his stomach, Gramps didn’t know, but he couldn’t linger if Cass wanted space. He had to let them fly free. Finally be who they were meant to be, without fear of anyone forcing them to sell drugs—or trying to sell *them*. This was their new life, and he’d make sure they enjoyed every second of it.



Cassidy stood by the closed door after Leo left, feeling overwhelmed. She’d wanted to beg him to stay, but he had a life to get back to. She needed to be strong, though it was hard when she felt anything but.

“He’s a good man,” Tiana said from behind her.

Cassidy did her best to get herself together before she turned. “He is,” she agreed.



“Skylar told me that you guys have known each other for a long time.”

“Yeah. He was a senior when I was a freshman in high school.”

“Let me guess, you had a crush on him back then,” Tiana said with a smirk.

“Well, yeah, but I think everyone did.”

“This isn’t my business, but y’all should know, I’m the nosy neighbor. I get in *everyone’s* business, so you should probably get used to it. From where I’m standin’, the man is seriously into you.”

Cassidy knew she was blushing, but she forced herself not to do a little happy dance right there in the foyer of her new apartment. She shook her head. “It’s just that we’ve spent a few intense days together.”

Tiana quirked her lips and shook her head. “Nope. That’s not it. I saw Skylar’s relationship with Bull progress from zero to full speed within a very short period of time. I saw the way he looked at Sky, as if he couldn’t bear to be apart from her. I had a feeling if he could’ve thrown her over his shoulder and carried her out of here, he would’ve. I see the same look in Gramps’s eyes.”

Cassidy licked her lips. “It’s different with us. He feels guilty because of what happened to me. About what he had to do.” She didn’t know why she was protesting so much. Probably because if she believed her new neighbor and friend, she’d be even more devastated if it became clear Leo was just being the kind man he was.

“I don’t know nothin’ ’bout what happened, but trust me when I say he doesn’t look at you like a man who just wants to be friends looks at a woman,” Tiana said. Then she linked her arm with Cassidy’s and pulled her back toward the kitchen. “But enough about that. We’ve got a lot of work to get done to get this place set up how you want it before he’ll be back. You can decide how you want to set up your cabinets, Mario can

unpack all his new stuff, and we need to get to know each other better. You're from El Paso? That's what Skylar said."

Cassidy let herself be steered back into the kitchen, deciding it was good to have someone to chat with. She hadn't trusted anyone in so long, it felt almost weird to talk about where she grew up and about her past.

For the first time in years, she was looking forward to the future. She had a lot to figure out—getting a job, finding a school for Mario, health insurance, learning her way around her new city—but instead of feeling overwhelmed and scared about it all, she was excited. Cassidy seemed to have more friends after only a day here in Indianapolis than she'd had living in El Paso, which was crazy since she'd grown up there.

But Alfred had slowly alienated her from everyone she used to hang out with. She hadn't realized it, too busy trying to be a good wife and not rock the boat. By the time she'd had Mario, the only people she'd spoken to on a regular basis had been her husband and her parents . . . and even then, she'd only spoken to her mom and dad once a month or so.

Now she had Tiana and the other women in the complex. Skylar, Taylor, and Molly had gone out of their way to make her feel welcome in her new home and to get her what she needed to start over. And, of course, there were Leo and his friends.

She had no idea what the future might hold, but she couldn't help but think this was where she was supposed to be.

Smiling, Cassidy reached for a bag and began to unpack.

# Chapter Nine

“Relax,” Leo said as he pulled through a security gate when they arrived at Silverstone Towing.

But Cassidy couldn’t relax. The heavy security reminded her a bit too much of the prison she’d just broken out of.

Leo pulled his truck into a space behind the foreboding building and shut off the engine. He unclicked his seat belt and turned so he could see Mario in the back seat and Cassidy at the same time.

“We’ve got a lot of security here at Silverstone Towing because of the part of town we’re in. Crime has gone down in the six or so years since we started, but the tow trucks are very expensive. And we want our employees to feel absolutely safe while they’re here. This is the main building—no one gets in without knowing the code to the door or being let in by someone who does. Silverstone is open twenty-four hours a day, and we don’t want anyone thinking they might be able to break in at three o’clock in the morning or anything.

“We’ve got cameras to keep track of outsiders, not to monitor what people are doing *inside*. There’s even a room in the basement that’s impenetrable. No one gets into that room without approval. I’ll give you both the code to get into the building so you can come here whenever you want. You’re safe here. You aren’t prisoners. I swear.”

Cassidy took a deep breath and nodded. “The gate out front reminded me a bit too much of Jamaica,” she admitted.

“I know, and I’m sorry. I should’ve warned you.”

She shook her head. “No, this is your business. It’s smart to keep it secure. I’m just being jumpy.”

“Leo?” Mario asked from the back seat.

“Yeah, bud?” Leo said, turning to give him his complete attention.

“Do you *really* think we’re safe? That Lloyd or Martin won’t make us go back?”

Cassidy’s heart hurt. *She’d* done this to her son. If she could go back and make different choices, she would. But since she couldn’t, she vowed from this moment on to do everything in her power to put him first. To provide him a safe environment in which to grow into a man.

She jolted when she felt Leo take her hand in his, but he didn’t look at her. He kept his eyes on her son. No one gave Mario their entire attention like Leo did.

“I wish I could tell you that nothing bad will happen to you ever again,” Leo said. “But I can’t. There are bad men and women all over the world who take delight in having power over others. I guess if you locked yourself in your apartment and never came out, you might be safe, but that wouldn’t be much fun, would it?”

Mario shook his head.

“So I can’t guarantee that you’re one hundred percent safe. But what I *can* promise is that your mom, and everyone you meet today, will do whatever it takes to protect you from anyone who wants to hurt you. And I mean *anyone*. Lloyd, Martin, mean kids you might meet in the future, and anyone who thinks they can bully you because they perceive you to be different from them. Silverstone is a safe space for you and your mom, and everyone who goes through the door. Period.”

Mario nodded.

Cassidy knew he didn’t totally understand what Leo was giving him. If he did turn out to be gay, life wouldn’t be easy for Mario, but Leo was laying the groundwork for a place where he could be himself, whoever that was. It meant more to her than she’d ever be able to articulate.

She squeezed Leo’s fingers, and he returned the pressure, still not taking his gaze from Mario’s.

“I know a lot has happened in a very short period of time, but I promise things will calm down. Your mom will find you an amazing school where you can make friends with other

boys and girls your age. I've even been on the lookout for a place for you to take dance lessons. Would you like that?"

"You have?" Mario asked, his eyes growing huge. "Really?"

"Really." Leo darted a glance at Cassidy. "With your mom's permission, of course."

"Oh, Mom, can I? I really, really want to!"

Cassidy chuckled. "Of course, Mar. I thought we could also look into enrolling you in gymnastics if you wanted to try it."

"Holy cow! This is the best day *ever!*" Mario exclaimed. Then he reached for the door handle and sprang out of the car and did an impromptu jig right there in the parking lot of Silverstone Towing.

"Guess he's a little excited," Leo said dryly, his eyes dancing as he looked at Cassidy.

"Just a little," Cassidy said, then grabbed hold of Leo's hand as he went to climb out of the truck. "Leo?"

"Yeah, Cass?"

"I'm sorry about getting freaked out over the security. I really do understand why you have it."

"Don't ever be sorry for worrying about something," Leo said, tucking a stray curl behind her ear. "You're allowed to feel how you feel. And I'm sure this won't be the last time something from your past triggers you. If you have concerns in the future, don't hesitate to express them. Okay?"

"Okay," she said, feeling her belly do somersaults. It was obvious Leo liked her, and she definitely liked him back, but it still kind of felt too good to be true. Was Leo this way with everyone he rescued, or was there something special between them? The connection she felt with him certainly seemed unique, but she was the worst judge when it came to stuff like that. Time would tell.

She climbed out of the truck and laughed at Mario, who was still dancing his little heart out.

Leo whistled and gestured to Mario. “Come on, twinkle toes. I need to show you how to work the code to get in the building.”

Her son laughed and scampered over to Leo’s side.

Thrilled that Mario seemed to be so carefree, she followed him over to where they were standing by the security box next to the door. Cassidy knew it would take her a few tries to remember the complicated code Leo punched in, but she nodded anyway, as if it wasn’t a big deal. He smirked, probably suspecting she’d never remember the ten-digit code he’d repeated three times.

They walked through the door, and she was surprised when Leo grabbed three name tags from a large metal board hanging just inside. He crouched in front of Mario and handed him a tag with his name in large black letters.

“You remember why you need to wear this when you’re here?” he asked.

Mario nodded. “Because Taylor has progro, promo . . . pro something, and she can’t remember faces and names.”

“Prosopagnosia, and correct. This isn’t just a safe space for you—it’s safe for everyone. And we want Taylor to not worry about figuring out who everyone is when she’s here. We all wear name tags so she doesn’t have to ask who we are.”

Mario nodded. “That’s nice.”

“It is,” Leo agreed as he stood. He held out a name tag for Cassidy. “Here’s yours.”

“I can’t believe you already had name tags made for us.”

“Skylar did it. She’s totally on-the-ball organized. I think it’s the kindergarten teacher in her,” Leo said with a smile. He attached his name tag to his shirt, then gestured down the hall. “Ready?”

Cassidy wasn’t sure she was, but she nodded anyway.

“It’ll be fine,” Leo said, easily able to read her uncertainty.

Mario grabbed her hand, seemingly as nervous as she was, and the three of them walked down the hall toward the large open room Cassidy could see ahead. It sounded like there were a lot of people there, and when they finally stepped into the room, Cassidy saw that she was right. The room was full.

But everyone was smiling and laughing and having a great time. The happiness in the room went a long way toward making her relax. She couldn't remember ever walking into a room this crowded in Michael's mansion and feeling comfortable. There had always been tension in the air, as if everyone was just waiting for shit to hit the fan.

"Hey," Leo said, giving everyone in the room a chin lift.

Cassidy loved that. It was such an alpha-male thing to do, and every time he did it, she couldn't help but smile. She'd even caught Mario copying the movement a time or two. It seemed as if she wasn't the only one enamored of their rescuer.

The men in the room all called out greetings, but the three women who hurried toward them were the people Cassidy focused on. She knew right away who they were, even without having to read their name tags.

The pretty redhead had to be Skylar. She'd heard a lot about the kindergarten teacher and could guess by the bright welcoming smile on her face that she was probably just as nice as Leo had said she was. The woman with the baby in her arms was Taylor, and the pregnant woman was Molly.

All three women seemed open and friendly, and it wasn't hard to read the curiosity on their faces as well.

"Hi!" Skylar said as she approached. "I'm Skylar. And this is Taylor and Molly. It's so good to meet you. Did you find everything in your apartment? Tiana said that you and Mario were settling in all right, but if there's anything we didn't get, we're more than happy to go shopping with you."

Taylor laughed. "Yeah, Skylar loves shopping."

Molly smiled at them both, one hand on her belly, as if she couldn't bear to let go of her unborn child.

Cassidy felt a little awkward, as she always did when meeting new people, but smiled and said, “Hi. Thank you so much for everything you’ve done for us.”

“You must be Mario,” Molly said as she smiled at Cassidy’s son.

He nodded.

She leaned close, as if she was going to tell him a secret. “I hear you like to dance.”

When he nodded again, Cassidy nudged him. “Words, Mario.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he dutifully answered.

“I have it on good authority that Mark is thinking about getting a *Dance Dance Revolution* video game for the basement. Would you like that?”

Mario looked up at Cassidy, then back at Molly. “I don’t know what that is, but if it involves dancing, I’m sure I would.”

“Oh man, you’re in for a treat,” Molly said excitedly. “You’re going to love it!”

“Smoke’s going to buy another game?” Leo asked with a groan, but Cassidy could tell he was teasing. “There’re already two pinball machines and *Pac-Man* down there. I’m not sure we need anything else.”

“Wrong,” Eagle said as he came up behind Taylor. He pulled her against his side, and Cassidy noted how Taylor immediately seemed to melt into him. “We’ve got more kids than ever hanging out here now, especially after school. We don’t want them to get bored. And I’m definitely okay if Smoke buys another machine for me to get the high score on,” he said with a smirk. “Besides, my kid’s gonna be the pinball champion of the world, so I need to make sure he or she has lots of machines to practice on.”

“*You’re* going to get the high score?” Taylor asked with a roll of her eyes. “I don’t think so.”



Cassidy heard Leo groan again, then he leaned down and whispered in her ear, “Don’t ever let those two talk you into playing. They’re both disgustingly good at pinball. I have no idea how they do it.”

“You play pinball, Mario?” Taylor asked.

“No, ma’am.”

“You can call me Taylor. And that’s good. I won’t have to unteach you bad habits. Later, if your mom says it’s okay, we’ll go down and I’ll show you all the tips and tricks.”

“You hungry, Mario?” Bull asked as he came forward and joined their huddle. “Archer made homemade mac and cheese. Trust me, it’s the cheesiest, gooiest, most awesome macaroni and cheese you’ve ever eaten.”

Mario looked up at her with such an expression of longing, Cassidy could only chuckle. “Go on, it’s fine.” They’d eaten lunch not too long ago, but Mario was small for his age, and it wouldn’t hurt him to fill out a little more.

The baby in Taylor’s arms began to fuss, and she wrinkled her nose. “Smells like I need to change him,” she told the group in general.

“I’ve got him,” Eagle said as he reached for his son.

Cassidy loved the look of devotion on his face. She was seeing a whole new side of Leo’s friends, and she liked it a hell of a lot. Living in Michael’s mansion, she hadn’t seen a whole lot of respect for women. And none of the men would’ve stooped to changing a diaper, not that there were any babies living there.

Eagle kissed Taylor, then cooed to his son as he carried him off down a hall.

“We’re very glad you’re here,” Taylor said softly. “I’m sure you’re overwhelmed with everything that’s happening, but rest assured that if you need anything, we’re here for you.”

“Thank you so much,” Cassidy said. She liked these women . . . and their husbands. Everyone had been friendly

and welcoming, and while it was overwhelming, she could tell their concern for her and Mario was sincere.

“Come on, let me introduce you to the others,” Leo said. His fingertips rested on the small of her back, and a tingle went up Cassidy’s spine. Even that was different from what she was used to. If Lloyd or Martin or any of the other men in Michael’s house had wanted her to go somewhere, they’d simply grabbed her arm and hauled her around. There had been no gentleness. She hadn’t really thought much about it after so many years, but experiencing how accommodating and gentle Leo and his friends were just put a spotlight on how bad her situation truly had been.

Leo steered her over to the kitchen. A man with a very slight paunch and a huge smile greeted her.

“You’re Cassidy!” he boomed. Then he turned to look down at her son. “And you’re Mario! It’s so good to meet you!”

“Cassidy, this is Shawn Archer. He’s our resident cook. We hired him to help keep this place clean and to do the landscaping as well as cook, but we quickly realized where his true talent was. Here in the kitchen,” Leo explained.

Shawn was a little taller than her, with friendly brown eyes. His cheeks were flushed from the heat of the stove, and he had a bit of flour in his brown hair. He looked genuinely happy, which made Cassidy relax even more. The cooks in Michael’s house had always had scowls on their faces, and she’d quickly learned they didn’t like *anyone* in their kitchen. They had also been strict. If Mario had wanted a snack, he’d been out of luck; they hadn’t allowed anyone to pilfer food to tide themselves over between meals.

Shawn turned to Mario and motioned for him to come closer. After glancing at her to make sure it was okay, Mario slowly walked forward. Shawn put his arm around Mario’s shoulders and brought him to a closed door. He opened it and explained, “This is the pantry. I’ve got all the snacks on the lower shelves. So when you’re hungry, I can either make you something to eat, or you can find something on your own.”

Mario's eyes got big as he took in the cornucopia of food on the shelves. Potato chips, pretzels, popcorn, pudding cups . . . it was a kids' treasure trove.

"But it's not good to only eat crap, of course. I've got fresh fruit and vegetables as well. You should probably balance out the junk food with some healthy stuff, too, okay?" Shawn prodded.

Mario nodded absently, still fascinated by the amount of food he was looking at.

Seeing his reaction made Cassidy overwhelmingly sad. He hadn't had a chance to be a kid in *any* way, and that was on her shoulders too.

"It's okay," Leo said from next to her. "You did the best you could in a shitty situation."

Swallowing hard, Cassidy nodded. But she knew she had a lot to make up for. She didn't want Mario to end up being a spoiled-rotten brat, but giving him some of the things he'd missed out on was at the top of her agenda.

"Dad!"

A little girl came running into the kitchen, and Shawn caught her around the waist as she ran right into him.

"Hey, Sandra. I want you to meet some new friends," Shawn said as he turned her to face Cassidy and her son. "This is Cassidy and Mario. They're new to the area, and Gramps's new friends."

"Hi!" Sandra said brightly. "You wanna play with me?" she asked Mario.

The little girl was beautiful. Probably around six or seven, as far as Cassidy could tell. She had black hair held neatly in two braids, with pink and white beads at the end of each. They swung around her head as she moved to take in everyone in the room, making her seem like she was constantly in motion. She had on a pair of jeans with holes in the knees and a Silverstone Towing T-shirt.

Mario once again looked up to his mom for permission. "It's okay," Cassidy reassured him.

"Only for a bit," Shawn told his daughter. "You promised to help me with dinner."

Sandra looked at Mario and said, "We're making chicken dumplin's. Daddy makes them taste sooooo good. I always pick out the carrots, but you can't even taste the other vegetables he puts in the sauce."

"I've never had that," Mario told the little girl.

"You haven't?" Sandra's eyes got wide. "It's to die for! Especially the way Daddy makes them. Come on, I've got my Barbies and Matchbox cars set up in one of the sleeping rooms. I'm making a fort where all the people are hiding from the Bigfoot who's about to trample the city."

Mario looked overwhelmed, but he let his new friend grab his hand and tow him toward the same hallway where Eagle had disappeared a little bit ago.

"Sorry 'bout that," Shawn said. "She's a little bossy, but not in a mean way. We're workin' on it."

"It's fine," Cassidy said. "Mario hasn't been around many little girls, and he hasn't had much chance to simply play. It'll be good for him."

Leo then introduced her to the other people in the room, all Silverstone Towing employees. He and his friends had told her all about their business while they had been in Miami. She was impressed that they'd been able to become a success in such a short period of time. But after seeing the setup and how happy all the employees were, she could understand.

She was very thankful everyone was wearing name tags, because she'd never remember their names. Jose, Robert, Christine, Leigh . . . her head was spinning. They explained how the drivers came and went from the main garage throughout the day. If things were slow, they hung out and watched TV, grabbed a nap, or ate some of the delicious meals Shawn provided for them. The dispatch room was manned

twenty-four hours a day, as Silverstone Towing was always on call.

Cassidy had been blown away by the basement. Between the pinball games, the foosball table, the comfortable couches, and the huge television, it was a place where people could gather to have fun or simply relax.

The other guys were in various parts of the building with their wives, and before she and Leo had gone downstairs, they'd checked on Mario, who was happily playing with Sandra. It was currently just Cassidy and Leo in the basement, and somewhere along the line, Leo had taken hold of her hand. It had been a very long time since she'd held hands with someone other than her son, and holding Leo's felt . . . comforting.

He led her to the end of a short hallway and stopped in front of a door that was obviously different from the others. She could tell it was reinforced, and because of the complicated-looking security pad next to it, she knew it wasn't just another sleeping room or storage closet.

"This is our safe room," Leo told her. "I told you about it out in the car. It's where Silverstone does all our research and planning for our missions. It has our top-secret files on possible targets. The room itself is fireproof, tornado proof, and no one can break in."

Cassidy swallowed. She wasn't sure why he was showing her this room.

Like usual, it was as if Leo could read her mind. "I want you and Mario to feel safe here. For too long, you were under Coke's control. Your life wasn't your own. Living here in Indiana is a brand-new start. You can do anything, be anyone you want to be. I'm not saying you won't have disappointments and challenges, because that's life, but at Silverstone Towing, you and your son are secure. One hundred percent safe and protected. And if at any time you *don't* feel safe, you can come down here and hole up in this room. No questions asked."

Cassidy's eyes filled with tears.

He gently wiped them off her cheeks with his thumbs when they spilled over. “I’m not expecting anything to happen. As I already told you, the FBI covered our tracks very well. But nothing is foolproof. Coke is dead, but there are others in his organization who aren’t. Silverstone is your haven. Period. Understand?”

Cassidy nodded.

“Good. Let me show you how the security pad works.”

Once inside, Leo patiently explained that the lock was biometric, and then he programmed her fingerprint into the system. “You don’t have to push any buttons to get in—just put your finger on the scanner, and the door will open immediately. In extreme situations, you can lock the door from the inside, or out, by hitting the star key, then nine-nine-nine. That will trigger extreme lockdown. No one can get in or out without the override code.”

“Who has that?” Cassidy asked.

“Bull, Eagle, Smoke, and myself. That’s it. Taylor, Skylar, and Molly are all programmed to be able to get in and out of the room, but the employees aren’t. It’s not that we don’t want them to be safe in case of anything happening, but they don’t know about our missions, and we want to keep it that way.”

Cassidy bit her lip.

“What? What are you thinking?”

“Why are you telling *me*?” she asked. “I mean, the others are all married to your friends. That makes sense.”

She couldn’t read the look on Leo’s face, but she heard the sincerity in his tone. “Because you need to feel safe more than anyone I’ve ever met. You’ve been screwed over time and time again. Because you know firsthand what Silverstone does. You’ve lived it. And because I trust you, Cass. I’ve known you for over twenty-five years. Granted, we don’t know the little things about each other, but when you wrote me while I was deployed, I lived for your letters. They made me smile, and we opened up to each other. I was stupid for not trying harder to keep you in my life, and I feel as if we’ve

been given a second chance. But there's no pressure here. You need time to live your life. To find your new normal. You and Mario both need that. And . . . maybe I'm crazy, and what I'm feeling is only one sided."

"It's not," Cassidy whispered, feeling shy but energized at the same time. She'd written Leo when he'd been deployed because she'd missed him. Because she'd been proud of him. She'd had no idea her letters had meant so much.

Regrets swamped her. Her life could've been so different if she'd just had the courage to go after what she'd wanted.

"Good. I'm not about to rush anything. You and Mario need time, and I'm going to give that to you. But I hope you'll let me be your friend while you're figuring things out."

"Of course," Cassidy told him.

"Good. So . . . back to the safe room. If at any time you feel nervous or uneasy, you come here. I don't care if it's two in the morning—get your ass to Silverstone, and lock yourself in. You can call me on the phone from in here, and I'll do what I can to check things out. But honestly, you don't even need a reason to come here. Bull and the others have told me that sometimes their wives have panic attacks because of what they've been through."

Cassidy nodded. She'd also been informed by the men about the complicated backgrounds of their wives. How Skylar had gotten herself kidnapped by a pedophile who had actually been interested in little Sandra. That Taylor had been targeted by a serial killer who'd stalked and tormented her for months. And how Molly's ex had stalked her, shot her, and then left her for dead. Cassidy had been intimidated to meet them, but she also felt a kinship with the women. They knew what it was like to feel helpless. To feel as if they had no control over their lives.

"Thank you," she told Leo. "Those words seem so inadequate for what I'm feeling, though."

"I'm sorry I didn't find you faster," Leo told her.

Cassidy moved without thought, putting her arms around him and laying her head on his chest. He embraced her back, and she sighed in contentment. As she stood in the middle of his safe room, it felt as if she were in a bubble. Michael was dead. Lloyd couldn't get to her. Martin wouldn't touch her son again and wouldn't send him out into the dangerous parts of Kingston to deliver drugs. They could both relax. Let down their guards.

She still had a lot of shit to figure out, but she knew she wouldn't be here now if it hadn't been for Leo and his friends.

He didn't have to share the safe room with her, but she couldn't deny that she felt better knowing she had somewhere to lock herself and Mario down, just in case. Intellectually, she knew she was thousands of miles away from Jamaica, but frequently in the last couple of days, her heart had thumped in fear at the thought of what she'd escaped.

Several moments later, Leo pulled back, and Cassidy let him go. "Come on. Let's go check on Mario. Sandra *can* be pretty bossy sometimes—and you have to try Archer's mac and cheese."

"Is his chicken and dumplings as good as Sandra claimed?" she asked.

"Better," Leo said with a smile.

The safe room door closed heavily behind them as they walked toward the stairs. Cassidy had to smile again at the over-the-top games in the basement. Leo and his friends had gone overboard, but it was obvious they had the utmost respect for their employees. Silverstone Towing was an unusual place; she loved that everyone and their families were invited to hang out even when they weren't on duty. They'd created a community, and it was hard for her to believe that she and Mario had been invited into the fold.

As she followed Leo up the stairs, she couldn't help letting her gaze wander over the man . . . stopping to check out his ass. Now that she was out of Jamaica, she could think of something other than keeping her son safe. Leo was a hell of a



good-looking man. He might be forty-five, but he could give many twentysomethings a run for their money.

As her libido flickered back to life, Cassidy smiled. The world truly was a strange place. She'd been rescued from a situation most couldn't fathom, only to come full circle, back to crushing on Leo Zanardi like she had when she was a freshman. Even more amazing, he still seemed to be everything she'd ever wanted in a man. Protective, alpha, good with children, and a good friend.

She had no idea where this new phase of her life would lead, but she could only hope Leo would be involved. If she couldn't have him as her lover, she'd take having him as a friend, because she could no longer seem to imagine her life without him in it.

# Chapter Ten

Cassidy took a deep breath. A week had passed since she'd returned to the States, and it was past time she called her parents. She didn't know why she'd been putting it off. She supposed it was because she had no idea how she was going to explain the last five years. She was so ashamed of what she'd done, of the situation she'd gotten herself and Mario into. And she knew her parents, her mom especially, would feel horrible that they hadn't been able to help her.

She'd been forced to lie to them over and over. Whenever Lloyd had allowed her to call home, he'd listened closely. Standing over her as a physical reminder that she couldn't tell them her true situation.

Mario was currently over at Tiana's apartment. She'd offered to take him for a while so Cassidy could make the call in private. She wanted Mario to get to know his grandparents, but this first phone call was going to be tough, and he didn't need to be there for it. There would be time for him to talk to them later.

Taking a deep breath, Cassidy dialed her parents' number.

The phone rang once. Then twice. And just when she thought she'd get a reprieve, her mom answered after the third ring.

"Hello?"

Cassidy's voice got caught in her throat at the sound of her mom's voice. She'd stopped asking to call her parents because it had simply been too painful, and hearing her mom's voice after so long was terribly emotional.

"Hello? Is anyone there?"

Cassidy heard her dad in the background asking, "Who is it, Alice?"

"I don't know. No one seems to be there," her mom said.

"Mom?" Cassidy whispered, forcing herself to speak.

“Cassidy?” her mom asked, the shock clear in her tone. “Is it you?”

“Yeah, it’s me,” Cassidy said.

“Oh, Julio, it’s Cassidy!” her mom called. “Oh my goodness, it’s so good to hear from you. It’s been so long!”

“I know, I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’m just glad you called. How are you? How’re things in Jamaica?”

Taking a deep breath, Cassidy said, “We have a lot to talk about.”

“Oh . . . I know that tone,” Alice said. “Something’s wrong.”

“Well, it was, but now it’s okay,” Cassidy told her mom honestly.

“Okay, sweetie. I’m sitting, and I put the phone on speaker so your dad can hear too. Lay it on us.”

So she did.

Cassidy told her parents *everything*. They already knew she’d left Texas to get away from her ex and the stifling atmosphere of El Paso. They knew she’d taken a job as a nanny and teacher for a rich Jamaican, but that was as far as the truth went. She told them how Michael had turned out to be a drug dealer, and how she and Mario had been prisoners in his mansion. She told them how every time she’d called before, everything she’d said had been monitored. She even told them how she’d sent letters to the FBI to try to get help.

“I can’t believe it,” her mom whispered, not for the first time during Cassidy’s explanation. “But you’re all right? Truly okay?”

“Yes. I’m so sorry I couldn’t tell you anything before now.”

“Of course you couldn’t,” her dad said, the words emotional.

“Oh, honey. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Cassidy said. “We’re okay.”

“When can we see you?”

This was the hardest part yet. She *desperately* wanted to see her parents . . . but she’d discussed this with Leo. Because of everything that had happened, because she’d used Lloyd’s phone to call them over the years . . . he likely knew where they lived.

It was better for *everyone*’s safety if they all lay low for a while.

“It’s not safe right now,” she said.

“But you said you were good. That the drug dealer was dead . . . ,” her dad started.

“I *am* good now, but he had lots of bad people working for him, Dad. They were training Mario to run drugs. They *sold* me to one of my rescuers, like I was nothing more than a piece of meat. They’re truly evil men, and I wouldn’t want you anywhere near them.

“The men who rescued me want you to change your number; you could be found easily, since I called you from one of my captor’s phones. Make the new number unlisted. It’s also best if you get out of town for a while. Maybe go visit our relatives in Mexico? Or if you don’t want to do that, my rescuers said they could probably arrange for a safe house.”

Cassidy heard her mom gasp, and she *hated* this for them. Hated that her decisions had led to her parents possibly being in danger. She didn’t want to think Lloyd or anyone from Michael’s organization would bother to hurt them, but she also didn’t want to take the chance. She’d never forgive herself if anything happened to them because of her.

There was a fairly long silence before her dad asked, “Do you really think that’s necessary?”

“Unfortunately, yes. Dad, I lived with these people for years. I know what they’re capable of. They . . . they aren’t good.” It was the understatement of the century, for sure.

“We’ll look into it,” her dad finally said.

Cassidy's shoulders relaxed a fraction.

"Have you called Alfred and let him know you're back in the country?" her mom asked.

Cassidy wrinkled her nose. "Yeah. Legally, I had to do it, but honestly, he doesn't care. About me *or* his son."

"Maybe now that Mario's older, he'll be more comfortable around him," her mom suggested lightly.

Resisting the urge to sigh, Cassidy knew her parents would always have a soft spot in their hearts for her ex, which wasn't something Cassidy would ever understand. Just because he had money didn't make him a good person. But her parents were old school. It was more important that their daughter be "taken care of," even if the relationship wasn't healthy.

She wasn't going to get into that now, though. She'd done her best to explain why she'd divorced Alfred before moving to Jamaica, but it seemed as if they were still hoping she might reconcile with him.

Wanting to change the subject, Cassidy asked, "Do you remember Leo Zanardi?" she asked.

"I don't talk to his parents much anymore, as we've grown apart over the years, but of course I remember him," her mom said.

Cassidy wasn't going to tell her parents that he was the one who'd rescued her, but she wanted them to know he was in her life again. "Well, I ran into him, and he invited me to come to Indianapolis, where he lives. He co-owns a towing business with his friends—it's called Silverstone Towing—and for the first time in a very long time . . . I feel safe," Cassidy admitted.

"That's a relief, baby," her mom replied. "And you're sure Mario's okay?"

"He's amazing," Cassidy said. "So smart and creative. He wants to be a dancer, and I couldn't be prouder of him."

"We miss you," her dad said.

“I miss you guys too. And love you so much, and I’m sorry about everything.”

“You have nothing to be sorry about,” her dad said sternly. “You did nothing wrong.”

“You sound like Leo,” Cassidy replied without thinking.

“I always liked him,” Alice said. “He was respectful and seemed very levelheaded, especially compared to his family. It’s a shame about his uncle, being in prison and all. And everyone knows that his parents hate each other, but they refuse to get divorced.”

Cassidy felt uneasy talking about Leo’s family behind his back. She vaguely recalled that his uncle had been put in jail for domestic abuse, but she hadn’t remembered until now. And the fact that he could have such a volatile family was a little surprising. Her mom was right—Leo *was* levelheaded. There had been times in Jamaica when he could’ve flown off the handle, especially with Lloyd, but he’d controlled himself. She figured some of his restraint was intentional so he wouldn’t scare her or Mario, but in general, she could tell he kept a tight rein on his emotions.

“I love you guys,” Cassidy told her parents. “I’m sorry that I’ve been such a disappointment, but I’m on the right path now. It might’ve taken me forty-two years, but I’m going to make you proud.”

“We’re *already* proud of you,” her dad said gruffly.

“Thanks, Papa,” Cassidy said, her voice cracking.

“Take care of yourself and our grandson,” her mom said. “Call when you can—we’d love to hear from you more often.”

“I will, Mom. And you guys take care of yourselves. Be very careful. I was serious about the new phone number and maybe getting out of town. It won’t be forever, just for a while.”

“We’ll let you know,” her dad said.

Cassidy resisted the urge to sigh again. She really hoped they’d take her concerns to heart. Maybe she should’ve told

them more about what she'd been through, but she wanted them to be cautious, not scared shitless.

"We love you," her mom said softly, and Cassidy could tell she was trying not to cry.

"Love you too. I'll call again soon."

"Bye."

"Bye."

By the time Cassidy hung up, she was completely exhausted. Glancing over at the clock, she saw that an hour and a half had gone by. She hadn't realized she'd been talking to her parents for that long, but it had been very overdue.

Without thinking, she picked up her phone again and clicked on Leo's name.

"Everything okay, Cass?" he asked in lieu of a greeting.

Cassidy smiled. "Yeah. I just wanted to let you know that I talked to my folks."

"And?"

"It was good."

"I'm glad," Leo said. "Tell me about it?"

Cassidy rehashed their conversation, and by the time she was done, she felt ten pounds lighter. "They were really good about my lying to them for so long. I think Papa may be on board with going to Mexico for a while, but it's hard to tell."

"Good," Leo said. "Call them again in a few days. If they don't want to leave and I need to arrange for a safe house, I will."

Cassidy couldn't help but close her eyes in relief. Once again, he was protecting someone she loved. Leo was such a good man. "Okay. And by the way . . . they remember you. Mom said that she always liked you."

"I liked your parents too. I only met them a few times, but I liked how attentive your dad was with your mom. Standing

between her and others when he thought they might bump into her, holding her hand, things like that.”

Cassidy hadn't really thought about her parents like that, but now that Leo had brought it up, she realized her dad had always been protective of her mom. They'd always held hands in the house, too, which had kind of grossed her out when she'd been a teenager.

“Your folks weren't like that, were they?”

He chuckled, but it wasn't a humorous sound. “No. They were always fighting and yelling at each other. I used to pray that they'd get divorced, but that never happened. I wasn't sorry to leave when I graduated high school.”

“How'd you turn out so . . . normal?” Cassidy asked, then immediately regretted it. “Sorry, that was rude. Don't answer that.”

“No, it's fine. I think because I had such bad examples growing up, I made a vow to never be like them. I got good grades because my uncle once told me that I'd never amount to anything. I went out of my way to be good to my girlfriends because my dad was so mean to my mom. I don't truly know why I am the way I am . . . I just knew I didn't want to be like *them*.”

“I always had a crush on you,” Cassidy admitted. She never would've admitted that to him if she hadn't been on the phone. It was easier to be brave when she didn't have to look at him.

“Yeah?” he asked.

“Uh-huh. I knew you thought I was too young.”

“But I still liked you too,” Leo said.

“You did?”

“Yeah. It wouldn't have been fair to you to start anything. I was leaving El Paso, and you still had three more years of high school. I also had a feeling it would be extremely hard to leave if you were mine.”



Cassidy's heart was beating so hard, she put a hand over her chest to try to calm herself.

"Cass? Sorry, am I freaking you out?"

"No!" she exclaimed. "Well, maybe a little. You have no idea how often I thought about you," she said softly. "You were my dream guy. I scribbled our names all over my notebooks. I was such a dork, but I think I knew, deep down, that you were the real deal. You weren't like the other boys. You were intense, and some of my friends were scared of you, but I watched you with other girls. You never yelled at them, never belittled them, and most stayed friends with you after you broke up. To me, that said a lot."

Leo didn't say anything to that; all Cassidy heard was his breathing on the other end of the line. "Leo?"

"I'm here," he said immediately. "I should've gone after what I wanted. Then you wouldn't have married that asshole and been treated like shit. You wouldn't have fled to Jamaica, and you wouldn't have spent five years of your life terrified. Mario would've been mine. Fuck, I'm an idiot."

Goose bumps broke out on Cassidy's arms at his words. Leo sounded really . . . pissed off. She wasn't upset, wasn't scared. Surprisingly, she was turned on. It had been so long since she'd felt such desire that she almost didn't recognize the feeling.

"My mom always said that life happens like it does for a reason," she told Leo. "We were both young. Who knows what would've happened."

"I knew you were special even back then, but I was too much of a chickenshit to do anything about it. I'm not anymore," Leo said.

Cassidy bit her lip, wanting to ask him what he meant. Was she ready for a relationship? She wasn't sure.

When she didn't say anything, Leo said, "I'm glad things with your parents went well."

"Me too."

“You and Mario want to grab something to eat tonight? I haven’t taken you to Rosie’s Diner yet. Archer’s an amazing cook, but I have to say, I think Rosie has him beat.”

“Sure. Mario would love to see you.” And he would. As unlikely as the pair seemed, Mario had taken to Leo as if they’d been friends forever. Cassidy knew it was because Leo listened to her son. *Truly* listened. He also didn’t belittle his fondness for Barbies . . . or his newfound fascination with gymnastic videos on YouTube.

Mario would sit in front of the computer and watch old videos of Nadia Comăneci, Mary Lou Retton, Bart Conner, and Paul Hamm all day if she allowed it. He also watched more recent Olympians, including Simone Biles and Jake Dalton. Cassidy was positive Leo had no idea who any of them were when Mario had started babbling about them, but the next time they’d gotten together, it’d been clear he’d done his research. He’d rattled off their stats as easily as he knew his own name.

The fact that Leo embraced her son’s interests even though they weren’t what most little boys wanted to talk about endeared the man to her all the more. The way to her heart was definitely through her son, and Leo was getting there seemingly without even trying.

“I’m about to head out on a towing run. How about I pick you guys up in about an hour and a half—will that be enough time?”

“That’s perfect,” Cassidy said. It would give her time to shower and find something nice to wear. She’d been to the thrift shop with Skylar and found a bunch of cute outfits. She’d also been able to find Mario some more clothes. She’d had to borrow money from Leo to make the purchases, but she hoped to pay him back as soon as she could.

“Stay safe. I’ll see you soon,” Leo said.

“You too. Bye.”

Cassidy clicked off the phone and sat on the couch, staring into space for a few long minutes. Her life had been

hard, there wasn't any doubt, but she refused to get mired in the negative. There were a hell of a lot of good things happening to her right now, and she didn't want to dwell on the bad.

Eventually, she pushed herself off the couch and headed for her room. She'd shower, then go over and get Mario and tell him the good news about Leo taking them out to dinner. She knew he'd be happy about that, and he'd even have time for a shower as well. That was another thing about her kid—he loved being clean. He'd shower twice a day if she let him. And he took even longer than she did to get ready.

Smiling at the quirks of her child, Cassidy stripped off her clothes and waited for the water in the shower to get warm. For the past five years, she hadn't felt safe being naked, even in her own bathroom. She'd never known who might be watching or listening. But here, alone in her small apartment, her past behind her, Cassidy could dance naked, and no one would know or care. It was an amazing feeling, and she had Leo and his friends to thank for it.

Leo. Just the thought of the man made her shiver in reaction. As she stepped into the bathtub and tilted her head back, wetting her hair, Cassidy thought about what he'd said. How he regretted not asking her out. Lord, if Leo had asked her out when she'd only been a freshman, she probably would've passed out. She'd been more than innocent back then, despite drawing hearts and writing *Cassidy Zanardi* in her notebooks over and over.

She was older and wiser now, as was he. And she *still* had a crush on him. If what he said was true, he was interested in her too.

Moving a hand down her body, Cassidy closed her eyes. She pictured Leo in her mind, hovering over her, his hands touching her everywhere. His intense brown gaze not letting her look anywhere else as he slowly entered her. He wouldn't hurt her, wouldn't do anything that might be uncomfortable. He'd make slow, sweet love to her, which would gradually morph into hard and fast fucking. She'd grab his hard ass and

hold on for the ride. He'd never leave her wanting—he'd make sure she orgasmed every time . . . she had no doubt.

Before she knew it, Cassidy was shaking with one of the most intense orgasms she'd had in a very long time. Her fingers were soaked from more than the water, and she could barely hold herself up in the shower.

She'd masturbated while thinking about Leo, actually getting herself off. She couldn't even remember the last time she'd done that.

Feeling relaxed, even if she was still turned way the hell on, Cassidy leaned into the hot water and finished her shower. She had no idea where things between her and Leo might go. She wasn't ready to jump into a relationship—yet—but she wasn't opposed to seeing whether the chemistry they had would continue to grow or eventually settle into a comfortable friendship.

Smiling, Cassidy climbed out of the tub and headed for her closet. She had to figure out what to wear, get her son, hurry him up so he'd be ready when Leo got there, and then try to relax enough to enjoy dinner and not let on what she'd done in the shower.

All in all, things were looking up. For the first time in years, Cassidy was actually excited about the future.



Lloyd Robinson wasn't happy. The shit had indeed hit the fan, and Michael's entire organization had erupted in chaos after his body had been found. Instead of working together, all of his lieutenants were fighting a bloody battle to take control of the mansion, along with the people who lived and worked there.

Lloyd had managed to clean out Michael's safe, and he and Martin had gotten away with several hundred thousand dollars' worth of drug money. Unfortunately, Michael's lieutenants suspected what they'd done, and they were enemy number one in Kingston right now.

They were currently sitting in a shitty motel in one of the worst parts of the city, lying low, saving as much money as

they could before heading to the United States.

“We need to get to Ocho Rios,” Martin said.

“Agreed,” Lloyd said. “We’ll stay there for a while, just long enough to let the dust settle. Then we’ll catch a plane to Texas.”

Martin nodded. He hadn’t been fully on board with Lloyd’s plan at first, but eventually he’d come around. “You think we’ll be able to find G?”

“Fuck him,” Lloyd said. “I’m guessing nothing we learned about him was true. I’m more interested in Cassidy.”

“Why?”

“Because she’s somehow behind all this! You know how desperate she was to get out of here. I’m thinking she must have contacted someone in the States, and that’s why G arrived, why Michael is now dead and we’re out of a job. It’s *her* fault—and she’s gonna pay.”

“How?”

“By losing the one thing she loves most in this world,” Lloyd said with a sneer.

“The brat?”

“Yeah. Him. We’ll bring him back to Jamaica and turn him into the biggest drug dealer this country’s ever seen!”

Martin looked confused. “Why don’t we just kill him?”

“No. I want to kidnap the little shit. And I want her to know what our plans are. I want her to *die* knowing everything that happens to him is *her* fault,” Lloyd said, growing hard at the thought of having Cassidy Hewitt at his mercy. “She’ll suffer twice as much knowing her precious kid will be dragged back into the drug trade. That he’s gonna end up being a ruthless killer. Nothing will hurt her more than knowing that.”

Martin didn’t look convinced. “Do you know where she is?”

Lloyd tamped down his irritation. Martin wasn’t very smart, but he was obedient. He did whatever he was told,

which was what Lloyd needed right now. “Not yet, but I will.”

“How?”

“I’ve got her parents’ phone number. She always called them on my phone. The area code is El Paso. We’ll head there and find them.”

Finally, Martin’s eyes lit up with excitement. Getting information was the man’s area of expertise. Lloyd would let him torture Cassidy’s parents to get details on her whereabouts. Then he’d have his fun with the bitch herself.

“First we need to get to Ocho Rios and regroup,” Lloyd said. “Maybe recruit some others to help. Then we’ll make our move. I want Cassidy to relax. Feel comfortable in her new life. Let down her guard. Then we’ll strike when she least expects it. It’ll be a piece of cake.”

“Sounds fun,” Martin said. “We gonna get a piece of that ass before we kill her?”

Lloyd looked at the other man as if he’d just said something completely stupid. “Of course. When I have my fill, you’ll get your shot. Then anyone else who’s joined us. *Then*, after she hears all our plans for the kid, we’ll kill her.”

“Awesome,” Martin breathed.

Lloyd could see the other man’s cock tenting his pants. His own dick twitched again. He’d dreamed about bringing Cassidy down a peg or two, only keeping his distance on Michael’s orders. But Michael was dead—and the bitch was gonna be *his*, no matter what. She’d learn to respect him if it was the last thing she did.

Zipping up the bag with the money he’d stolen from his dead boss, Lloyd stood and gestured to the door. “Come on, let’s get moving. We’ve got plans to make.”

# Chapter Eleven

Gramps looked down at his phone and couldn't stop the smile creeping over his face.

***Mario: There's a spider in the bathtub, can you come over?***

Cassidy's son had gotten into the habit of texting him almost every evening. At first it had worried him, making him assume something was horribly wrong. Mario would tell him he'd heard a funny noise. Or that Cassidy was crying. He'd race over to their apartment, only to find Cassidy confused about why he was there . . . and Mario doing his best not to look guilty.

But he couldn't get upset at the boy, since Gramps had ended up right where he wanted to be. Hanging out with the woman and boy who were fast becoming the most important people in his life.

Chuckling, Gramps texted Mario back.

***Gramps: I'm sure if you asked your mom, she'd kill it for you.***

***Mario: She's more scared of them than I am. Please?***

***Gramps: On my way.***

Mario's response was nothing but a string of emojis.

Gramps knew he should be nipping Mario's behavior in the bud, but honestly, he didn't want to. He *liked* that Mario wanted him near. Liked spending time with him. It had been two weeks since they'd returned from Jamaica, and he was impressed at how quickly Cassidy was settling into a routine.

She'd kept Mario home with her, deciding to homeschool him for now; neither was quite ready for him to go back to school full time, or to be separated from each other all day. She looked after a couple of children during the mornings and

early afternoons, they'd go to Silverstone Towing afterward to hang out with Archer—and Gramps, because there was no way he could stay away from her—and then they'd head back to their apartment around dinnertime.

And inevitably around eight o'clock or so, Gramps would get a text from Mario asking if he would come over.

The other guys didn't know how much time he'd been spending with Cassidy and her son, not that they'd care. They were busy with their wives. The four of them still talked every day, still helped out at Silverstone Towing, but it was obvious the other men's priorities lay elsewhere. Gramps was thrilled for them. Loved seeing them so happy. He genuinely adored Skylar, Taylor, and Molly, and the three women had been nothing but welcoming toward Cassidy and Mario. But with his friends otherwise occupied, that left Gramps free to spend as much time with Cassidy as possible.

It didn't take very long to get to Southpoint Apartments. Traffic this time of night was light, and his small house wasn't too far away.

He grinned as he parked and took the stairs two at a time. He strode down the walkway toward Cassidy's apartment at the end, then knocked on the door. He smiled even wider when he heard Cassidy swearing as she undid the chain and the dead bolt.

She gave him a sheepish look when she opened the door. "I'm so sorry," she said.

Gramps shook his head. "Don't be."

"What was it *this* time?" Cassidy asked. "Water leaking in the bathroom? Shadows lurking around outside?"

"Spider in the bathtub," Gramps told her.

"Oh, good Lord. This is crazy—I'll talk to him," she promised him.

Gramps took a step toward her, and she immediately backed up. "It's fine, Cass. He's settling in."



“He’s being a pain,” Cassidy corrected. “You have a life—you can’t come over here every night to babysit us.”

“That’s not what I’m doing,” Gramps told her seriously.

“Then what *are* you doing?” she asked.

Taking a chance, Gramps lifted his hand and smoothed her hair back. It was a little wild tonight, curling around her shoulders in disarray. “Hanging out with an old friend and her son.”

Cassidy licked her lips, and Gramps couldn’t help but watch the movement and wish he was the one wetting them.

“Oh.”

It was a sound of disappointment, and Gramps hated it. He pulled Cassidy close. She fell against him with a small *oof*, then looked up at him shyly.

“Believe me, if I didn’t want to be here, I wouldn’t be,” he told her. “Mario’s texts give me an excuse to see you. In case I haven’t made myself perfectly clear, I like you, Cass, and there’s going to come a time very soon when I can’t hold myself back anymore.”

She was breathing fast, her eyes wide in surprise. But he could see the desire in them too. He wasn’t alone in his feelings.

“I’m giving you time,” he said. “To get used to me. To us. To your new life. But make no mistake, the last thing I’d be doing is humoring your son and coming over every night if this wasn’t exactly where I wanted to be. Laughing with you guys, watching Mario give us impromptu dance recitals, reading *Harry Potter* to him, then pretending to be interested in whatever TV show you put on when I’m much more interested in learning what makes you tick . . . who you’ve become as a woman over the years . . . seeing if the chemistry I feel when I’m around you is a product of my imagination or the real deal.”

He knew that was one very long sentence, but he had to get the words out. He noted the way Cassidy leaned into him

even more heavily, how her fingernails dug into his chest, as if to ensure he didn't escape.

"Oh," she said again.

"Yeah, oh," Gramps agreed.

"Leo!" Mario called out, interrupting what had become a very sexually charged moment.

Gramps looked up and saw Cassidy's son standing near the entrance to the small living area. He looked a little sheepish, but happy to see him.

"Hey, champ. There's a spider?" he asked.

Mario nodded. "There was. But it crawled back down the drain after I texted you."

Gramps harrumphed.

"You texted Leo because you saw a spider?" Cassidy had dropped her hands from his chest and turned when Mario had called his name, and Gramps knew he was a goner when he felt bereft at losing her touch.

The boy bit his lip and looked down at the floor. "It was a really big spider, and I know how much you hate them. Remember that one we saw that one night in Jamaica? You said it seemed angry and was watching you."

Cassidy chuckled. "Yeah, I remember. And it *was* angry, and it *was* watching me." She turned back around. "Since you're here, you want to stay for a while? I made brownies. They're just from a box, but they're good."

"I'd love to stay," Gramps told her.

"Yay!" Mario exclaimed. "I found a new YouTube channel, and wait until you see the new dance I learned today!" Then he turned and disappeared from view, probably to go get his phone, which most likely already had the music he was going to dance to cued up.

"I never should've let you give him that phone," Cassidy said with a shake of her head.

“Yes, you should have. It gives him independence,” Gramps told her. “And you know as well as I do that it makes both of you feel better that he can contact you whenever you’re not within sight. You need that after Jamaica.”

She sighed. “You’re right, but he’s driving me crazy with the YouTube thing. And he needs to stop texting you to come over every night.”

“I actually was going to talk to you about that,” Gramps said. Her face fell, and he hurried to explain. “I thought maybe you two could come over to my house sometimes. It’s not anything huge, not like Smoke’s house, but it’s comfortable. My living area is larger than yours, and Mario would have more room to practice his dance routines.”

She gave him a shy smile. “We’d like that, thank you.”

Gramps reached for her, needing to feel her close again. It was insane how her touch seemed to settle him. She came to him easily, laying her head on his chest. He inhaled deeply and closed his eyes. He’d never been a hugger. Hadn’t ever really understood the appeal. When he’d been with women in the past, he’d never thought much about touching them outside the bedroom. He’d never held hands, hadn’t spontaneously pulled them into hugs. But he couldn’t keep his hands off Cassidy. And luckily, she seemed to enjoy his touch as much as he enjoyed hers.

“You talk to your parents lately?” he asked softly.

Cassidy nodded against him. “Yeah, a little earlier. I think Mario texted you while I was on the phone with them.”

“How are they doing?”

“They’re good. They changed their phone number, and they’re working on arrangements to take a long holiday in Mexico. Which I’m totally relieved about. It’s been really nice to talk to them openly and honestly about everything. Mom promised not to bring Alfred up again, now that she knows once and for all how horrible our marriage was for me. I miss them, and I feel guilty that they really want to see Mario, get to know him, but I’m definitely not ready to travel anywhere.”

“You want to see them, say the word, and I’ll get you there and back,” Gramps told her.

Cassidy looked up at him. “I appreciate that, but I feel as if I’ve taken so much money from you already. I want to say that I’ll pay you back, but we both know how unlikely that is.”

“You thought any more about what you want to do?” Gramps asked.

Cassidy shrugged and put her cheek back on his chest. “I’m actually enjoying babysitting. I joined Michael’s household in Jamaica as a nanny and teacher, and I wouldn’t mind doing something like that here, but I don’t want to work in a day care center. And I’d like to have flexible hours. Once Mario starts school, I want to be able to help out in his classroom and go on field trips with his class, things like that. And if I get a nine-to-five job, I won’t be able to. I know I’m being really picky when I can’t afford to be, but Mario’s growing up in front of my eyes, and I’m afraid if I blink, he’ll be eighteen and moving on to bigger and better things than living with his old and decrepit mother.”

An idea struck Gramps, but he didn’t want to say anything to get her hopes up. “I’m sure you’ll find something that will work out perfectly for you,” he said a little lamely.

“I hope so. Anyway, my parents are good. It’s nice to be able to talk to them whenever I want and not have to lie about what’s going on in my life anymore. And I’m definitely glad they’re going to get out of town.”

“I’ll see what I can find out about what’s going on down in Jamaica and with Coke’s empire. Have some of the DEA guys put feelers out about whether you or your parents might be in danger. I still think it’s good for them to lie low for a while, but we know they can’t stay in Mexico visiting relatives forever.”

“Thank you,” Cassidy said fervently.

“The last thing you need is more bad shit in your life. I’ll do whatever I can to help make your life smooth from here on

out. Tomorrow is Mario's first dance class, right?" Gramps asked.

"Yeah. He's over-the-moon excited about it. Molly helped me find the place. I guess it's a multiuse gym. There's gymnastics, dance classes, and even cheerleading lessons being given there. Tomorrow, Mario's class is between tumbling and cheerleading." Her voice lowered. "Thank you for paying for the first few classes for him. I never would've been able to afford it otherwise."

"My pleasure. Mario deserves it, and I think it'll be great for him to start hanging out with other kids," Gramps said.

Cassidy sighed. "I know I need to let him go, but it's been just the two of us against the world for so long."

"You're a good mom," Gramps told her without hesitation. "He obviously adores you. It'll take some time for you both to learn your new normal."

"I know. I really am sorry that he keeps texting you with excuses for you to come over."

"I wouldn't be here if I didn't want to be," Gramps reassured her again.

"Leo! Mom! Come *on!*" Mario called from his room.

Cassidy chuckled. "I guess we're late for tonight's performance."

"Guess so," Gramps agreed. The urge to lean down and kiss her was intense, but he forced himself to drop his arms and gesture for her to go down the hall first. She smiled up at him before heading to her son's room.

Sighing, Gramps wondered when he'd lost his touch. He'd never had a problem making sure a woman knew he wanted her. But Cassidy was different. Special. He didn't want to fuck up, so he was moving at a snail's pace. He knew she was worth it, though. Both she and Mario were worth anything.



“Leo’s here!” Mario exclaimed happily when they stepped outside their apartment the next day. He went running down the walkway and took the stairs two at a time. He threw himself into Leo’s arms, giving him a huge hug. Leo had been standing in front of his Nissan Frontier with his arms crossed, as if he’d been there awhile, waiting for them.

Cassidy walked down the stairs with more restraint than her son. She smiled as she approached. “What are you doing here?”

“You didn’t think I was gonna miss Mario’s first dance class, did you?” He held out his arms, and without thought, Cassidy walked into them. It felt natural to hug him. Not awkward at all.

“I was going to order an Uber,” she told him.

“And now you don’t have to,” he said smoothly.

Mario quickly hauled himself into the back seat before slamming the door.

“He’s a little excited,” Leo noted.

“Ya think?” Cassidy said wryly. Then she frowned. “I just hope he’s not intimidated by everyone. He has a lot of desire, but I’m not sure how much talent that may translate to in a classroom setting.”

“He’s going to be fine,” Leo told her, putting his hands on her hips and resting his forehead against hers. “We’ve been watching him dance for us every night for the last two weeks. His enthusiasm and attitude will carry him a lot further than just talent will.”

“I hope so.”

“I know so. Now come on—if we don’t get going, your son is going to have a coronary.”

Cassidy chuckled. “It took him forever to decide what to wear. And he was in the bathroom for at least an hour trying to get his hair perfect.”

“I’m guessing you should probably get used to that,” Leo said as he opened the door for her.

Cassidy rolled her eyes and climbed into the truck.

The ride to the gym was filled with Mario's excited chatter as he talked about what dances he might learn and fretted over whether he was going to be good enough, since he'd never had any official lessons before.

Leo found a parking spot in the surprisingly full lot at the gym and turned to Mario. "Listen to me. Are you listening?"

Mario nodded.

"It's likely that you aren't going to be the best dancer, but after watching you perform every night for the last couple of weeks, I know you won't be the worst either. Other kids might make fun of you, or you might be jealous of their skills. But what's important is that you don't give up and you have fun. Life's too short to get sucked into negativity, Mario—I think you know that better than a lot of kids. Be friendly, be positive, encourage the other kids, and be happy for them when they do something good. Okay?"

"I will," Mario said.

Cassidy turned away so her son and Leo wouldn't see her tears. God, this man was amazing. Somehow he managed to be both tough and encouraging at the same time. It was what Mario needed. What *she* needed.

"Come on, let's go see what's what," Leo told Mario.

Her son nodded and reached for the handle of the truck.

"You okay?" Leo asked.

Cassidy took a deep breath. "Yeah, I'm good."

"Right. Come on, Mama. Let's go watch your baby bird fly."

Cassidy loved how Leo was more alpha than any man she'd ever met while still being so kind and sweet—and that he didn't care in the least that Mario displayed more feminine traits than masculine. He didn't care that he'd spent all his recent nights watching her son dance hip-hop to music he'd probably never heard of. He hadn't even blinked when she'd said Mario had spent an hour on his clothes and hair. She'd be

surprised if Leo thought about either for more than a minute and a half, tops, each morning.

Mario practically ran across the parking lot for the door. But right before he went through, he seemed to get a case of nerves. He suddenly stopped, his shoulders hunching, and he took a keen interest in something on the ground.

Leo put a hand on his shoulder and said, “You got this, champ. Compared to running around Kingston on your own, this is a piece of cake.”

Cassidy never would’ve reminded Mario of what he’d had to do in Jamaica, but it seemed to be exactly what he needed to hear. He nodded and lifted his chin.

Leo held open the door, and they entered a world of complete chaos. There was music playing over the speaker system, and little girls were everywhere. Most had bows in their hair, and everyone was wearing leotards or leggings, and many were barefoot. Everyone was smiling. It was an overwhelmingly positive atmosphere—and Cassidy loved it.

Apparently so did Mario. He hung by his mom’s side as she checked him in. They were a little early for the dance class and were directed to a set of bleachers on the side of the large open space.

Mario’s eyes were huge as he took in the various activities on the mats. On one side, girls were walking on a balance beam and twirling around the uneven bars. To their left was a huge pit of foam blocks, and girls were taking turns flipping their bodies in the air and landing on their backs in the soft space.

But it was the action on the mat nearest them that had Mario most entranced. Girls from around five to probably eleven or twelve were tumbling. Doing cartwheels, backflips, running back handsprings, and other intricate moves.

Cassidy looked from Mario to the mat, then back to her son. “You like that?”

“It’s amazing,” Mario exclaimed. “Look at them! Look!”



Cassidy turned her head to see a girl do an intricate flipping-and-cartwheeling routine from one end of the mat to the other. She landed on her feet with a huge smile on her face before she was engulfed by at least ten other girls, who were all congratulating her.

“She’s impressive,” Cassidy said.

“Yeah,” Mario agreed, and it was clear he was amazed by all the tumbling going on in front of him.

A whistle blew from somewhere, and the girls on the floor of the gym moved to the sidelines almost as one, a new group of kids approaching the mats from their seats on the bleachers.

“Looks like you’re up,” Cassidy told her son.

He nodded, and she saw a light in his eyes that she hadn’t seen for many years. It was almost hard to see how happy he was now, when it underscored how miserable he’d been for so long.

“Easy, Cass,” Leo said as Mario headed down the bleachers to join his dance class.

“I feel as if I’ve failed him,” she whispered.

“You haven’t,” Leo insisted. He scooted closer and put his arm around her waist. His hand felt huge on her hip, and while his presence made Cassidy feel better, it didn’t erase the hurt she felt.

“Look at him,” she whispered. “Look how happy he is.”

Mario had stood off to the side of his class, but immediately a group of girls went up to him, and within a minute, he was smiling and laughing.

“I should never have taken him out of the country. I thought it would be good for him. Instead I put him in more danger than ever . . . all because I wanted to escape.”

Leo placed his fingers on her chin and turned her to look at him. “If you were a mind reader, if you could see the future, I might agree with you or tell you how horrible your decisions were. But *no one* can see the future, Cass. You did what you needed to do for your own mental health. Through no fault of

your own, you were forced to stay in a dangerous situation. But the fact that Mario is out there right now, laughing and having the time of his life, tells me that despite everything you went through, you did an amazing job raising him in the worst of circumstances.”

“I swear, I won’t do anything to put him in a situation like I did in Jamaica *ever* again. He comes first from now on.”

Leo nodded. “I believe you. It’s why you’re such a good mom. But I hope you aren’t thinking about being single for the rest of your life. You can put your son first and still be in a relationship.”

Cassidy wasn’t sure she was ready for that conversation. But she had to be honest. “It’s been so long since I’ve been in *any* kind of relationship—I’m not sure I even know how to be a good partner anymore.”

“You know,” Leo insisted. “And any man who wants to be with you will have to understand that you and Mario are a unit. That he can’t have one without the other. Can’t love one without loving the other.”

Cassidy’s mouth went dry. She nodded.

“Would need to support both of you in whatever you wanted to do while making you feel safe to spread your wings in the process.”

“Leo,” she whispered.

“Let me be that man,” he said quietly, not looking away from her eyes. “I won’t push you for anything, but you have to know that I wouldn’t be spending quite as much time with you both if I only wanted to rekindle an old friendship. Let me show you that you can give Mario a safe place to finish growing up while grabbing hold of happiness for yourself at the same time.”

“And you think you can make me happy?” she asked, teasing him.

“Fuck yes, I can,” Leo said. “Give me a chance to prove myself to you.”

“You already have,” she whispered.

Was this happening? Right here? Right now?

Leo leaned toward her, slowly, giving her a chance to pull back. But Cassidy didn’t want to pull away from him. She’d wanted Leo practically her entire life. She wasn’t sure she was the right woman for him, but she wasn’t strong enough to refuse him.

His lips touched hers briefly, and when he leaned back, Cassidy couldn’t help but follow. She wanted more. She *needed* more.

“Easy, Cass,” he said softly. “I want more, too, but we don’t want to embarrass Mario.”

Blinking, Cassidy swallowed. God, she’d gone from vowing to always put her son first to wanting to make out with Leo in the bleachers at his dance class. She knew she was blushing as she forced her attention back to the mats.

Leo chuckled next to her. He leaned in, and she felt his hand tighten on her hip. His fingers seemed to burn through her jeans. He brushed her hair away from her ear, then nuzzled the skin of her neck with his nose. Shivering at how good it felt, Cassidy clasped his thigh with her hand, digging her fingernails in as he teased her.

“You have no idea how hard it’s been to keep my hands off you,” Leo said, his hot breath tickling the sensitive skin of her neck. “Everything about you turns me on. Your temper, your courage, the way you’ve embraced Skylar, Taylor, and Molly’s friendship . . . all of it. The fact that we’ve known each other for decades and share a common heritage is icing on the cake.”

He lifted his head, and the desire in his eyes had her squirming on the hard wooden bench beneath her.

“Be warned, Cass—when I make a decision, I’m one hundred percent committed.”

“You haven’t been all in already?” she asked, her voice cracking.

He smiled. “Nope.”

“Lord help me,” she mumbled.

His smile grew. “You’ll be all right.”

“Promise?” she couldn’t help but ask.

“Promise,” he said, and it sounded like a vow. “Now, we’d better watch at least part of Mario’s first lesson—otherwise, we’ll look pretty stupid when we can’t talk to him about it on the way home.”

Nodding, Cassidy turned her attention back to the gym. Mario was in the middle of the back row of students. He was the only boy in the class, but he didn’t seem to mind. He was gyrating his hips and following the movements of his teacher as if he were in seventh heaven. She loved seeing him so happy and in his element.

Throughout it all, Leo’s hand stayed glued to her hip. His thumb had moved so it was resting on the bare skin above the waistband of her jeans. Every now and then, he’d give her a small caress, sending shivers down her back. Cassidy gave him a little more of her weight as the class progressed.

If someone had told her a month ago that this would be her life, she would’ve accused them of using the drugs her jailor had been selling. But now that she was here, she was determined to do whatever it took to *keep* this life.

She managed to have a fairly normal conversation with Leo over the next forty-five minutes. They talked about Mario and how well he was doing. They discussed Kevin, Eagle and Taylor’s baby, and how it seemed that he hadn’t inherited his mother’s prosopagnosia. Leo shared how relieved Taylor had been that her son had been born with a small birthmark on his face, because it meant she would always recognize him. They talked about the double wedding ceremony that had happened right before they’d all gone to Jamaica, and even about some of Molly’s strange pregnancy cravings.

That led to Cassidy telling Leo all about her own pregnancy . . . and how Alfred hadn’t helped much at all.

But that conversation pissed Leo off so much, she worried he was going to leave and hunt Alfred down right that second, so she quickly changed the subject and talked about some of the funnier things Mario had done as a toddler.

By the time the dance class finished, she'd learned more about Leo's teenage years and his time in the Army, and had heard a harrowing story about how he and his teammates had all saved each other's lives when they'd been held hostage in the Middle East while still in the service. She was grateful Leo was so close to his friends, and hoped he always would be.

Mario climbed the bleachers toward them with a huge smile on his face. "Did you see me, Mom?"

"Of course I did. I've been sitting here the whole time," she told him with a smile.

His eyes flicked down to Leo's hand on her hip, and if possible, his smile grew even bigger. But he didn't comment, simply sat next to her and put his head on her shoulder. "I had so much fun," he said.

"I'm glad."

"I'm not the best, like Leo warned, but I'm not the worst either. Even though that was my first-ever class, I think the videos I've been watching helped me. Allison, the girl I was next to, said I was really good, and . . ." His voice trailed off as the next group of kids began their practice on the mats.

They were obviously cheerleaders, and once again, Mario's eyes were glued to the action.

"Look, Mom—there's boys down there too!"

"I see," Cassidy said.

The younger girls were practicing cheers, but the older kids, the teenagers, were doing a mixture of tumbling and cheering. The boys in one group were balancing girls on their shoulders, then throwing them in the air. The girls did flips before landing in the arms of the boys once again. And throughout it all, everyone was smiling, clearly having a great time.

“Holy crap, did you see that?” Mario asked.

Cassidy glanced at her son, who wasn't paying any attention to her, then looked over at Leo. He was looking from her to Mario with such obvious amusement, she couldn't help but smile back.

“They're dancing and cheering *and* tumbling,” Mario said in awe. “I want to do that.”

“Guess we've found his next passion,” Leo told her.

Cassidy marveled that she didn't feel more possessive of her son. If anyone else had dared use the *we* pronoun this early in a relationship, she would've rolled her eyes and probably been a little turned off. Especially considering what she and Mario had been through. But since Leo was literally responsible for getting them to this point in their lives, she supposed he had a right to say *we*.

“I guess so,” she said before turning back to Mario. “You want to do that?”

He nodded, not taking his eyes off the cheerleaders.

“More than dance? As much as I hate to say it, I can only afford one kind of class right now.”

Mario looked at her then. “I want to be a cheerleader. It's got dancing *and* tumbling. I can get a job and help with the cost.”

Cassidy opened her mouth to say he didn't need to do that, that she'd find a way to come up with the money for lessons, but Leo spoke before she could. He leaned around her and put a hand on Mario's thigh. “You've got plenty of time to worry about finding a job when you're older. Between your mom and me, we've got you covered.”

Mario's eyes narrowed slyly, and Cassidy braced.

“Are you and my mom dating?”

“Yes,” Leo said immediately.

“Are you gonna hurt her? Because if you are, then you can leave now. We don't need you.”

Cassidy's heart broke. Mario *loved* Leo; she knew he did. He wouldn't have been texting him every night if he didn't. But he was still doing what he thought was necessary in order to protect her.

"I will *never* hurt your mom. Or you," Leo said firmly. "I knew your mom when we were in high school. Did you know that?"

Mario nodded. "Mom told me."

"Right, then you know we've been friends for a very long time. I should've asked her out back then, but I didn't. We both moved on with our lives, and now we have a second chance to see if what we feel for each other is love or something else. But you need to know that I didn't wait almost thirty years to find her again, only to turn around and hurt her. I'm not an idiot."

"Okay."

"Okay," Leo echoed. "And another thing—I will never come between you and your mom. She loves you more than she'll ever love anyone else. Period."

"Even more than a man?" Mario asked, looking at Cassidy.

She nodded. "Yes."

Mario sighed in what she thought was relief, as if that was exactly what he'd needed to hear. "Does this mean you'll come over every night without me having to make up excuses anymore?"

Both Cassidy and Leo laughed.

"Yes, it does. You think you might like hanging out at my house every now and then? We can set up your bedroom however you want it."

"Can I paint it pink with bright-purple and yellow circles so it'll look like a disco?" Mario asked.

Cassidy winced, but Leo didn't seem fazed. "Anything you want."

“Awesome,” Mario breathed. Then he leaned in and said, “I’m kidding, though. Just pink will do fine.”

They all laughed.

“All right, let’s not remodel Leo’s house just yet,” Cassidy said. “We just started dating. We’re taking things slow.”

Mario gave his mom a skeptical look, and she couldn’t help but smile.

Leo laughed at their interaction. “Come on, let’s go talk to someone about switching you to a different class. I don’t know where they’ll want to slot you in, but we’ll figure it out.”

He stood and immediately took Cassidy’s hand in his, helping her walk down the bleachers. When they were on the floor, his hand spanned her back, keeping her close to him as they walked toward the receptionist. Somehow, in the course of an hour, she’d gone from having Leo as a good friend to dating him and basically agreeing to spend every evening together. It was hard to believe she’d been a prisoner not too long ago. Now she had her own place and friends, her son was happy and safe . . . and she apparently had a boyfriend.

But Cassidy was more than on board with all the changes in her life. For the first time in longer than she could remember, she was happy. She didn’t have cameras watching her every move, and she didn’t have to panic every time Mario was out of her sight.

Glancing up at Leo, she blushed. She had a feeling she’d soon find out if sex with the man lived up to, or surpassed, all the dreams and fantasies she’d had about him for years.



## Chapter Twelve

A week after enrolling Mario in his new cheerleading class, Gramps stood in the hallway in the basement at Silverstone Towing and watched Cassidy for a long moment. She was busy entertaining a little girl named Betty and watching Taylor's boy, Kevin.

He'd talked to the guys, and they were fully supportive of his plan. He had been going to talk to her about it later, but he couldn't wait even a moment longer.

"Hey, Cass, can I talk to you for a sec?"

She looked up—and he immediately regretted not waiting. She looked worried, as if whatever he wanted to talk to her about was something bad.

There were days when she seemed to be settling into her new life without any issues, but other times, like now, a simple comment seemed to throw her right back to how she'd felt while living in Michael Coke's house. Worried that she'd said or done something wrong . . . and that at any time, she and her son could suffer the consequences.

He tried not to take it personally. It would take her a while to shake off the automatic reaction to someone taking her by surprise.

"Nothing's wrong," he said quickly.

He saw her shoulders relax a fraction as she nodded.

Molly came down the stairs and smiled at Cassidy. "Hey, girl." She gave her a quick hug. "Gramps asked if I wouldn't mind watching these two angels while you guys talk."

Betty, one of their employees' kids, who was around three or four—Gramps couldn't remember—jumped up from the floor where she'd been playing with Cassidy and hugged Molly. Kevin was asleep on a blanket on the floor, oblivious to the goings-on around him.

"Um . . . okay, sure. No problem," Cassidy said.

Gramps hated seeing her so uncertain. He pulled her close and speared his hands into her hair, tilting her head up so she had no choice but to look at him. “Nothing’s wrong,” he repeated.

“Okay.”

“Shit,” Gramps said, knowing she wasn’t going to feel better until she heard his proposal. “Thanks for looking after the kids for a second,” he told Molly, then towed Cassidy toward the safe room.

He opened the door with his fingerprint and pulled Cass into the room behind him. Bull, Eagle, and Smoke were still sitting at the table where he’d left them a minute or so ago to go get Cassidy. The three men all stood when they entered.

“What’s wrong?” Bull asked.

“Is Kevin okay?” Eagle questioned.

“Molly’s all right, yeah?” Smoke asked.

Gramps couldn’t help but smile. His friends had most definitely changed. In the past, they would’ve been more worried about who their next target might be and where their mission might take them. Now they were almost exclusively focused on their wives . . . which was exactly how it should be. It was certainly how *he* felt.

“Everything’s fine,” Gramps said as he led Cassidy over to a chair.

“Then why does Cassidy look so worried?” Eagle asked.

“I’m guessing because every time someone in that fucking house in Jamaica said they needed to talk to her, it wasn’t good,” Gramps explained. “She just has to get used to the idea that she and her son are safe here and no one is gonna make them do anything they don’t want to,” Gramps said, holding the back of her chair as Cassidy sat. He pulled another chair up next to her and held her hand. He didn’t want to prolong this, especially not in light of how worried Cassidy seemed.

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be so . . . uncertain,” she apologized.

“No one blames you,” Gramps said. “You’ll figure out in your own time that nothing bad is gonna happen to you when you’re with us. Anyway, what I wanted to say is that we want to hire you,” Gramps told her. “Silverstone Towing, that is. Many of our employees have kids, and affordable childcare is tough to find. We’ve talked about either adding to this building or putting up a smaller structure between here and the first garage. It probably wouldn’t be full time at first, but that’s our goal for the long term. We’d like you to be the director. You’d probably be the only staff member to start, but depending on how much use the center gets, we’d hire people to help as necessary.”

Cassidy stared at him in surprise.

“You’d be given full benefits, just like all our other employees,” Bull added. “Health insurance, retirement—all the usual stuff.”

“Once we hire more staff, your hours can be flexible, so you can still help out at Mario’s school and be there for him if he gets sick or whatever,” Eagle added.

“And, of course, after school he’s always welcome to come here to hang out,” Smoke said.

“I . . . I don’t know what to say,” Cassidy stammered.

“It’s obvious you love kids, and you’re really good with them. And this offer has nothing to do with the two of us,” Gramps said. “I mean, if we don’t work out—which I can’t see happening, but I can’t see into the future—this job will still be yours. There aren’t any strings attached.”

Cassidy swallowed hard, and Gramps saw tears form in her eyes.

“Shit,” he muttered as he reached for her. Gramps hauled her into his lap. “Talk to me,” he ordered. “What’s wrong? If you don’t want the job, it’s okay—we’ll find you something else.”

“Not want the job?” Cassidy asked through her tears. “Of *course* I want it. I can’t believe this is happening.”

“You’ll probably need to look into certificates and licenses,” Eagle said. “We want to be as aboveboard as possible.”

Cassidy nodded. “Of course. I got my undergraduate degree online when I was living in El Paso. But Indiana might have different regulations than Texas when it comes to childcare.”

“We’re not quite ready to open shop yet,” Gramps told her. “We need to meet with an architect and see what he or she thinks will work best for a dedicated space, so there’s time to figure out all the legalities.”

Cassidy looked around the table, but made no move to get off Gramps’s lap. “Thank you so much.”

Everyone shrugged off her thanks.

“No, seriously,” she pressed. “This is all so much. I never expected any of it.”

“We’re getting just as much out of hiring you,” Bull told her.

Cassidy shook her head. “No, you aren’t.”

“We are,” he insisted. “Archer is an amazing cook, and he was being underutilized at the diner where he worked. Hiring him makes all our employees happy, and happy employees means they’ll work harder, will be more loyal, and won’t mind working overtime or longer shifts if we need them to. Adding childcare will mean moving around schedules and additional overhead, but the last thing we want is our employees worrying about their kids while they’re working. That’s opening the door for someone to be careless and increases the possibility of injuries.”

Cassidy chuckled and wiped the tears from her face. “You can try to make me think you’re hard-asses who think about nothing but the bottom line all you want, but I know the truth.”

“And what’s that?” Eagle asked.

“That deep down, you guys are all just marshmallows.”

Everyone laughed.

“You are,” she insisted.

“If you say so,” Bull said with a smirk.

“Yup. Marshmallows,” Eagle agreed, completely straight faced.

Gramps rolled his eyes, but wasn’t about to get into how unmarshmallowy they all were. She didn’t need the reminder.

“Welcome to the family, Cass,” Smoke said with a smile. He stood and held out his hand.

Cassidy got to her feet—with Gramps’s help, since she was draped over his lap—and shook Smoke’s hand. Bull and Eagle also stood, and she shook their hands too.

She turned to Gramps and gave him a grin as she held out her hand.

Gramps ignored it, and instead wrapped his arms around her waist and bent her backward. She squealed in surprise and grabbed hold of his biceps. “Wha—”

Gramps didn’t give her a chance to say anything else. His lips covered hers, and he kissed her as he’d longed to for over a week.

Ever since their little chat at the gym, things between them had been good. But strangely, now that she’d agreed they were officially dating, he still hadn’t felt a need to rush things between them physically. They’d cuddled as they’d watched TV, and they held hands all the time. She and Mario had spent the night at his house twice, but the other nights he made sure they were safely tucked into their apartment before he’d gone home, alone.

He had no idea what had come over him now—but there was no way he was sealing any kind of deal with a handshake. It was the perfect opening to kiss her again, and he wasn’t going to let the opportunity slip by.

She was everything he never knew he wanted in a woman.

Gramps vaguely heard the others leaving the safe room, but he didn’t stop kissing Cassidy. After a moment of surprised hesitation, she’d wrapped her arms around his neck

and kissed him back as if she couldn't get enough. And the feeling was definitely mutual.

He'd never gotten so hard just from kissing, but then again, he'd never kissed Cassidy quite like this either. As if he needed her to breathe. As if he'd die if he didn't get closer.

He stood them upright, but that didn't end their kiss. Gramps picked her up, then sat her on the table, and she tilted her head back, giving him all of her.

Cassidy's hands snaked under his T-shirt, and he shivered at the sensation of her bare hands on his skin. He could feel her fingernails lightly digging into his flesh, and he immediately thought about how she'd react when he sank inside her for the first time.

Gramps pulled his mouth from hers and buried his face in her neck. He needed to get control of himself. Of the situation. He didn't want to take her for the first time on top of the table in their safe room, but he felt as if he was ten seconds away from doing just that. He might've been patient for weeks, but he knew he was done with that. He needed Cassidy. Needed to be as close to her as a man could be with a woman.

"Leo?" she asked.

"Give me a second," he managed to croak out. His cock felt as if it was going to burst out of his jeans. He was that hard. That close to exploding without her even having touched him.

Licking his lips, Gramps could taste her. It made him want to taste her all over. To lick her sweet juices and watch her come as they slid down his throat. He groaned.

Cassidy's hands came out from under his shirt and lightly caressed his back. Up and down, soothing him, doing what she could to try to make him feel better even though she had no idea what he was thinking. His Cass was a nurturer, and how she'd remained so . . . *untainted* was a mystery.

He slowly picked up his head to meet her gaze. "For the record, *that's* how you seal a deal with me. Not by shaking my hand."

She grinned. “Noted. Are you all right?”

“Yeah, Cass. I just . . . you overwhelm me.”

She frowned.

“It’s not a bad thing,” he said quickly, reassuring her. “I just realized that I haven’t ever felt so . . . *much* . . . about someone in my entire life. I think I knew you’d do this to me even when I was eighteen years old, which was why I went out of my way to never go there with you.”

She swallowed hard but didn’t interrupt him.

“I knew if I had you back then, I’d never let you go. And you had shit you needed to do, and so did I. I was getting the hell out of El Paso, and I was going to see the world. I knew you’d ruin me for all other women, so I kept my distance. I regretted it all the time, but didn’t see any way to fix it. Then you got married . . . and that was that.”

“Leo,” she said softly.

“When I found out the American sending letters to the FBI begging for help was you, nothing could have kept me away,” he told her. “And it turns out, I was right.”

“About what?” she asked when he didn’t elaborate.

“You’ve ruined me for anyone else. Did you feel it?” he asked, knowing he wasn’t making himself clear, but not able to explain any better.

But he didn’t need to. Not with her. Cassidy nodded and licked her lips. “Feel the earth shift? Feel as if our souls clicked like two puzzle pieces fitting together? Yes.”

“Thank fuck,” Gramps said, then leaned down again.

This time their kiss was sweeter, but no less potent. They were both breathing hard by the time he pulled back once more.

She grinned up at him. “Making out in your supersecret safe room is kinda fun.”

Gramps chuckled. “Got to say, this is the most fun I’ve ever had in here.”

She took a deep breath, then said in a low, serious tone, “I want you, Leo. But Mario comes first.”

He nodded. “As he should,” he agreed.

“It’s always been the two of us against the world,” she went on. “I don’t know how or when we’ll get to—”

Gramps put his finger over her lips, stopping her words. “I’d never ask you to do anything that might confuse or worry Mario. Nothing changes between us. I’ll hang over at your apartment and go home at the end of the night. You guys can come over to my house, and we’ll make dinner, continue to work on decorating Mario’s room, and you can stay, or I’ll take you home.

“This is all new to me, but this isn’t a short-term fling. I want you, Cass. I want to make love to you so badly my cock is dripping right now just thinking about it. But I’m not a horny teenager anymore. I’ve got a hand; I can take care of myself. When we make love for the first time, it’s going to be because it’s the right time and place. Where we don’t have to worry about Mario or having to rush things. That might be tonight, or it might be two months from now, but it doesn’t change how I feel about you. Okay?”

She nodded, and Gramps could see the relief in her eyes. “I don’t want you to think I’m a tease.”

Gramps snorted. “No chance of that. You’re a grown adult with a child she needs to look out for. I respect you too much to take you in some closet when we have a ten-minute break or something. I’m not saying the time won’t come when we want to do that, but not right now. Not when we’re starting out. Ten minutes isn’t going to be enough time for me to do all the things I want to do to you.”

“Nor I to you,” she replied.

“Damn,” Gramps said. “Forty-five years old, and you’re gonna make me come in my pants.”

She giggled, then leaned forward and hugged him. Hard. “I didn’t think I’d ever be happy again,” she whispered. “And now I can’t imagine being anything but.”



Gramps mentally vowed to do everything in his power to keep her feeling just like this for the rest of her life. She'd lived through hell, and now it was time for her to see the light on the other side.

Knowing they needed a bit of space before he really *did* take her right there and then, Gramps stood back and held out a hand. He helped her down from the table, and they headed for the door.

"Thanks for the job, Leo. Seriously."

He stopped before opening the door. "You're welcome. And you should know, we didn't offer just because you're my girlfriend. We did so because we truly think you'll do a great job and will be a good fit for Silverstone Towing and our employees."

"And that makes me feel even better about accepting," she told him.

"Good. You hungry? I think Archer was going to make cauliflower pizza for lunch. I didn't think I'd like it, but it's so good. You can't even tell the crust isn't bread," Gramps said.

"I'm starved. And I probably need to force Mario to take a break from practicing."

"You got him signed up for school, right? He starts next week?"

Cassidy nodded. "Yeah."

"He's going to be fine," Gramps said.

"I know. Putting him in the fifth grade is the right choice. I'm confident that, intellectually, he's ready for sixth, as I worked hard to keep him on track while we lived in Jamaica, but socially I think he's better off with the younger kids."

"And you're worried about him being bullied," Gramps guessed.

Cassidy bit her lip. "I love his style, and that he expresses himself however he feels now, but I also know how kids are. They'll make fun of him, call him gay, and I just don't want

him to doubt himself. I love him just how he is, and I want him to do the same.”

“He’ll be okay. Know how I know?”

“How?”

“Because he’s got you. A lot of kids don’t have supportive parents like you. And he’s got us. Silverstone. We’ll nip any bullying in the bud.”

Cassidy wrinkled her nose as she looked up at him. “You’re not going to kill anyone who picks on him, are you?”

For a second, Gramps was stunned. Did she really think he and his friends were capable of such a thing?

Then she smirked. “Just kidding.”

“Shit, Cass. Did you just make a joke out of what Silverstone does for a living?”

“You need to lighten up,” she sassed. “And for the record, I’m against murder in general, but intimidating and scaring the shit out of anyone who dares to tell my boy he’s anything other than perfect . . . that’s fine by me.”

“Damn, woman. You’re fierce,” Gramps said, smiling down at her.

“No one messes with my son. He’s perfect exactly how he is.”

“And for the record, no one messes with *you* either,” he told her seriously.

“Thanks. It feels good to have a champion . . . and that’s why I’ll do whatever I have to in order to keep Mario safe.”

“Come on, mama bear. Let’s feed you and baby bear. You’ll both do great next week.”

“I hope so,” Cassidy murmured.

Gramps wanted to do more to comfort her, but he wasn’t sure what else to say. He’d just have to keep an eye on them next week. They’d both be dealing with a new situation. Mario

needed to know that Gramps would always have his back, and Cassidy needed to know that she could lean on him.

They walked through the empty basement—Smoke had obviously taken Molly and the kids back to the main floor—and headed for the stairs.

Gramps felt good about where things stood between him and Cassidy. They were obviously on the same page, and he knew without a doubt that physically, they'd be explosive. He'd always been a little weird when it came to anticipation. He loved it. As a kid, he'd loved the feeling in the pit of his stomach as Christmas approached. Loved the excitement of opening presents, but enjoyed the lead-up as well. While in the Army, he'd enjoyed the moment right before all hell broke loose on missions. And with Silverstone, he looked forward to the anticipation he always felt during the planning process.

He had the same feeling now. The anticipation growing within him. Knowing he and Cassidy would eventually make love made his stomach churn, in a good way. It would happen when it happened, and would be that much better because they didn't rush things. In the meantime, he'd enjoy the fuck out of kissing her, caressing her in passing, and seeing the lust and desire in her eyes that he knew would be reflected in his own.

“That look makes me nervous,” Cassidy said as she glanced up at him.

Gramps merely shrugged. “It shouldn't. I've got nothing but your best interests at heart. Always.”

In response, she tucked her fingers into the belt loop at the small of his back and followed him across the room toward the kitchen. The slight pull at his waist was a small reminder that she was his. And he wasn't giving her back or letting anyone else have her. Finders keepers and all that.



Lloyd glanced over at Martin. They were both looking a bit rough after the last few weeks in hiding. Things were pretty bad in Jamaica. Coke's entire organization was in upheaval, and the fact that the lieutenants knew he'd taken off with a

bunch of money was making it difficult for them to get out of the country undetected.

Coke had connections *everywhere*, in nearly every town. In bus stations, airports. So many people he'd been paying to spy, so getting away was proving trickier than even Lloyd had imagined.

But Lloyd had also been busy while they'd holed up. He'd made a couple of connections in El Paso, where he knew Cassidy's parents lived. Coke might've been the head of the organization, but Lloyd had worked hard to cultivate relationships with some useful people in Jamaica over the years, which was paying off now.

In a week, he and Martin would be meeting a pilot on a private airstrip, who would fly them to Mexico. From there, they'd be picked up and taken to El Paso. Then they had plans to meet up with a local drug distributor, who would assist them in finding the Hewitts.

Lloyd was normally a patient man, but the longer he was forced to hide as if *he* was the criminal, the more irritated he got. Why should Cassidy and her brat be living free when he wasn't? Women were inferior to men. They weren't as strong or as intelligent. As far as he was concerned, the world would be better off if they'd never gained the right to vote, or many of the other rights *men* had fought and died for.

If Cassidy thought she could bring in some asshole to ruin everything he'd worked for his entire adult life and get away scot-free, she was sadly mistaken.

"What's the plan when we get to Texas?" Martin asked.

Lloyd tamped down his irritation. He'd already told Martin what they were going to do. Well . . . as much as he was *willing* to tell him. But he'd give him a little bit of what he wanted. Lloyd knew Martin well, knew he loved being an enforcer, loved beating on people.

"When we find her parents, we'll ask them nicely where their daughter is. If they won't tell us, you'll get to use your own brand of persuasion," he told Martin.

Martin smiled. "They'll tell us where she is," he said confidently. "I know just how to make people talk."

"I know you do," Lloyd agreed. Martin didn't need to be bothered with the small details of their trip. His job was to do what he was told and to get Lloyd the information he needed.

Of course, Martin didn't know that *he* wasn't going to be coming back to Jamaica. Lloyd and the kid . . . but not Martin.

Lloyd didn't need Martin hanging on like a bad memory. At one time, he'd planned on having Martin by his side, but after spending too much one-on-one time with the man, Lloyd realized he couldn't stand him. He was annoying as hell. Once Martin had helped him find Cassidy, get rid of her, and get the boy, his usefulness would have run its course.

Mentally shrugging, not concerned that he'd already planned his loyal friend's demise, Lloyd smiled at Martin. "Not long now until we'll be out of this hellhole."

"Can't wait," Martin said, lying down on the hard floor and covering his head with a hat to block out the light.

It was just as well Martin was taking a nap. Lloyd was sick of his company.

He rested his head against the wall and closed his own eyes. But he didn't sleep. His mind was too full of plans. Plans to take revenge on the bitch he *knew* was responsible for the destruction of Coke's operation. He didn't know how she'd managed it, but it didn't matter. Her time on this earth was nearing an end.

# Chapter Thirteen

“He’s fine,” Leo said softly. “Breathe, Cass.”

She tried, but it was hard to feel as if she was getting enough air. That morning, she’d dropped Mario off at Eastlake Elementary for his first day of school. She’d been worrying ever since. The other kids already knew each other. Would he be behind in his studies and feel stupid? Would he make any friends? Would he be made fun of?

It had been the longest day ever, and Leo had been right there at her side for every minute. She knew she was probably driving him crazy, and she appreciated his trying to distract her, but nothing had worked. She’d cleaned the apartment from top to bottom, baked a cake and three dozen cookies, and searched the internet for cheerleading items she could get Mario for Christmas, which was still a long way away, and she hadn’t sat still for more than five minutes at any one time.

Mario had said he wanted to take the bus home instead of having her pick him up. He’d also been surprisingly excited about going to school. Cassidy thought she’d probably done too good a job talking it up. She hadn’t wanted him to dread it like she did.

Skylar had called the night before and told her that she’d personally check in on Mario throughout the day, and if he seemed off, she’d call Cassidy. It was a relief that Skylar would keep an eye on her boy, but she also had her own class to teach.

“I’m sorry I’ve been such a spaz today,” Cassidy told Leo.

He wrapped his arms around her. They were standing on the landing outside her apartment, watching for the bus. It would stop at the edge of the parking lot, and they’d be able to see Mario not only get off, but cross the lot and come up the stairs. Her back was to Leo’s front, and his chin was resting on top of her head. She felt surrounded by him, which went a long way toward comforting her.

“You and Mario have spent every day together for the last five years. It’s natural to be nervous about this. But your son is an amazing kid. He’s funny, and nice, and I have no doubt he had a good day.”

Cassidy nodded and shifted in Leo’s grasp. “Is the bus late? He should be here by now, right?”

“Relax. It’s only been thirty seconds since you last asked what time it was. The bus isn’t late.”

“This is so hard,” she whined.

She could feel Leo chuckling against her. “Compared to what you guys have already been through, this is nothing,” he countered.

Cassidy took a deep breath. He was right. She was freaking out for no reason. She was being ridiculous and needed to just chill out. Mario had his phone, and she’d gotten a text around what would’ve been his lunchtime letting her know that everything was fine. He hadn’t demanded she come and pick him up. Hadn’t called her crying. He was *fine*.

Then she heard it. The sound of the school bus rumbling down the street near the complex.

“Easy, Cass. He’s comin’.”

She realized that she’d tensed up, ready to run down the stairs to greet Mario. Her eyes fixed on the spot where her son would appear, Cassidy waited with bated breath.

She heard him before she saw him. His distinctive laughter ringing out over the concrete. When he finally came into view, he was walking with two other kids, a boy and a girl. The boy was Black, and she knew he lived in another building in the complex. The girl lived on the first floor at the other end of Cassidy’s building. Her family had just emigrated from somewhere in the Middle East. She was wearing a hijab, the traditional headscarf that the women in her family wore. All three of the children were smiling and laughing, and Cassidy closed her eyes in overwhelming gratitude.

Mario had always been very accepting of other people. He didn’t care what color skin someone had or what they wore; he

wanted to be everyone's friend. He'd met both of the other kids before, and it made her feel good that they were all getting along.

She turned and felt Leo step away from her, but he didn't go far. His hand rested on the small of her back as they waited for Mario to say goodbye to his friends and walk up the stairs. The second he saw them waiting, he beamed and jogged down the walkway to get to them.

He ran into her so hard, she had to take a step backward to stay upright, but Leo was there to steady them both.

"Mom! School was so good!"

"I'm glad," Cassidy told him.

"I didn't know anyone in my class, but for the most part, they were all really welcoming."

"For the most part?" Cassidy asked, latching on to that part.

"Yeah, well, Timmy was a jerk, and Becky didn't really like me, but Frankie said that she doesn't like anyone so I shouldn't take it personally. And! Guess what?"

"What?" Cassidy asked, not even trying to hide her smile.

"I saw Sandra at lunch. I know she's only in first grade, but she came over to say hello when she saw me."

"Cool," Cassidy said.

Mario looked up at Leo. "Hey, Leo."

"Hey, bud. Sounds like you had a good day. Do you like your teacher?"

"She's okay. But I really like my social studies teacher. His name is Mr. Smithton. He's tall, like you, and his teeth are so white they really stand out when he smiles. And when he laughs, it echoes around the room."

Cassidy knew the fifth-grade kids switched teachers for English, math, and social studies in the mornings, and then they stayed with their homeroom teacher for the afternoon.



She'd thought it might be confusing for Mario, but it seemed he was doing just fine. "You hungry?"

"Of course!" Mario said.

Cassidy heard Leo chuckling but merely shook her head. It was a silly question—Mario was *always* hungry. She figured it was a by-product of living in Jamaica, where they hadn't been allowed to go into the kitchen and snacking had been strictly forbidden. He was a growing boy with a high metabolism who needed all the calories he could get.

"Come on, I baked today," she told him.

Mario raised a brow, leaning into her and hugging her tightly. "Were you nervous for me, Mama?" he asked quietly.

Cassidy ran a hand over his head. "Of course I was. I wanted you to have a good time and not be scared. But it looks like I was probably more worried than you were."

Mario looked up at her with a serious expression on his face. "I missed you, though."

"I know, son, but it's important to get a good education. Believe it or not, there will come a time in the not-so-distant future when your mama probably embarrasses you and you won't want to be around her."

"Never," Mario vowed. "I love you, Mama. Always and forever."

Cassidy closed her eyes. She loved this kid more than anything in the world. He had a tender heart, and she constantly worried that someone would stomp on it. "I love you too. Come on, let's get some cookies."

Mario immediately let go of her and released a small whoop of excitement. He raced ahead of them and into their apartment.

"See? Told you it would be fine," Leo said.

Cassidy looked up at him. "I wanted to believe it, but kids are mean. I just didn't want him to dread going to school every day."

Leo leaned down and kissed her lightly on the lips. She loved when he did that, and he did it all the time. He was constantly touching her on the back, holding her hand, resting his palm on her thigh when they were sitting next to each other. It had been a very long time since she'd experienced any kind of affection from a man, and it had taken a bit to get used to. She'd been surprised—after all his talk of making love to her and how amazing he knew it would be—when he didn't try to get her into bed. But she appreciated his not rushing things.

“Come on, the smell of those cookies has been taunting me,” Leo said with a grin.

The contradiction of how boyish Leo could be compared to the man who she knew had killed Michael Coke was sometimes startling. But knowing he could be both loving and dangerous wasn't a turnoff. If someone threatened her, or Mario, she had no doubt he'd be there to protect them.

Cassidy didn't feel the least bit guilty about *liking* the fact that Leo could protect them. She'd felt alone for so long, and the pressure of trying to keep Mario out of harm's way had eaten away at her until she'd felt like only a shell of the person she used to be. Maybe it wasn't socially acceptable for a woman to want a man to take care of her, but she was exhausted from carrying the weight and responsibility of being a mother by herself. She'd gladly let Leo help. Mostly because she knew he cared about Mario. He wasn't being nice to him to try to get into her bed. He genuinely liked her son, and that made all the difference in the world.

There'd been many times before she'd fled to Jamaica when she'd felt as if Alfred didn't even *like* his own son. Cassidy knew Mario had felt it too. He'd been remote and shy around him when his dad had shown up for custody visits. And Alfred hadn't protested when Cassidy had announced she was moving to Jamaica and taking their son with her. In fact, he'd seemed relieved.

They walked arm in arm into her apartment, and after the door was shut, Leo leaned down and kissed her briefly, then

joined Mario in the small kitchen. Cassidy watched them together for a moment before Leo noticed her.

“Come here,” he said, holding out his hand.

Cassidy strolled into the kitchen and laughed when Leo grabbed her around the waist and started to tickle her. Mario got into it as well, and they both ganged up on her. She laughed until she cried, then turned on Mario and tickled him until he cried uncle. Then she and Mario tried to attack Leo, but he was taller and stronger than both of them, and they all ended up in a heap on the kitchen floor. It was less than comfortable, but Cassidy couldn't remember ever being happier.

“Go on and get ready for gymnastics,” Leo told Mario. He immediately sprang up from the floor and ran out of the kitchen.

“You're going to spoil him,” Cassidy protested lightly.

“Cass, the kid has a passion for tumbling, cheerleading, and dancing. After what he's been through, the *last* thing he'll become is spoiled if I indulge him. Besides, I've never seen him as happy as he is when he's out on those mats trying to master cartwheels and whatever else those spins and flips are called.”

He had a point. “I need to figure out a way to get a car. You can't be driving us every day after school to his lessons.”

“Why not?” Leo asked.

Cassidy tilted her head and stared at Leo in confusion. “Why not what?”

“Why can't I drive you guys?”

“Because,” Cassidy said. “You've got a life. Things to do. A business to run.”

Then Leo blew her mind with his next words. “I didn't have a life until you and Mario entered it. I can't think of anything better than watching your son blossom in front of my eyes as he learns a new cheer, or someone praises him for finally mastering a jump he's been working on. The joy in his

entire body when he's dancing is something to be treasured, and it makes me smile to watch him do something he loves. And Silverstone Towing runs just fine without me. We've hired the best of the best for a reason, so we don't have to micromanage our employees.

"If you don't want me around so much, just say so, and I'll back off. I agree you need a car, simply so you can be independent and not beholden to anyone for where you want to go and when. You've lived that way for too long, and I refuse to make you do it again. I can help you find an affordable car. I'm sure our buddy Stan will help. He owns a mechanic shop, and he's a miracle worker with older vehicles, making them run smoothly and safely."

Cassidy blinked at him. They were both still sitting on the floor of her tiny kitchen, but that didn't stop her from throwing herself at Leo. He caught her easily.

"I don't know what we would've done without you," she said quietly.

"You would've landed on your feet, I have no doubt. Anyone who loves their son as much as you wouldn't have it any other way."

"I'm not so sure about that," she told him.

"I am," Leo said with confidence. Then he stood, with her still in his arms. He made it seem so easy. "I'm falling in love with you, Cassidy. I know it's fast, but in some ways it seems as if I've been in love with you for most of my life. I love Mario. I love that he is who he is, and doesn't seem to give a rat's ass what anyone else thinks. That's because of you. Because you've given him the confidence to be true to himself. I know you hold a lot of guilt for bringing him to Jamaica, but you need to let go of that. He's an amazing kid."

Cassidy would never get enough of hearing good things about her son . . . but she couldn't get past his first sentence. "You love me? How is that even possible?"

"You got under my skin when I was eighteen and never left. When I was in the Army, you wrote me letters that made

me laugh. You made me feel better about my parents not getting along, and you didn't care that my uncle's a felon. You encouraged me and took me down a peg when I thought I was hot shit. And it broke my heart when you got married. I knew I'd lost you. Which sucked. I mean, it was my own damn fault, but still."

"Leo," Cassidy whispered.

"It's okay. I didn't tell you so you'd feel guilty or say it back. I just need you to know. I'm not hanging out with you for a piece of ass. No offense, but I can get that with way less trouble than you and your son." He smiled and winked to lessen the sting of his words. "I'm here because I want to be. Because you and Mario have made me smile more since I've known you than I have in years. Because you make me feel alive again."

Cassidy wanted to tell him she loved him back. But she couldn't get the words past the lump in her throat. She'd thought she loved Alfred, too, and look how that had turned out.

Leo wasn't Alfred. Not even close. And she'd been a little bit in love with Leo for most of her life. Still, she was scared to death that if she admitted it out loud, she'd somehow lose him.

Luckily, Mario saved her from having to say anything. He burst back into the small living room, exclaiming, "I'm ready!"

Leo brought a hand up to her face and caressed her cheek with his thumb for a split second before he let go of her and turned to Mario. "Lookin' good, Mar!"

Mario stuck out a leg and lifted his chin, posing for Leo. He'd put on a pair of bright-pink shorts and tucked in a yellow T-shirt. He had bright-white socks on with his sneakers and looked like he'd fallen into a vat of fluorescent paint.

"Kinda bright, Mario," Cassidy said with a chuckle.

"I know! Isn't it great?" Mario said, not caring what she thought of his outfit.

“It is, bud. I grabbed you some peanut butter crackers for a snack. As much as I love your mom’s cookies, athletes need protein to keep up their energy and strength too,” Leo said as he handed Mario a package that he’d grabbed off the counter.

Cassidy was grateful Leo thought about Mario’s well-being as much as she did. They’d had a talk about his nutrition, and while they agreed he needed to put on a few pounds, she was glad one of them made sure he did so in a healthy way and not just from eating junk. Cassidy wanted to pamper her son, give him all the things he’d been deprived of for so long; Leo made sure to balance out her motherly instincts.

He balanced *both* of them. They’d spent almost every evening together since she’d gotten to Indianapolis, and somehow Leo had become a part of her every waking thought. Mario’s too.

Leo had taken Mario under his wing and helped him blossom. Her son might be naturally positive, but a lot of his success in transitioning into a normal life here in the States was because of Leo. He hadn’t had a nightmare since they’d gotten to Indiana, and for that alone, Cassidy would have fallen for Leo.

Suddenly she wanted to blurt out that she loved him, but now wasn’t the time or place. Mario was impatient to get to the gym, and Cassidy wanted privacy when she told Leo for the first time how much she cared about him. She didn’t know when or where that might happen, but she knew it was coming. There was no way she could hold back her feelings for long. Leo deserved to know that she thought he was an amazing man. She wasn’t nearly good enough for him, but if he wanted her, she was going to hold on as hard as she could. She knew a good man when she saw one, and Leo was one of the best.

# Chapter Fourteen

“Thank you all for coming with me today,” Cassidy told Skylar, Taylor, and Molly. They were sitting in the gym watching Mario’s cheerleading practice. He’d been in school for a week and was still loving it as much as he had the first day. This was his first Saturday practice, and it was two hours long instead of his usual one-hour sessions after school. Leo had planned on driving them and hanging out with her while they watched from the stands, but something had come up at work, and all the guys needed to spend some time in their safe room discussing it.

Cassidy hadn’t asked what it was. She knew. They were talking about the possibility of another mission. On one hand, she hated the idea, simply because she didn’t want any of the men she’d come to care about putting themselves in danger. But on the other hand, she couldn’t help but think about the situation *she’d* been in. If they hadn’t taken the risk to come after her, she and Mario would be in a very different place right now.

Tiana would’ve driven both her and Mario to the gym, but Molly had volunteered. And then Taylor and Skylar had said they wanted to come too. Before she knew it, the six of them, including baby Kevin, were packed into Molly’s Volvo SUV and on their way.

“I’ve been wanting to come watch this since you told me he was taking cheerleading classes,” Molly said, her eyes shining, one hand resting on her belly as she took in the goings-on in front of them.

“This is serious stuff, isn’t it?” Skylar observed. “I mean, I kinda thought it would just be a bunch of kids jumping up and down and clapping.”

“That’s what I thought at first too,” Cassidy said. “But I quickly found out how wrong I was.” Mario currently stood with other kids around his age, watching an older group of students demonstrate how to safely catch a flier, a girl who

was thrown up in the air to do a flip or some other amazing acrobatic feat.

“It looks kind of dangerous,” Taylor said a little hesitatingly.

Cassidy nodded, although her opinion of what might be dangerous was a bit different from those of the women sitting next to her. Delivering drugs in the run-down parts of Kingston was dangerous. Cheerleading didn’t even come close.

“So . . . how’ve you been?” Taylor asked.

Cassidy smiled. It felt good to have someone to talk to. “Good,” she said.

“The apartment’s working out?” Skylar asked.

“Yes. Tiana, Maria, and everyone else have been very welcoming and helpful.”

“I know it’s not in the best neighborhood,” Skylar said with a small wince.

Cassidy couldn’t help but laugh. “Seriously? We came from the lap of luxury in Jamaica, but it was a prison. We definitely weren’t safe, even though we lived behind a huge wall. I feel safer in that apartment than I ever did in Michael’s home.”

The women all knew her story, and knew what their men had done to save her. She’d been informed that most of the time, Silverstone didn’t divulge where they were going or where they’d been, but when they’d returned with her and Mario, they’d kind of *had* to explain to their wives.

“Do you think anyone’s gonna come after you?” Molly asked.

Cassidy sighed. “Honestly? I just don’t know. I’d like to say no, that we’re way too far away from Jamaica, but after everything I saw when I lived there, I have no idea what Michael’s lieutenants will do. They’ve got the money to come here, but would they? I don’t know.”



“Doesn’t that scare you?” Taylor asked. She seemed to hold Kevin a little tighter against her chest as she asked.

“A little. But more than that, it makes me mad. I *am* glad that my parents are getting out of El Paso for a while, since Michael’s head of security had their old phone number. I hate not being able to tell them how long they might want to stay away, but for now, they claim they’re glad for the excuse to visit relatives they haven’t seen in years.

“Michael and his lieutenants did their best to ruin not only my life, but Mario’s as well. For what? Just because they could. Because they think women are inferior to men. Because I was property, and drugs and money are more important than being a decent person. Why *wouldn’t* someone like that think I had no right to leave? And . . . they probably think I had something to do with their boss’s death. That alone could mean they want to make me pay or hurt someone I love.”

“Why aren’t you freaking out, then?” Molly asked.

“Because of him,” Cassidy said, gesturing to the mats in front of them, where Mario was smiling and having the time of his life. “Because he deserves to live a life without fear. And if I’m scared and constantly watching over my shoulder, that will transmit to him. He’s very sensitive, and he’ll know. But you want to know another reason?”

Three pairs of eyes were focused on her, and all the women nodded.

“Because of Leo. Just being around him makes me feel . . . safe. I know I’m not supposed to admit that, but it’s true.”

“There’s nothing wrong with admitting that,” Molly said. “When I was kidnapped, I knew Mark would come for me. I hoped he’d find me in time, but I knew without a doubt he’d never stop until he found me, either way.”

“I’ve been asked many times if I’m scared whenever I’m out and about, since I can’t recognize anyone, and my answer is, sometimes, yes. But if I’m with Eagle? Never. Just having him with me makes me feel almost invincible,” Taylor agreed.

“How can we feel anything but protected and safe with our men at our sides?” Skylar added. “And Gramps is like eight foot three, so he towers over everyone. No one would dare do anything with that guy by your side.”

Everyone chuckled. “He’s not quite *that* tall,” Cassidy protested with a smile. Then she sobered. “Can I ask you guys a question?”

“Anything.”

“Of course.”

“Shoot.”

She really liked these women. “Sometimes I get the feeling that Leo is a little concerned because I don’t care what Silverstone does. Should I? Am I a horrible human being that I don’t mind they’re basically assassins?”

Skylar grimaced and held up a hand. “I’ve got this one,” she told Molly and Taylor. They both nodded. “I’m afraid him worrying about your reaction is probably my fault. When Carson told me what it was he did with Silverstone, I didn’t take it very well. I pushed him away and wasn’t sure I could deal with it. I grew up very protected and sheltered and had a hard time understanding why he thought it was okay to go around killing people.

“Because I was so freaked out, I also kind of dismissed the part where he said he was working with the FBI. I got the impression Silverstone was sort of a vigilante group running around playing judge and jury. I should’ve known better, though. I mean, I love the man. But I think that was what made it even harder to understand. Gramps actually called me and helped me understand a little better. But the guys went on another mission, so I didn’t get to talk to Carson before he left. And then I got kidnapped.”

“Tell her about Carson’s scale-of-one-to-ten thing,” Taylor urged.

Cassidy was surprised. Out of all the women, she wouldn’t have guessed Skylar to be the one who hadn’t accepted Silverstone. She taught in the inner city. She was one

of the least discriminatory people she knew. To think she'd have an issue with Silverstone taking out horrible, awful people like Michael Coke was a revelation.

“Right, so when I asked Carson why he hadn't killed the pedophile who'd kidnapped me and Sandra, he told me he had a scale of badness,” Skylar said.

“A scale?” Cassidy questioned.

“Yeah. I was thinking Jay Ricketts, the guy who kidnapped me, was at least an eight or nine. I mean, what's worse than a pedophile? But Carson said he was actually a three or four. And that he and Silverstone only went after and eliminated the nines and tens. Though that was terrifying, it actually made me feel a little better and helped me understand the importance of what they do.”

“But when Eagle killed the guy who'd run our car off the road, he told me that he didn't agree with Bull's ‘scale’ idea. That *anyone* who dared hurt me would pay the ultimate price,” Taylor said.

“Of course, Brett Williams turned out to be like an eleven on the scale,” Skylar said dryly.

“Right, but at the time, we didn't know he was a prolific serial killer who wanted to torture and kill me,” Taylor said.

“True,” Skylar agreed.

“I think because of how Mark and I met, I didn't have the reservations that Skylar did,” Molly added. “I mean, I was in a hole in the middle of Africa with no hope of being rescued when he literally fell from the sky on top of me.”

Cassidy was fascinated. She'd known the basics of the other women's stories, but hearing them talk about their experiences—and sound almost . . . *nonchalant* about them—was enlightening.

She wanted to be like them. To be able to talk about what happened to her in Jamaica without feeling a knot in the pit of her stomach and wanting to throw up.

“I was well aware that Mark and his friends weren’t just taking a pleasure stroll through the jungle. They had no problem killing the people who’d kidnapped all those schoolgirls. They’d come for that specific purpose, to kill the guy in charge. They were just nice enough to take me with them when they left.”

Everyone smiled at that.

“I guess what you’re saying is . . . it’s okay that I’m not morally shocked by what they do,” Cassidy said.

“Our men are *good*,” Skylar insisted. “I might’ve had a hard time with everything at first, but I’ve seen the light. I wouldn’t be sitting here with three of the best friends I’ve ever had if it wasn’t for them.”

Cassidy pressed her lips together and tried not to cry. To be included in Skylar’s statement meant everything, especially since she hadn’t had a true friend in so long.

“Now that *that*’s out of the way . . . ,” Molly said with a small smile. “Tell us how things are going with Gramps. I mean, it’s obvious the man cares about you, but are you two . . . more than friends?”

Cassidy couldn’t help but smile back. “Yeah,” she said a little shyly.

“Woo!” Skylar exclaimed, throwing her arms up in the air.

“Jeez, Sky, chill out, you’re gonna wake Kevin!” Taylor chastised.

“Sorry! But that’s so awesome,” Skylar said, a little more subdued. “Tell us more!”

“You know Leo and I were friends in high school,” Cassidy said.

“I bet he was handsome even back then, wasn’t he?” Taylor asked.

“Oh yeah,” Cassidy said on a sigh.

The others all grinned.

“I was a freshman, and he was a senior. But he didn’t seem to care about that. He was always nice to me, and I may or may not have written Mrs. Cassidy Zanardi a hundred times with a heart around it in my notebooks.”

They all laughed again.

“I got his address from my parents, who got it from his folks, and I wrote to him when he was in the Army. We wrote for quite a while, actually, but eventually my life got busy, and I guess his did too.”

“You got married, and your husband didn’t want you writing another man,” Skylar guessed.

Cassidy nodded. “I felt guilty because I looked forward to getting a letter from Leo more than I did hanging out with my own husband. I suppose I should’ve gotten a clue, but instead I acquiesced to what Alfred wanted. He alienated me from all my friends and was generally a jerk. Having Mario helped for a while, but then things turned bad again. After the divorce, everyone I knew told me how stupid I’d been to leave Alfred. I needed a break from that. I thought Jamaica would be fun. And the rest is history.”

“I’m sorry about what you went through, but I can’t help but think somehow it was all meant to be. What are the odds that the guy you had a crush on in high school would be the one to rescue you?” Taylor asked.

“I know. It’s pretty unbelievable,” Cassidy agreed.

“But you guys are *together* together now?” Molly asked.

Cassidy shrugged. “I guess so.”

“You *guess* so?” Skylar echoed, then shook her head. “Honey, if you don’t *know* so, then you need to step up your game.”

“We’ve been taking things slow. It just feels weird to do anything with Mario nearby.”

“You’ll get over that,” Taylor said with a smile. “Trust me. I know how you feel. For the longest time, I didn’t feel comfortable doing more than kissing when Kevin was in the

room with us. Even though he's a baby, I thought I might damage him emotionally if we made love where he could see and hear us. But one night, after I'd fed him in the middle of the night and put him back in his crib, I couldn't resist Eagle anymore. I jumped the poor man, and we made love for hours. And you know what? Kevin slept through it all. I know Mario is different because he's not an infant, but I think as long as you aren't having crazy monkey sex in the living room right before dinner, you're good."

Cassidy was blushing. She'd never had such frank talk about sex with anyone before. But it felt kind of liberating. "I want him," she admitted. "But I don't know how to make the first move."

"I'm guessing you won't have to do much," Molly said dryly. "I've seen the way Gramps watches you. He's hyperaware of where you are at all times and what you're doing. At Silverstone, I saw him get out of his chair and leave the conversation he was having with one of the drivers, grab your glass, go to the fridge, get you a refill, and bring it back to you before going back to his conversation as if nothing had interrupted him. When Smoke teased him about it, Gramps just shrugged and said he didn't want you to be thirsty. The next time he's at your apartment and gets up to leave, just grab him and kiss him. He won't be able to tear himself away."

"Although, the walls in her apartment complex are pretty thin," Skylar said. "I heard Tiana and Maria more times than I can count enjoying the company of men. It might make you feel better if you made a move when you were at *his* house."

Cassidy nodded. She'd noticed how thin the walls were at her apartment, and the last thing she wanted was Mario waking up and coming to her room to investigate any weird noises he might hear. It had taken him long enough to get comfortable sleeping in a room by himself.

He was even more comfortable at Leo's house. He loved being able to decorate his room however he wanted and had no problem sleeping by himself when they were over there.

“What if he doesn’t want to? I’d be so embarrassed,” Cassidy admitted.

“Believe me, he wants to,” Skylar said.

Taking a deep breath, Cassidy nodded. She wanted Leo too. She wanted more than his kisses. She wanted all of him. She’d waited over twenty years; she didn’t want to wait any longer.

“You got this! Good job, Jake! You can do it, Beth!”

Cassidy recognized her son’s voice, and she turned to look at his class. The younger kids were once again gathered around the older class. There was music playing, and they were doing some sort of intricate routine. Some boys were catching the girls after they were thrown in the air, others held girls on their shoulders, and between the aerial tricks, almost everyone was tumbling across the mats.

The younger kids were watching silently, their eyes open wide—except Mario. He was smiling and clapping and yelling out encouragements to the older kids.

“Oh my gosh! That was awesome, Harriot! Keep it up! Amazing! You’re doing so good, Josh! It’s okay, shake it off, get back into it, Sarah!”

Her eyes filled with tears as she listened to her son lifting everyone else up. She knew he wanted to be right there performing along with the other kids, not standing on the sidelines, but that wasn’t preventing him from encouraging them.

“He’s a pretty amazing kid,” Molly said. “If my daughter is anything like him, I’ll be blessed.”

“Kevin’s got a fantastic role model, for sure,” Taylor added.

“I wish I could’ve had him in my class,” Skylar agreed.

Watching Mario blossom was one of the most satisfying things in the world. His cheerleading, gymnastics, and dance classes were expensive, but Leo didn’t seem to care. And no matter how much they cost, she’d do whatever it took to keep

Mario enrolled, even if things with her and Leo didn't work out. She'd bend over backward to keep the smile on her son's face that he had right that second. His passion wasn't cars, or sports, or anything most men would want their son to be interested in, but she knew without a doubt that didn't matter to Leo. He'd been encouraging Mario from the first day he'd met him. Encouraged him to be exactly who he was without trying to pigeonhole him into what society deemed acceptable.

She loved Leo for that. And couldn't wait to express exactly how much she appreciated every single thing he'd done for both herself and Mario since he'd found them in Jamaica.

She couldn't keep the silly smile from her face. She didn't know when or how, but she was going to show Leo how much she loved him. How much she'd loved him from the time she was fifteen years old. Leo Zanardi was the man for her, and the longer she was around him, the more sure she became.

There'd been a time not too long ago when she'd despaired of even living long enough to see her son grow into a man. Now she felt as if she was living the American dream. Maybe it was in a run-down apartment with hand-me-down furniture and clothes, but she had friends, people who cared about what happened to her. She had a job, earned her own money. And her son was finally living the kind of life she'd always wanted for him.

It was time to stop being so unsure about her relationship with Leo and just go for it. Leo wasn't going to reject her—she'd known that even without Skylar's, Taylor's, and Molly's reassurance. She just needed to reach for what she wanted. And what she wanted was Leo.



# Chapter Fifteen

Something was different with Cassidy, but Gramps couldn't put his finger on it. She'd been acting a little strange ever since Taylor, Skylar, and Molly had gone to Mario's cheerleading practice with her.

He'd hated not being able to go, but Willis had contacted them with information on a possible target. The men had all gathered in the safe room at Silverstone Towing to discuss it.

But the discussion hadn't gone very smoothly. Eagle kept texting Taylor to check on her and Kevin. Smoke was worried about Molly because she'd been a bit dizzy that morning. She hadn't thrown up or passed out, but he didn't stop worrying throughout the meeting. And Bull had argued against any extended missions because he didn't want to leave Skylar for that long.

All four of them were distracted, and that wasn't how they needed to be when they were discussing a possible future mission. It was more than obvious that Silverstone was ready for change, but no one had been willing to say what they were probably all thinking.

It was Gramps who had finally ended the meeting when he'd gotten a text from Cassidy saying that Mario'd had a great class and Molly was dropping them off back at their apartment. He had been curious as to why Cassidy had used all caps when she'd spelled *great* and had looked forward to talking to Mario, to hear for himself how things had gone.

Ever since that day, Gramps had felt Cassidy's eyes on him more and more. When he'd asked about it, she'd merely shrugged and said everything was fine. Of course, that made Gramps even more nervous. When a woman said something was *fine*, that meant it probably wasn't. Which worried him.

They'd gotten back from another cheerleading practice earlier, and he'd splurged and ordered pizza for dinner. They'd all eaten more than their fill, then Mario had excused himself to go upstairs to practice some of the cheers he'd learned that

day. For a while, Gramps had heard him up in his room, yelling out the cadences and jumping around. But now it was past ten at night, and everything was quiet upstairs.

He and Cassidy were sitting next to each other, ostensibly watching a comedy show. Gramps had no idea which show it was because all his attention was on the woman next to him.

It was getting harder and harder to keep his hands to himself, particularly since they spent nearly all their time together. She came with him to Silverstone Towing in the mornings and hung around the garage looking after any kids who showed up while he ran some shifts or discussed business with his friends. Then he took her to pick up Mario, and they took him to his practices and ate dinner together, and more often than not, he spent the night at her apartment, sleeping on the couch, or she stayed at his house in a guest room.

But being separated from her at night wasn't something he could handle much longer. He liked Cassidy. Liked talking with her. Hanging out with her. Watching her laugh at something her son said or did. They didn't even have to talk; just being near her calmed him.

And he wanted her. More than he could ever remember wanting a woman. All he had to do was glimpse a shadow of her cleavage, and he got hard. He'd masturbated more than he ever had before, simply because it was the only way to keep his cock from being embarrassingly hard all day.

Gramps didn't want to do anything that would pressure Cassidy. He didn't want her to be with him because she was grateful to him for rescuing her, or because she felt obligated. He'd never been this unsure with anyone before. He'd always gone after what he'd wanted. But with Cassidy, everything he'd done in the past was thrown out the window.

And now, something was on her mind, and she wasn't talking to him about it, which drove him crazy. He wanted to slay all her dragons. Make her life as easy as possible. But if she wouldn't talk to him, he couldn't help her. Which was unacceptable.

Reaching over, Gramps took her hand in his. He brought it up to his lips and kissed the back. Cassidy looked at him in surprise, but didn't jerk her hand out of his grip.

"Talk to me," he urged.

Her brows drew together in confusion. "About what?"

"About what's been bothering you. About how when I ask if anything's wrong, you say that everything's *fine*. It's not fine, I can tell. Tell me what's up so I can help you figure out how to fix it. Is it Mario? I thought school was going well for him."

Cassidy shook her head. "It is."

"Then what? Talk to me, Cass."

He stayed silent and watched as she did her best to gather her courage. He hated that. He wanted her to trust him enough to talk to him about anything, and the fact that she was obviously uneasy was a dagger to the heart.

She took a deep breath, turned to look him in the eye, and said, "I want you."

Gramps blinked in surprise. "What?"

She blushed but didn't look away. "A couple weeks ago, you said that you were falling for me. I think I've been in love with you since I was fifteen years old," Cassidy admitted. "I have no idea why you seem to like me. I'm a mess, and I've done a lot of stupid things recently. But the last month or so has been the happiest time in my life."

She pulled her hand out of his—and Gramps was even more shocked when she reached for the button on his jeans. Her hands were shaking, and she fumbled awkwardly with the button. He reached down and grabbed her wrists, holding her still.

Her eyes filled with tears, and she looked away from him then. Gramps hated that he'd made her feel embarrassed, but he needed to be sure they were on the same page before they continued.

"Look at me," Gramps ordered.

It took a moment, but Cassidy slowly lifted her head to meet his gaze.

“I haven’t pushed for anything more intimate than we’ve already done because I wanted you to be sure,” he said softly. “When I take you, that’s it. There’s no going back. Just like when I was eighteen and knew if I asked you out that I’d never be able to leave you, I know that if you let me sink into your hot, wet, gorgeous pussy, there won’t ever be anyone else for me. You’re it. I needed to give you time to be one hundred percent sure that’s what you want.

“I’m not Alfred, or Michael, or any other fucktard male who’s screwed you over in the past. I’m bossy, protective, and way too blunt for my own good, but I give you my word that I’ll do everything in my power to make sure you and Mario have nothing but good in your life from here on out. If you can’t commit, if you aren’t sure you want a long-term relationship with me, if you can’t see yourself wearing my ring for the rest of your life . . . we need to wait. I’m willing to do so, but I’m *not* willing to be given paradise only to have it snatched out of my grasp afterward.”

Cassidy stared at him without blinking. Gramps couldn’t read what she was thinking. She’d perfected the art of the poker face. Probably because she’d had to in order to protect herself in the past. It pissed him off.

“I love you, Cassidy,” Gramps went on. “You *and* Mario. I’ve never felt so alive. Suddenly I have more to live for than my job. I wake up smiling because I know I’ll be seeing you both soon, and I go to bed replaying all the moments we spent together that day. I want you. More than I’ve ever wanted a woman. But that means in all aspects of my life, not just in bed. If ‘I want you’ means ‘only in bed’ . . . my answer is no. I’m not willing to settle for that. I want all of you. Every little piece. The good, bad, and ugly.”

Gramps held his breath as he let go of her wrists, waiting for her answer. If she backed off now, it would be crushing, but he wasn’t going to give up. He’d give her some space while doing his best to convince her to give them a shot. He’d never ask for more than she could give—but he wanted it all.

Licking her lips, Cassidy rested her fingers on the waistband of his jeans once more. But she didn't move as she spoke. "It's been six years since I've been with a man," she said softly, blushing.

Gramps couldn't help it. He loved that.

"And before that, I'd only been with Alfred. He was my first, and I have to say, it was never good. He didn't care if I enjoyed what we were doing. His only goal was to get off. Most of the time, being with him was humiliating and awkward. I'd read a lot of books and watched my fair share of porn, trying to figure out how to make things better for myself. The sad truth is, the relationships of the actors and actresses in those porn videos were more loving than my own marriage."

Gramps frowned. Not because she was talking about watching porn or being with another man, but because he hated she'd never felt loved.

"Being with you these past several weeks has made me realize what a real relationship is all about. It's not all sex up against walls and getting each other off. It's making each other laugh. It's watching you teach my son to love himself no matter how different he might be from others. Seeing him blossom under your attention. It's having someone to cook dinner for us, and knowing if I need anything at all, all I have to do is ask.

"I love you, Leo. I thought I loved Alfred, but I think I was desperate to be in a relationship. To find a connection with someone else. What I feel for you makes it more than clear I didn't have a clue before."

Her fingers began to move once more, and Gramps held his breath, wanting to feel her hand on his pulsing flesh more than he wanted to breathe.

"But most of all, I want to know how it feels to make love. I want to know what those women in those videos felt when their partners pushed them over the edge. I want to know how you feel when you fill me. I've dreamed about you practically my entire adult life . . . and waiting for you to make the first move has been killing me."

She took her time slowly unzipping his jeans, and Gramps was two seconds away from pouncing on her. He hated that she'd been second-guessing his intentions. She didn't come right out and say that, but it was obvious that was what had been bothering her. What all the "I'm fine" shit had been about. She hadn't been fine, and that was on him. He'd let his woman down.

That stopped now. She'd never again wonder if he wanted her as much as she wanted him.

Her eyes dropped from his as she looked down at his lap. She pushed the denim aside, and his cock immediately swelled, happy to no longer be confined. Cassidy's cheeks flushed a deeper red, and she licked her lips as she stared. Her hand moved slowly, but before she could touch him, Gramps reached the end of his rope.

He was done talking.

She'd made her decision.

She was his. Now and forever.

Gramps moved again, standing in one fluid movement and reaching for Cassidy. He leaned over and picked her up off the couch as if she weighed no more than a child. He cradled her in his arms and headed for the stairs.

He headed down the hall and stopped outside Mario's door. He lowered Cassidy's legs until she was standing, then eased the door open and leaned in to check on Mario. He was sprawled on his bed, arms and limbs askew, dead to the world. Sleeping the sleep of the innocent. He knew he was safe in his room, in this house, and his deep slumber proved it.

Gramps shut the door without a sound, then picked up Cassidy again and headed for his room. He'd dreamed of this moment more nights than he could count. He'd hated watching Cassidy go to the guest room and shut the door behind her. He'd longed to snatch her up and bring her to his bed. And he was finally getting that chance.

He pushed open his door with his shoulder and shut it gently behind him with a hip. Then he strode toward the bed

and draped Cassidy on it. He leaned over her. “Do you need to use the bathroom?”

She shook her head.

“One last chance to change your mind,” he said, even though everything within him was screaming for him to shut up. To take her.

“Fuck me, Leo,” she said quietly.

That was all it took for his control to snap. Gramps grabbed her sides and hauled her farther up on the bed. His hands went to her jeans, and within seconds, she was lifting her hips so he could shove the pants down her legs. He grabbed the hem of her delicate white blouse and tugged it upward. Then she was lying on his bed in nothing but a white cotton bra and a pair of black leopard-print panties. They didn’t match, but somehow that seemed all the more sexy. More real.

His cock ached in his open jeans, and Leo couldn’t wait a second more. He crawled onto the bed and spread her legs apart. Without a word, he lowered his head and nuzzled the cotton over her pussy. He inhaled deeply and groaned low in his throat.

“Leo?” Cassidy asked, but he was too far gone to respond.

His hands came up, and he roughly jerked the panties aside so he could see her for the first time. Her lower lips glistened with wetness, and the sight made his mouth water.

Gramps moved without thought, his tongue lapping at her slit. The position was a little awkward, since he hadn’t had the patience to strip off her underwear before going down on her. He couldn’t get his tongue inside her body, but he could get to her clit. He needed her to orgasm. Needed to show her what she’d been missing.

Latching on to the sensitive bud, Gramps sucked hard.

Cassidy made a high-pitched squeaking noise and halfway sat up on the bed. He put a hand on her belly, holding her still, and the other hand held her underwear out of his way.

“Let me take them off,” Cassidy pleaded.

But Leo shook his head. Now that he’d tasted her, he wasn’t backing off until she was mindless with pleasure.

He glanced up as he continued to use his tongue to lash against her clit. He could see her erect nipples even through the cotton of her bra. Cassidy stared down at him, her eyes wide, pupils dilated as he pleased her.

“Leo,” she whispered.

He couldn’t stop. Not now. He needed to get her off. Needed to give her more pleasure than she could handle. Not taking his eyes from hers, Gramps increased his efforts. Soon her thighs began to shake, and he could feel her stomach muscles tightening under his hand.

“Oh my God,” Cassidy said. “I’m going to come.”

Gramps wanted to crow in triumph. He wasn’t so conceited as to think it was just his technique. It had obviously been a very long time since she’d come, and she was definitely due. But he couldn’t deny he was pleased as fuck that he was the one getting her there.

It only took thirty or so more seconds. Cassidy fell on her back and grabbed his head as she shook uncontrollably. Her intoxicating scent increased right before she flew over the edge. She bucked against him, and Gramps almost lost his grip. He smiled even as he increased the suction on her clit.

Ever mindful of her sleeping son, Cassidy muffled her shrieks. Gramps couldn’t wait for a day when he could take her without either of them worrying about the noise they were making. But for now, he couldn’t think of anything sexier than his woman losing her ever-loving mind under his tongue.

She thrashed and jerked as her orgasm seemed to go on and on. It wasn’t until she whimpered that Gramps gave her mercy. He pulled back, still holding her underwear as he took in the way her pussy leaked from excitement. He couldn’t help but lean down and lick her slit, forcing his tongue between her folds to gather as much of her fluids as he could reach.

Cassidy moaned again.



And with that, Gramps knew he had to have her. Right now. He couldn't wait another second to get inside her.



Cassidy lay spent as Leo pushed away from her and stood next to the bed. He stripped off his clothes in record time, not taking his eyes from hers. She'd had no idea an orgasm could feel like that. She'd masturbated in the past, but the orgasms she'd given herself had never felt anything like what Leo had just done to her. They'd been slow and easy. But Leo hadn't let up when she'd gotten close. He'd licked harder. Sucked harder. Sending her flying in an almost painful explosion of pleasure.

Her breasts heaved up and down as she tried to catch her breath, watching as Leo bared himself to her. He was nearly perfect. His chest had a light covering of hair. The dark strands were liberally mixed with gray, and it made him even sexier in her eyes. His shoulders were broad, and while he didn't have a perfect six-pack, it was more than obvious he still worked out and took care of his body. He even had those V muscles she found so sexy.

Her eyes went to his waist . . . and widened at how large his dick actually was. Even from where she was lying, she could see it pulsing. The mushroomed head looked red and angry, and she wasn't sure he would even fit inside her.

Feeling uneasy for the first time, Cassidy bit her lip.

"We'll fit," Leo said, as if he could read her mind. He reached for her underwear, and Cassidy blushed as he drew the elastic down over her hip bones. She lifted her butt to assist and couldn't help thinking that she was in no way good enough for this man.

She'd had a baby. Still had the stretch marks on her body to show for it. Her breasts weren't very perky anymore, and she never went anywhere without a bra as a result.

Suddenly, she wasn't sure she could do this.

"So fucking beautiful," Leo said reverently as his eyes roamed her body. His hands went under her back to unclip her bra as Cassidy looked into his eyes.

If she'd seen even a hint of disappointment, she wouldn't have been able to continue. But instead, all she saw was lust. For her.

She was now naked as the day she was born, breathing hard, pleasure still coursing through her body from the orgasm he'd given her. Alfred had never gone down on her. He'd thought it was disgusting and always refused. Of course, he didn't find her sucking on *him* disgusting, and many times preferred she get him off that way before falling asleep without giving her any pleasure in return.

Leo put a knee on the bed and moved between her legs. Looking down, she saw that while she'd been lost in her thoughts, he'd donned a condom. For just a moment, she felt disappointed. She didn't want anything between them, but it was the responsible thing to do, she knew that.

"I meant to have a discussion about birth control before we got here. But I was too cowardly and waited too long," Leo said.

The last thing Cassidy thought about the virile man kneeling above her was that he was a coward.

"I'm protected," she told him, watching his cock literally jump at the words. "When Mario and I went to the doctor after arriving in Indy, I asked about birth control. I'd gotten the shot before heading to Jamaica, because I didn't know what my situation would be there, but of course I wasn't able to keep getting them."

Leo pulled her back to the present by putting a hand on the side of her face. "You'll always be safe with me," he said quietly. "We'll have a discussion later and figure everything out, but I can't wait even a second longer to have you."

Cassidy liked that he was desperate for her. She felt the same way. Her love for him expanded within her.

The tip of his cock brushed against her belly, and she inhaled sharply. Looking up, she could only see a sliver of the brown in his irises. His pupils were dilated, and his nostrils flared as he did his best to hold on to his iron control.

“Go slow,” she whispered, widening her legs, inviting him into her body.

“I won’t hurt you,” he vowed. “I’d *never* hurt you.”

Instead of putting his cock to her opening, Leo reached down and ran his fingers over her slit. He played with the wetness he found there, rubbing it around, flicking her clit, making her jump before she relaxed into the mattress.

He eased a finger inside her tight sheath, and they both groaned.

“Fuck, Cass, you’re so hot. And you’re squeezing my finger so tight, you’re gonna strangle my cock when it gets in there.”

His words made her muscles tighten, and he moaned.

Then neither of them spoke as he concentrated on getting her used to having something inside her body once more. One finger turned into two. His gentle probing changed into a more demanding pace. He turned his hand, and those two fingers hit something inside her that made her literally jump in his grasp.

Leo smiled. “That’s it,” he said, more to himself than to her.

Cassidy didn’t know what he was talking about, but she couldn’t think when his hand picked up its pace. His other hand came down and began to rub against her clit. He worked her hard, and Cassidy felt as if she were soaking the bed under her with how wet she was. The squelching noises his fingers made would’ve embarrassed her if she hadn’t been so turned on.

She knew he’d found her G-spot. She’d seen enough porn videos of men doing this same thing to women. She’d assumed their over-the-top reactions had been pure acting. But if those actresses had felt even a fraction of the pleasure she was right this second, she knew she’d been wrong. Very wrong.

Cassidy felt as if she was being turned inside out. She opened her legs even wider, trying to get more of Leo.

“That’s it, let go, love,” Leo said.

She barely heard him over the rushing sound in her ears. She'd never felt anything like this before. The pleasure was almost painful. His fingers thrusting inside her had hurt at first, but now she wanted more. Needed more.

Her legs alternated between closing and opening; her body tightened around his fingers, then relaxed. She wanted more and wanted him to stop at the same time. Then she felt a gush of liquid between her thighs just as the most euphoric feeling engulfed her. It washed through her like a wave of tingling heat, and Cassidy was lost in the most erotic feeling she'd ever experienced in her life.

When she came back to herself, Leo was between her legs once again. The head of his cock brushed against her soaking-wet folds. She was sensitive there, but no longer afraid of his size.

“Be sure, Cass,” he asked as he paused at her opening.

In response, Cassidy sat up and put her hands on either side of his face. One of his fists kept him braced over her, and the other held his cock, positioning it at the opening of her body.

“I love you,” she said softly. “I’m yours.”

At her declaration, Leo’s control snapped.

He pushed inside her with one long thrust.

Cassidy had been scared of how big his cock was, but she was so wet and primed, she felt nothing but pleasure as he filled the empty space inside her.

They both moaned as their pubic hair meshed together. Cassidy could feel his balls pressing against her ass, and she shifted, wanting him deeper. Loving how he filled her up.

He'd thrown his head back as he'd entered her, but now he dipped his chin to see her. “I’m never giving you up,” he said.

Cassidy wanted to cry. She was more than okay with that. “And you’re mine,” she answered.

“Yours,” Leo vowed as he pulled himself out of her and slammed back in.

Cassidy grunted. She loved that he wasn’t going slow. She wanted, needed, to feel his possession.

Neither of them spoke after that. Leo forged in and out of her, and Cassidy did her best to meet each thrust by pressing upward with her hips. They were in complete sync. Connected by more than the flesh.

That G-spot orgasm had been so amazing, Cassidy was perfectly content to let Leo take his pleasure, but he had other thoughts. “Make yourself come,” he ordered.

Cassidy blinked up at him. “What?”

“Touch yourself,” he said.

“I’m okay,” she protested. “This is for you.”

“Wrong,” Leo retorted immediately. “This is for both of us.”

“But I’ve already come twice,” she argued.

“And I want to feel you come around my cock,” Leo told her. “Touch yourself, Cass. Squeeze my cock.”

How could she say no to that? Feeling self-conscious, she closed her eyes and brought her hand between them. She felt his pubic hair brush against the back of her hand as she tentatively touched her clit. It was still very swollen and sensitive, and she jerked at the first touch.

Leo groaned. “Fuck yeah, just like that. Open your eyes, and look at me while you pleasure yourself.”

Her eyes popped open immediately, and she stared up at Leo. His face and upper chest were red and blotchy, and she loved the way his jaw tightened as he ground his teeth together.

“Fuck, you’re so beautiful,” Leo breathed.

Cassidy was breathing hard, but she couldn’t look away from his eyes. His cock continued to press in and out of her body as he made love to her.

“That’s it,” he encouraged. “Make yourself feel good.”

“*You* make me feel good,” she countered. “I’ve never felt this way before.”

“Good,” he said a little too smugly.

Cassidy couldn’t help but smile at that.

“Faster, Cass. I’m on the edge here.”

She actually thought he had impressive staying power and told him so.

“I’ve been masturbating every morning, sometimes at night too,” he told her without any embarrassment. “My cock was too hard *not* to jerk off, but more than that, I knew if I didn’t, I’d blow the second I got inside you. But I’m only human, and you feel too fucking good. Get there, love. I’m begging you.”

Cassidy didn’t like the thought of Leo begging for anything, so she moved her fingers faster. She brought her legs up and planted her feet on the mattress, giving her more leverage. Lifting her ass, thankful for the hand Leo put on her butt to help her keep the exact angle she needed, she frantically tried to make herself come.

When her orgasm came, it was gentler and weaker than the previous two Leo had given her, but no less pleasurable.

“Fuck yeah!” Leo groaned as she spasmed around his hard-as-nails cock. He thrust into her forcefully four more times, then planted himself inside her as deep as he could get, and Cassidy watched in fascination when every muscle in his body tensed as he came. She wanted to feel his hot come fill her up, but the condom prevented it.

He collapsed when his arms gave out, but turned so he didn’t crush her. Leo pulled her against his chest, and they both lay there, trying to catch their breaths for a long moment.

He finally lifted his head and stared at her with a look so intense, it made her a little uneasy.

“What?” she asked shyly.

“I love you,” Leo told her. “So much it scares me.”

Cassidy was surprised he admitted that last part. “Me too,” she agreed.

“We’re gonna make it, though,” Leo said. “Wanna know how I know?”

“How?” Cassidy whispered.

“Because nothing that feels this right can be wrong. I’m not saying everything will be sunshine and roses, but I’ll fight for you, for us,” Leo said. “I’ve waited my whole life for you. Seen and done things I’m not proud of, but you and Mario are my reward.”

Cassidy’s eyes filled with tears. “Leo,” she choked.

“Shhhh,” he soothed. “It’s okay.”

And it was. She knew firsthand that relationships didn’t always work out, but for some reason, she wasn’t worried about her and Leo’s. He was right. Being with him felt natural. As if it was meant to be. They’d both been through a lot, and now that they’d found each other, she was determined to hold on as tightly as she could. Leo was worth fighting for—and fight she would.

They lay together for a long moment before he had to get up to take care of the condom. Cassidy hated letting him go, but he was back in a minute with a hot washcloth. He gently cleaned between her legs, which made Cassidy blush even more than she had before. But Leo didn’t comment on it, simply smiled tenderly at her before taking the washcloth back to the bathroom.

He pulled on a pair of shorts and leaned over her. “I’ll be right back. I want to check on Mario.” Then he kissed her forehead and was gone.

Alfred had never done that. Not once. When Mario had cried as an infant, he’d expected her to get up to take care of him. When she’d heard weird noises, he’d never investigated to assure her. Cassidy knew without a doubt that Leo wouldn’t simply roll over and go back to sleep if there was even the smallest chance something might be wrong. His going to

check on Mario when there was absolutely no reason to think he wasn't sleeping soundly just proved that he was the kind of man they could both count on. No matter what.

Leo was back within three minutes. He pulled off the shorts and climbed into the bed next to her. He reached over for his phone and pressed some buttons before putting it back on the nightstand. Then he gathered her against his chest, and Cassidy sighed in contentment.

"I don't know how you feel about Mario knowing you're sleeping in here with me, so I set the alarm for six thirty, just in case."

Cassidy's heart melted even more.

"I want you guys to move in, but I know you need your independence. I'm willing to be patient when it comes to us living together, but I'd like to ask that you see where Mario's head is at. If you think he's not ready for us to be a permanent thing, we'll work on it slowly and gently. I really don't want to go another night without you in my arms."

She lifted her head. The fact that Leo was thinking about Mario went a long way toward making her not freak out that he'd pretty much just asked her to move in.

"I don't like sneaking around behind his back," Leo said. "I get that he'll need some time. You guys have been a team for as long as he can remember. I want to be a part of that team, but I don't want him to feel as if he's being pushed away."

"Thank you," Cassidy told him softly.

"You don't have to thank me. I love that kid. I'm just greedy, and I want it all. You, him, us living as a family. I'll give you both as much time as you need to get used to the idea, but please know that's the endgame here. You moving in, marrying me, us living together permanently."

"I love you." It was all she could say. She wanted to say that she'd move in right this second, but knew she wasn't quite ready.



“And I love you too,” Leo said. “We’ll figure out a schedule. Me sleeping at your place and you guys staying here. It’ll be fine.”

He sounded so confident, Cassidy couldn’t help but relax against him. She knew things wouldn’t be that simple, but she didn’t have the energy to worry about it at the moment. She’d just had three orgasms and had been fucked to within an inch of her life. She’d worry about logistics later. For now, it was enough knowing that Leo had both her and Mario’s best interests in mind.

She fell asleep listening to the beat of Leo’s heart under her ear, and had never slept better.

# Chapter Sixteen

It was three o'clock in the morning, and Lloyd was crouched in a backyard with Martin. It had taken a bit to track down Alice and Julio Hewitt in El Paso. But they'd finally done it.

Nothing had been going right since landing in the States, and Lloyd was more than ready to get back to Jamaica . . . especially since things in Kingston were tentatively looking up.

He'd cautiously contacted a few of the lieutenants, who'd said that a distant cousin of Michael's would be taking over the organization. Lloyd had claimed he'd taken the money so he could track down G, to avenge Michael. And that he wanted to find Cassidy as well, make her pay for their boss's death. Everyone agreed that she had to have had *something* to do with G's showing up, with Cassidy's brat disappearing so conveniently shortly thereafter.

Luckily, the others bought his explanation, and Lloyd was more than grateful. That meant he could possibly go back to his old life, working for Jamaica's newest drug lord . . . as soon as he got his hands on the brat.

Lloyd was aware that Martin still thought he should just kill the kid and be done with it. But that wasn't enough. He wanted the bitch to know what was going to happen to him. That he was going to be turned into the very thing she hated—a drug dealer. Someone who would kill without remorse. Who would sell drugs to children. Who wouldn't give a shit about hurting or raping women.

He'd spell it out for Cassidy in great detail before he killed her. Then do exactly what he threatened. The kid would fear and respect him, and would do whatever the fuck he was told.

Lloyd hated kids, but he had a feeling he'd love fucking with Mario. Convincing him that his mother never loved him. Toughening him up. Turning him into a ruthless drug dealer.

But first he had to find them.

And tonight was the first step in doing just that. He was running out of time and money. He'd left most of what he'd stolen back in Jamaica, so he was running low. He should have just enough to pay for a flight to wherever the bitch was holed up, then to get back to Jamaica. Luckily, Coke's network of pilots was vast. They were willing to fly him and Martin wherever they wanted to go—without asking questions about what they were carrying. They'd ignore a “sleeping” boy for a mere fifty thousand bucks.

“Now?” Martin asked.

Lloyd barely managed not to lash out. He was fucking sick of Martin. The only reason he was still breathing was because he needed his muscle to help subdue and interrogate Cassidy's parents.

He'd planned to be inside the house by now. It had remained quiet all night—but surprisingly, the *neighborhood* had been very active. It was a Friday, and vehicles were constantly driving down the street, and there'd even been a party of some sort two houses down. There was no way he was going to risk breaking into the Hewitts' house while people were around. A neighbor could see them, or one of the Hewitts might make enough noise before they were silenced for someone to hear.

They needed plenty of time to get information from the older couple. And that had meant lying low for hours until he was absolutely sure everyone was sleeping.

“Now,” Lloyd told Martin.

They slowly got up off the ground, arching their backs to work out the kinks in their cramped muscles. They'd staked out the house and decided the easiest way to get inside was through the kitchen window. They'd tested it earlier when it hadn't looked like anyone was home, and it had easily slid upward. Stupid assholes had left it unlocked. It would be easy to get in without having to break a window or a door.

Within two minutes, they were standing inside the kitchen. Lloyd smiled over at Martin. Maybe things were looking up. Lord knew they'd experienced enough delays and frustrations over the last few weeks. It was about time something went as planned.

The two men tiptoed through the house and up the stairs. The place wasn't large, and it was easy to find the master bedroom. It would've been even easier to kill Cassidy's parents as they slept, but they needed answers.

Taking out the serrated pocketknife he'd procured once they'd gotten to El Paso, Lloyd flicked it open as he nudged the master bedroom door.

But the moonlight coming through the windows shone on an empty bed.

"What the fuck?" Lloyd muttered. "I thought you said they were home!" he barked at Martin.

"They were! A couple days ago . . ."

"Dammit!" Lloyd cursed.

After looking around the house a bit more, they found a note Cassidy's mother had written lying on the kitchen table. Directions on how much to water their plants . . . and assurances that she'd be in touch about when they'd be coming back to town.

"Well, shit," Martin said.

Lloyd's mind spun. He wasn't leaving El Paso without finding out where Cassidy was hiding. If he couldn't get his hands on her parents, he knew someone else who might have an idea where to find the bitch. "Come on," he told Martin, heading for the back door.

"Where are we going?" Martin asked.

"To find out where that bitch is."

"But—"

Lloyd had lost his patience. "Her ex!" he bit out, turning to glare at Martin. "I know his name. Michael ordered a

thorough background check on Cassidy before she was hired. There are rules about child custody in the US, and I'm betting she had to tell him she's back . . . and where his son is. We'll find out where Alfred Pepper lives and pay *him* a visit."

"So I'll still be able to have my fun," Martin said with a gleam in his eye.

Lloyd shook his head. "Yeah, asshole, you'll still have your fun. But no killing him until we have the info we need."

"Of course."

The two men slipped out of the house, and Lloyd immediately took the burner phone he'd purchased out of his pocket. They had a man to track down and torture before they left town.



Four hours later, Lloyd was beyond frustrated. This was taking too long. He hadn't expected the bitch's ex to hold out as long as he had.

Tracking him down hadn't been difficult at all. A couple of phone calls, a promise to drop off some cash, and they'd had an address. It had been ridiculously easy to break into the asshole's house. He hadn't turned on his alarm, and the fence around his property had made it easy to enter unseen by the neighbors.

Alfred was currently sitting on a chair in the kitchen, his hands zip-tied behind his back. It had been pitifully easy to subdue him, which had almost been a letdown. He was of average height for a man, around five-nine, and skinny, and it was obvious he spent more time drinking than working out. His beer belly stuck out from his slight frame. The asshole hadn't even tried to defend himself when he'd realized his house had been broken into.

Martin had alternated between hitting and slicing the man, trying to get information out of him. But he was either too stupid or too stubborn to tell them what they wanted to know.

Lloyd was done fucking around. It had been fun to mess with the guy at first, but now he was impatient to get this over

with and be on his way.

He walked behind Alfred and roughly cut through the plastic tie holding the man to the chair, but didn't release his hands. Ignoring Alfred's cry of pain, Lloyd pushed him to his knees on the hard tile floor, then kicked him so he fell over onto his side.

He knelt next to the man, who was crying uncontrollably now, and sliced through his sweatpants, leaving him naked.

"Tell me where your ex is," he asked one more time. "You don't even like her. She's a dumb bitch; why are you prolonging this?"

"My son," Alfred said on a gasp.

"I'm not going to kill your son," Lloyd said honestly. He could literally see the man's mind spinning as he took in his words. "I don't give a shit about Mario," Lloyd lied. "All I care about is Cassidy. So tell me where she is so this can stop."

It was pathetic that Alfred was attempting to protect his son now. Too little, too late, as far as Lloyd was concerned. If some bitch had tried to take *his* son out of the country, he wouldn't have allowed it.

"I don't know exactly where she is," Alfred said slowly.

Lloyd stood up and nodded at Martin. The other man smiled and leaned down, holding his knife against Alfred's cock, pressing the tip into the head until a bead of blood bloomed.

Alfred howled in pain, but with his arms still tied behind his back, he couldn't do a damn thing about the knife at his junk.

"Tell me right now where she is, or I'll have Martin cut your dick off and shove it up your ass," Lloyd threatened.

"Indianapolis!" Alfred shouted without hesitation.

Pleasure swam through Lloyd's veins.

"*Where* in Indianapolis? We need more than that. We need an address."

“I don’t know!” Alfred gasped, tears streaming down his face and snot running from his nose. “She called to tell me she was back in the States, but that’s all she said!”

Martin shook his head. “Not good enough, man.” He moved his knife to one of Alfred’s balls.

Lloyd kicked Alfred in the stomach, and he gagged, then fell backward, trying to get away from him. Lloyd wrapped a hand around the man’s neck and leaned closer. “Tell us what we want to know, and we’ll let you live. How can we find her?”

Alfred, pussy that he was, stared at Lloyd with wide eyes, tears still falling. He looked *pathetic*. His face was blotchy, and he wheezed, trying to breathe through the tight hold on his throat. Lloyd had heard a few stories about the man’s abuse of Cassidy, making him think he’d be easy to break, since the guy seemingly had little love for his ex. But he’d held out a lot longer than Lloyd would’ve guessed. Which didn’t mean he respected him at all. He was still going to die.

“Silverstone Towing,” he croaked.

Lloyd was giving him just enough air to speak. “What about it?” he asked.

“New boyfriend . . . works there.”

So the bitch had already found a boyfriend, had she? No doubt she was opening her legs wide, giving him everything she’d refused to give Lloyd in Jamaica.

Well, she’d learn what a real man felt like before he sliced her throat.

Smiling evilly down at the man, Lloyd tightened his hands. He pressed his thumbs into his throat and watched as Alfred realized he had no intention of letting go. Lloyd had everything he needed to find the bitch and her son.

“Can I cut it off?” Martin asked a little too eagerly.

“Don’t give a shit,” Lloyd said, keeping his gaze locked on Alfred’s. “She’s gonna die,” he told him. “I didn’t lie—

your son will live, but I'll be taking him back to Jamaica. Teaching him how to kill . . . and how to love it the way I do.”

Alfred tried to talk, but he couldn't get any air into his lungs.

It was thrilling as hell to see the anguish in his eyes. He may not have seen his son in the last five years, but he obviously didn't like Lloyd's plans for him. If Alfred was this affected, Cassidy would lose her fucking mind.

Satisfaction and anticipation raced through Lloyd's veins. He couldn't wait for it to be Cassidy under his hands. Until he could inform her of her son's fate. She'd die knowing that *she'd* done that to her son. That it was *her* fault.

Alfred jerked under him, and his eyes went even wider.

“Fuck, I love it when they gush!” Martin exclaimed.

Lloyd glanced up to see Martin holding Alfred's dick in the air. He turned back to look at Alfred's face and watched the life fading from his eyes. He lifted his hands and stood up.

“Go on,” he told Martin. “Have your fun.”

The other man grinned, dropped Alfred's dick, and fell on him like a man possessed.

Lloyd backed up and watched as Martin stabbed Cassidy's ex over and over. Even after Alfred was obviously dead, Martin continued to plunge the knife into his body.

Breathing hard several minutes later, Martin finally stood, his dark hair hanging over his eyes.

“Done?” Lloyd asked dryly.

In response, Martin pulled back his leg and kicked the man in the side of the head as hard as he could. Then he nodded and looked at Lloyd. “Done.”

“Good. Silverstone Towing in Indianapolis. We got what we came for. We'll be headed home with our new recruit soon,” Lloyd said.

The two men headed for the nearby door. Lloyd took a look back at the kitchen before he walked out of the room. The



chair Alfred had been sitting in was on its side, and the walls were literally covered in blood. A pool of red was forming under Alfred's body.

It didn't matter if the cops found their DNA or fingerprints or footprints at the scene. They weren't in any American criminal databases. They didn't live here, and there would be no connection between them and the asshole on the floor. It might take one day, or several, before Alfred's body was found, but it wouldn't matter. Lloyd would be on his way back to Jamaica with Mario.

Satisfied that he and Martin had done what they'd come to do, he followed his partner and walked out of the house. He had no other thoughts beyond getting back to their motel without anyone seeing them, cleaning up, getting to the private airfield, and then flying to Indiana and finding this Silverstone Towing place.

*We're coming for you, Cassidy. I hope you're ready,* he thought with a small smile.



Lloyd sat back in the shitty sedan they'd stolen off the street and glared at the garage he and Martin had been casing for the last day. It was their only lead on where the bitch might be. Now he was beginning to think they'd killed the ex too fast. Maybe he'd lied; maybe Cassidy had broken up with her new boyfriend. Maybe they had the wrong city or misunderstood the name of the business.

So far, he and Martin hadn't seen anyone who looked like the bitch or her son.

That failure made the last twenty-four hours even more painful. If Lloyd had to sit here with Martin for one more day, he'd kill the fucker before their mission was completed. Spending so much time with him, in such close quarters, just reinforced his decision to ditch the man before returning to Jamaica.

Martin couldn't keep his fucking mouth shut. He kept talking about killing the bitch's ex, about how much fun it was. Then he went into great detail about other people he'd

offed. Lloyd even learned about the three women he'd kidnapped off the streets of Kingston and raped, murdered, then dumped.

There was no way Martin would be able to keep his big trap shut about what had happened on this trip.

For now, Lloyd needed him. But after they killed Cassidy and had the brat, Martin was excess baggage, and he would die.

Lifting the binoculars and doing his best to ignore whatever his partner was babbling about *now*, Lloyd saw that a vehicle had gone through the gates while he'd been thinking about the most satisfying way to kill Martin.

"Is that her?" Martin asked.

Lloyd opened his mouth to tell Martin to shut the fuck up. He'd heard the same question four hundred and fifty-three times in the last twenty-four hours, or at least it seemed that way.

The truck parked, and a boy got out of the back seat. Then, when a female got out, Lloyd's heart rate increased.

He couldn't see the driver, except to note the man was big. He got out on the far side of the truck, and Lloyd glimpsed his back for just a fraction before they entered the building.

He put down the binoculars and smiled. "It's her," he said in satisfaction.

"It's about time!" Martin exclaimed.

For the first time in days, Lloyd agreed with his partner about something.

"Let's go get her," Martin said.

"Not yet. There's way too much traffic right now," he reasoned. They'd seen multiple men and women going in and out all day. "We'll wait until some of the assholes inside leave."

"But what if they don't?" Martin argued. "We can take them. Come on, let's just get her and the brat!"

“I said *no*,” Lloyd yelled, losing his temper. “We can’t take on an entire building full of people. We’ll watch for a bit. See what happens. If nothing else, we can follow her back to wherever she’s staying. She’s not getting away from us now.”

Familiar hate welled up within Lloyd. He’d had a good life with Michael Coke. And she’d ruined it. She’d pay for killing his boss . . . and he couldn’t wait.

# Chapter Seventeen

Cassidy couldn't remember ever being as happy as she was right this moment. Leo seemed to understand her better than anyone ever had. Since they'd made love, things had just clicked between them. They'd had a few misunderstandings, but nothing like the knock-down, drag-out fights she and Alfred used to have.

Leo was generally pretty easygoing, except when it came to her or Mario's safety. She'd had to put her foot down once or twice, most recently when he'd been on the verge of going to a car dealership to buy her a vehicle. She hated taking his money, wanted to be able to equally contribute to their household. She knew that would take a while, but in the meantime, him spending extravagant amounts of money on her wasn't going to happen, especially when she didn't *need* a vehicle right this moment.

She could accept Leo's paying for Mario's cheerleading, gymnastics, and dance lessons. She could even stomach him paying for the materials to decorate Mario's room. But a car? No. Mario took the bus to and from school. Leo drove her to Silverstone Towing and home when she was done working. If she needed to run errands, Leo also took her, or she called Molly, Taylor, or Skylar. She hadn't driven a car in five years and honestly wasn't in any hurry to get behind the wheel. Leo had given in, but Cassidy knew it was hard for him.

They'd also been very careful not to let Mario know about the change in their physical relationship, but it seemed as if her son wasn't going to be traumatized when they *did* tell him.

The first morning, when the alarm had gone off and Cassidy'd had to leave Leo's arms to go into the guest room, she'd hated it.

The second morning, when they'd been back at her apartment and Leo had gotten up to go out to the couch, she'd hated it even more.

It had already been a week of forcing herself to leave the warmth of Leo's bed and embrace, and him doing the same, and she was ready to ease into the topic with Mario.

Her son came out of his freshly painted pink room at Leo's house for breakfast.

"Morning, champ," Leo said before kissing her on the temple and heading up the stairs to shower.

"Scrambled eggs with chorizo this morning?" Cassidy asked.

"Yes, please," Mario told her. He pulled himself up onto a stool and put his elbows on the granite bar . . . and proceeded to stare at her.

"Something on your mind?" she asked, wracking her brain as to how to start a conversation with her son about Leo and herself being *together* together.

"Are you going to marry Leo?" Mario blurted.

Choking back a surprised gasp, Cassidy looked at her son. "Why would you ask that?"

"It's just . . . he's always touching you and kissing you, and we stay over here a lot. I was just wondering."

"Would that bother you?" Cassidy asked, and held her breath as she waited for his answer. "I mean, it's been just the two of us for a long time."

"I like him," Mario said softly. "He never rolls his eyes at me, and he doesn't think the things I like are dumb."

Cassidy forced herself to stay quiet. She knew the men in the Coke household, and the kids, too, had made fun of her son. They'd thought he was too effeminate and hadn't had a problem telling him to grow up. To be more of a man.

"But what I like most about Leo is that he treats you good. He doesn't yell at you or tell you you're stupid, like Dad used to."

"You remember that?" she asked.

Mario shrugged. "I'm not a baby," he said.

Which was true. It made her sad and scared her to death at the same time. “I love Leo,” she told her son. “I’ve been happier with him than I’ve been in a really long time.”

“Me too,” Mario admitted. “So you’re going to marry him?”

“I don’t know about that. But we are dating, for now. Is that okay?”

Mario nodded. “I like his house. There’s more space here. He has a yard I can practice some of my cheers in.”

Cassidy smiled at her son and walked around the bar so she could hug him. “I love you, Mario. You know that, right?”

“I love you too,” he told her.

“We’ve been through some hard stuff, but I promise that things will get better from here on out. I know you’re getting older, but I hope you’ll always feel as if you can talk to me. About anything.”

Mario hugged her back, then looked at her shyly. “It’s okay if he stays in your room all night, Mom.”

“What?” she asked.

“I woke up one night and was thirsty, and was going to go get a glass of water. I saw Leo leaving your room. He stood in your doorway for a long time, just watching you sleep. He looked sad. I’m old enough to know that when people are dating, they sleep in the same bed. You guys can do that. It’s okay.”

Cassidy stared down at her son, not sure what to say. But she didn’t need to say *anything*, because suddenly Leo was there.

“Thanks, Mario. That means a lot to us both,” he said, wrapping his arms around Cassidy from behind and resting his chin on her shoulder. “You know that I’ll never replace you in your mom’s heart and life, right?”

Mario nodded. “Yeah, but I’m not going to live at home forever. I’m gonna go to college and move out when I graduate from high school. I don’t want her to be alone.”

“She won’t be,” Leo vowed, and Cassidy’s knees went weak.

“Okay,” Mario said, as if that was that. “Mom?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“I’m hungry.”

She chuckled. “Right.”

“I got it,” Leo said, kissing the top of her head as he backed away. “You want to come by the garage after school?” Leo asked Mario.

“Yeah!”

Cassidy sat on a stool next to the bar and listened as Mario and Leo had an in-depth conversation about the latest cheer Mario was trying to learn. After they’d all eaten, Cassidy walked Mario to the door and watched as he headed for the bus stop. She waited outside until the bus arrived and picked up the neighborhood kids. Then she went back inside.

She went straight to Leo and plastered herself to his chest. “How much time do we have until we have to be at Silverstone?”

“Why? What do you have in mind?”

Smirking, Cassidy slipped her hands under his shirt and slowly began pushing it upward. “Oh, I’m sure we can think of something to do to pass the time.”

Without a word, Leo leaned over and picked her up and threw her over his shoulder.

Laughing, Cassidy stared down at her man’s fine ass. As he walked up the stairs toward the bedroom, she said, “Mario’s okay with us sleeping in the same bed.”

“I heard,” Leo said. “But we’ll play it by ear. He said it was all right, but I don’t want to rush things. Let’s give him some time to get used to it, okay?”

Cassidy closed her eyes. Leo putting her son’s emotional needs ahead of his physical ones? It was more than okay. “I love you,” Cassidy said softly.

She screeched as he bent in front of the bed and dumped her onto her back in the middle of the mattress. “I love *you*,” he echoed. “Now . . . get naked.”

Laughing, Cassidy reached for the hem of her shirt.



After an amazing morning—where Leo taught her the Golden Arch position—and after another mind-blowing G-spot orgasm, Leo drove them both to Silverstone Towing. It had been overcast and gloomy all day, but nothing could ruin Cassidy’s mood. She had a job and a place to live, her parents had called to let her know they’d made it safely to Mexico, Mario was happy, and Leo was the most generous and wonderful boyfriend she’d ever had.

Maybe because she was older and wiser, or maybe because of everything she’d gone through, living with Leo was . . . easy. He didn’t nag her, didn’t criticize her when she did something he didn’t like. She remembered all too clearly how Alfred hadn’t hesitated to ridicule her when she’d burned dinner, or how impatient he’d become when she’d been too slow following an order.

Leo was patient and kind, and he let things roll off his back. They’d shared a long laugh one night when the casserole she’d made had burned to a crisp because the three of them had gotten too engrossed in a board game and had forgotten about it.

She and Leo were still getting to know each other, but every little thing she learned made her love him even more.

The only bad thing about their relationship was Cassidy herself—she kept waiting for the other shoe to drop. Kept waiting for something to happen that would ruin everything. It had been her experience that when she thought she’d found something good, it would disappear. She’d thought she loved Alfred, but then he’d shown his true colors, and she’d spent years trying to recover emotionally. At first she’d loved Jamaica, but then she’d found herself a prisoner in a gilded cage.



She knew Leo was a good man. *Knew* it. But somehow the universe always seemed to know when she was happy and content and did its best to ruin it.

After school, Leo had driven her to Southpoint to pick up Mario, and now they were on their way back to Silverstone Towing. That morning, they'd talked about staying at home after Mario got out of school, but because of the weather, and the fact they were two drivers short because the flu had hit the business hard, Leo wanted to head back to the garage just in case he was needed.

Looking over at Leo as he drove, Cassidy did her best to relax. He was a very safe and confident driver, but a thick fog had begun to roll over the city, making it difficult to see too far in front of them.

"Leo?" she asked.

"Yeah?" he answered a little distractedly.

She bit her lip, looking out the front windshield at the swirling fog. "Nothing."

"What is it?" he asked, and Cassidy felt his hand touch her arm gently.

"You make me feel safe," she blurted. She caught his gaze for a split second before he looked back at the road, but she clearly saw the look of satisfaction on his face at her words.

"Good."

"I just . . . if I was driving right now, I'd be a mess. Not that I would drive in this, because it's been forever since I've been behind the wheel, and I'm not confident enough yet to try to go out in this weather. We got rain in Jamaica, but nothing like this fog. Anyway, I was just thinking about everything that's happened recently, and I probably wouldn't be adjusting as well as I have if not for you."

"Me too," Mario piped up from the back seat. Cassidy had almost forgotten her son was listening. "I'm not afraid to say stuff in front of you . . . I know you won't make fun of me for wanting to paint my room pink or to do cheerleading instead of football."

“You guys are the most important people in my life,” Leo said in a low, sincere tone. “I will always be your safe place. Always.”

Cassidy reached for his hand and squeezed it tightly. She wanted to hold on to him but knew he needed both hands to drive.

It took longer than usual to get to Silverstone Towing because of the weather, and she’d never been so glad to pull through the security gates. She sighed audibly when Leo parked the car.

“Go on in, Mario. You know the code, right?” Leo asked.

“Yeah!” Mario said excitedly. He’d worked hard on memorizing the ten-digit code for the back door. He wrenched open his door and ran toward the security panel.

Cassidy watched with pride as her son put in the code, then turned and waved before disappearing inside. The second the door shut behind him, Leo put a hand on the back of her neck and pulled her mouth to his. He kissed her long, hard, and deep. When he pulled back, Cassidy almost felt dizzy. She could feel how wet she was. All it took was Leo kissing her, and she wanted him. She’d never been like this before—but then again, she’d never dated a man like Leo.

“I love you,” he said gruffly. “You feeling safe with me means everything. I’ve spent my life helping people and didn’t really think much about it. I feel as if every mission in my past was preparing me for you and Mario. To protect you both. To make your lives as easy as possible.”

“We don’t need easy—we just need you,” Cassidy said.

“You’ve got me.”

Putting her hand on his cheek, Cassidy simply stared at the man in front of her. She loved him so much it almost hurt. It was terrifying at the same time. If he left them, or hurt them, or was somehow killed while on a mission, she knew it would destroy her.

As if he could read her mind, Leo said gently, “We didn’t go through all that we’ve gone through in this life only to lose

each other now.” Then he leaned forward and kissed her gently. “Come on, let’s go see what snacks Archer’s cooked up since we’ve been gone.”

Cassidy chuckled. She’d quickly learned that it seemed to be Archer’s goal in life to feed anyone who walked through Silverstone’s doors. Mario had certainly filled out since they’d moved to Indiana, and she’d even noticed more curves sprouting on her own body that hadn’t been there before. Not that she was complaining.

She climbed out of the vehicle, and Leo immediately reached for her when she got close. They walked into the building hand in hand.

Forty-five minutes later, Cassidy was sitting on one of the couches talking to Skylar, Molly, and Taylor when Bart rushed into the great room. Smoke, Bull, Eagle, and Leo had been standing in the kitchen chatting with Archer. Everyone’s attention focused on the Silverstone employee.

“There’s a massive pileup on Interstate 70,” Bart announced. “Reports are saying at least fifty or more cars and trucks. Hazmat is on their way because it’s believed at least one fuel carrier was involved. The call’s gone out for as many tow trucks as possible to assist. I’ve already contacted everyone who isn’t already on a job.”

“We’re on it,” Bull told him.

Bart nodded and turned to head back to the dispatch room.

As one, all four Silverstone men moved toward their women.

Cassidy stood and watched with wide eyes as Leo stalked toward her. She couldn’t help but be proud of her man, and his friends. They didn’t have to wade into the situation. They were the owners of the business, but here they were, not hesitating to help out where they were needed. It was one of the many reasons Cassidy loved Leo.

He approached her and put his hands on either side of her face, tilting her head back. “I don’t know how long I’ll be gone,” he told her.

“It’s okay.”

“Stay here with Mario. Archer’s got plenty of food in the fridge for you guys to eat for dinner. If I’m really late, you and Mario can take one of the sleeping rooms. Oh, and I was going to help Mario study for his social studies test in a few days—don’t let him get too involved in practicing his cheers and his newest dance routine and skip studying.”

Cassidy grabbed hold of Leo’s wrists. “I won’t,” she whispered. She supposed some women might get irritated that their new boyfriend was giving her orders about her own son, but she loved that Leo had taken such an interest in Mario and his school. He was strict, but not mean. He only wanted the best for her little boy, and both she and Mario knew it and blossomed under his care.

“Be careful,” she told him softly.

“Always,” Leo returned. Then he leaned down and kissed her. It was a fairly chaste kiss, but they both knew he didn’t have time for anything more.

“Love you,” Leo said.

“Love you too.”

Then he turned from her and headed for the door.

Cassidy watched as the other guys followed, and a silence fell over the room when the door shut behind them. She looked at Skylar, Taylor—who was holding baby Kevin—and Molly, who was standing with a hand on her pregnant belly.

“Well, that was exciting,” Cassidy quipped.

The other three women chuckled.

“You’d think I’d be used to that by now,” Skylar said, “but it’s always a little surreal.”

“What? That they go out to help when there’s an accident?” Cassidy asked, confused.

Skylar shook her head. “No. How the second our men hear someone needs help, they’re one hundred percent in. It doesn’t matter if it’s a missing child, an accident, or a natural

disaster. Serving others is in their DNA. They'd never be satisfied with a desk or management job. This is what they were born to do."

"Agreed," Taylor said. "Although sometimes I wish they'd figure out safer ways to serve than heading out to the far reaches of the earth to hunt down bad guys."

"Right?" Molly said.

"Worrying about them won't make the evening pass any faster," Skylar said practically. "How about we head downstairs and find something to binge-watch on Netflix?"

And just like that, the three women began to argue about what they wanted to watch. Cassidy followed behind them, smiling. She knew if she were by herself, she'd probably be worrying about Leo driving around in the foggy weather, but being at Silverstone meant she wasn't alone.

She'd *always* felt alone. Even when she'd been married to Alfred, she'd known she was on her own as far as dealing with Mario. When he'd been sick, it was she who had stayed up with him. When he'd been upset, she'd soothed him. And in Jamaica, she'd had no one to rely on but herself.

Having a group of friends she could share her hopes and fears with felt amazing. They wouldn't laugh at her if she was scared for Leo. They wouldn't brush her fears aside. They'd listen, *truly* listen, commiserate, and do whatever they could to make her feel better. She knew that because she willingly did the same for them.

Writing those letters to the FBI had been scary, but they'd brought her Leo. And Silverstone Towing. And these women. Sending a brief prayer of thanks upward, Cassidy headed down the stairs to the basement.



Gramps scowled as he drove along the shoulder toward the massive pileup on the highway. The accident was worse than he could've imagined. Cars and trucks driving upward of fifty or sixty miles an hour had plowed into each other. One driver at the front of the disaster had slammed on his brakes, and

because of the fog, the vehicles behind hadn't seen what was happening until it was too late.

Ambulances and fire trucks were parked everywhere. Lights from police cars spun in the quickly darkening sky. The scene was complete chaos, and he knew it would be a while before the tow trucks were needed. The injured victims needed to be tended to first. There was already a long line of tow trucks on the shoulder waiting to help clear the scene, and Gramps stopped his truck behind the one Bull was driving. He hopped out and headed for his friends. He knew they all wanted to help, but first they had to find someone in charge. The last thing they wanted was to contribute to the confusion by wandering around.

The four Silverstone men walked toward another group of guys standing nearby. The seven men reminded Gramps a lot of his team. He recognized an air about them, as if they'd been in the military, or perhaps were *still* in the military. He guessed they were in their midthirties or forties, same as him and his friends. They seemed tense, as if they wanted to jump in to help.

The tallest man turned to look at them as they approached.

"What's going on?" Bull asked. It might've seemed like a dumb question, because it was more than obvious a giant rescue operation was going on, but none of the other men blinked at the question.

"We were lucky enough to avoid being involved in this clusterfuck by about fifteen seconds," the tall man said. "We were in a van and headed back downtown when the pileup happened right in front of us. We helped as many people as we could before the authorities showed up, but they asked us to stage here. I understand them not wanting civilians wandering around, but it's damn frustrating not to be helping."

"I'm Bull," Bull said, holding out his hand.

"Talon," the tall man replied. "These are my friends Ethan, Cohen, Zeke, Raiden, Drew, and Brock. We're from Fallport, Virginia, a little town in the foothills of the Appalachians. Visiting Indy for an SAR conference."

“Search and Rescue?” Smoke asked.

“Yeah. Took a day off to do some sightseeing, but can’t see much of the famous Indianapolis Motor Speedway with this fog. We were on our way back to the hotel when this happened.”

“You were lucky,” Gramps said.

“We know,” Talon said with a nod.

“I see an officer I know,” Gramps said. “I’m going to go talk to him. Let him know we’re here and see if we can help in any way.”

“Please include us in that offer,” Talon requested, and his friends all added their agreement.

“Will do,” Gramps said, then headed for the police officer. The last thing he wanted was to stand around when they could be assisting in some way. Even if that was only to hold blankets for the victims who were being helped out of their cars. He hadn’t seen a pileup this bad in a very long time, if ever. He understood the need to keep everyone safe, but when there were eleven qualified men willing and able to help, the authorities should accept their offers.



Cassidy had gotten a short text from Leo ten minutes ago telling her they’d arrived safely and that they were waiting to be told how they could help until the scene was ready for the towing of vehicles to start. She’d been relieved to hear that he was all right, and not surprised that he and his friends wanted to jump in and lend a hand. As Skylar had said, it wasn’t in their DNA to sit around and do nothing.

Skylar had just hit play on a fantasy drama on the television, something Cassidy didn’t have much interest in watching, when her phone rang. Looking down, Cassidy saw the number said *Unknown*.

She was tempted to ignore it, as it was probably a telemarketer, but if for some reason Leo had borrowed someone else’s phone to call her, she didn’t want to miss it.

“Hello?”

“Cass?”

The voice was weak and trembling, but Cassidy recognized it immediately. “Mom?”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

Cassidy stood up and headed for the other side of the room. Her mom sounded awful. Her voice was raspy, and Cassidy wondered if she’d been crying. A pit of dread formed in her belly. “What’s wrong?” she asked quietly, not wanting to alarm her friends.

“Have you heard from anyone back in El Paso yet?”

“About what?” Cassidy asked in confusion.

“I . . . I’m not sure how to tell you this . . .”

When she didn’t continue, Cassidy suddenly got a really bad feeling. “What, Mom? Just tell me whatever’s wrong.”

“It’s Alfred. He was murdered a few days ago.”

Cassidy blinked. “Holy cow! What *happened*?”

“I’m not exactly sure. Carmela Sanchez called me. She’s our neighbor, you know, the one who’s looking after the house for us. Anyway, she heard from a friend of a friend that someone broke into his house. He was stabbed, Cass. Since we’re down here in Mexico, we didn’t hear about it until Carmela called us.”

Cassidy wasn’t sure what to think. Alfred definitely wasn’t one of her favorite people, but still . . . being stabbed while you thought you were safe in your own home . . .

Then she thought about Mario. Alfred was his father. Yes, they were estranged, but she’d still had hopes that one day he might come to his senses and want some sort of relationship with his son.

“Have the police caught who did it?” she asked.

When her mom didn’t immediately respond, and instead began to cry, Cassidy tensed further. “Mom?”



She heard some rustling, then her dad's voice came over the line. "Hey, Cass."

"What's going on, Dad?"

"It looks like you and Leo were right about us going to Mexico," he said quietly. "Carmela said when she came over to water the plants, the kitchen window was open . . . and the back door was unlocked."

"Oh my God," Cassidy whispered.

"She also said the news reported there were some tips that two men were asking questions in Alfred's neighborhood about which house was his. They claimed to be from a lawn service. Cass . . . they had Jamaican accents."

Cassidy's blood froze in her veins.

"You aren't safe," her dad said urgently.

"They were looking for me," Cassidy whispered.

"We think so," he agreed. "And you told Alfred where you and Mario were, didn't you?"

"I had to, you know that. When did this happen, again?" Cassidy asked, her eyes darting around the room, as if Lloyd Robinson—she was *certain* it was him—and whoever had accompanied him were about to jump out from behind a couch or something.

"Two days ago."

Her dad's answer made Cassidy's adrenaline spike. *Two days?* That was plenty of time for them to get to Indiana. She wasn't safe. *Mario* wasn't safe.

Just then, Taylor laughed at something on the television, and Cassidy's eyes went to her. She was cradling Kevin in her arms, smiling. Molly was grinning as well, and Cassidy glanced down to her belly. To the baby she was carrying. Skylar shushed her friends and kept her intent gaze on the screen.

If Lloyd—and likely Martin—knew where she was, they might already be here. Who knew what they had done to

Alfred to get him to talk. While he hadn't known her address, she'd told him about a friend who was helping them out . . . a friend who owned Silverstone Towing.

If Lloyd was willing to kill Alfred to find her, everyone around her was in danger. Michael's lieutenants wouldn't hesitate to hurt or kill *anyone* who got between them and their target.

Cassidy might've thought she'd left Jamaica behind, but she'd been kidding herself. She'd never escape . . . just like Michael had told her.

Once embroiled in the drug world, it was impossible to leave.

"Run, baby," Cassidy's dad whispered in her ear. "Don't let them find you!"

"I'm so sorry—" Cassidy began.

"Your mother and I love you," her dad said. "Now go!"

"Stay safe, Dad."

"We will. Take care of Mario. Tell him how much his grandparents love him."

"I will," Cassidy whispered. "Bye." She clicked off the phone.

Terrified, she had no idea what to do. Where to go. Her first thought was to call Leo, to tell him what had happened, to ask for his help. He'd know what to do. And as weak as it made her feel, she knew he'd keep her and Mario safe.

She'd just touched the screen on her phone to bring up her contact list when a loud boom sounded from somewhere outside.

Freezing, Cassidy instinctively knew time had already run out. Lloyd was here. She didn't know how she knew, but she did . . . probably the same way she suspected it was most likely Martin with him, another of Michael's most vicious guards.

She had no doubt whatsoever they'd kill everyone around her. Just because they could, to make her suffer, and to show the world that no one messed with their organization.

A small whimper escaped before she could swallow it down.

"What was that?" Molly asked, sitting up on the couch.

Skylar clicked off the TV, and all four women listened intently.

They heard noise over their heads from the first floor, then footsteps rushing down the stairs. Holding her breath and praying she wouldn't see Lloyd appear in the stairwell, Cassidy sighed in relief when she saw Archer and Mario, Bart close on their heels.

But her relief didn't last long.

"Into the safe room," Bart barked. "Now!"

Feeling as if she was trying to swim through quicksand, Cassidy watched with wide eyes as Archer helped Molly up from the couch and the other two women stood. Bart herded them toward the room at the end of the short hallway.

Mario rushed over and took hold of her hand. "Come on, Mom!" he said, tugging at her. "Bart said someone just rammed through the east side of the fence. He saw it on the security cameras! They didn't come through the front 'cause the gate's fortified and they wouldn't be able to get through. He said we have to hide!"

Her son's terrified voice forced Cassidy out of the weird trance she'd been in.

She knew what she had to do.

She wouldn't let Mario suffer, or any of her new friends, because of a bad decision she'd made years ago. If Lloyd got his hands on *her*, he'd leave everyone else alone. She believed that down to her bones. Once they had her in their grasp, they'd take her and go. Mario would be safe.

Looking down at the best thing she'd ever done in her life, she nodded.

“Is it them?” Mario asked.

There was no way Cassidy was going to tell her son that his worst nightmare was coming true. “I don’t know who it is, but just to be safe, we need to stay put until Leo can come. Promise me you’ll do everything Bart and the others tell you to, okay?”

“Okay, Mama,” Mario agreed.

Inside, Cassidy was dying, but outwardly, she stayed as calm as she could. As she hurried toward the safe room with the others, she shoved her phone in her pocket. Bart gestured for Skylar to use her fingerprint to open the door. The Silverstone Towing employees might not know what their bosses did on their semifrequent “business trips,” but they all knew that besides the owners, their wives were the only ones with access to this room.

The door clicked open. Cassidy tried to maneuver herself so she was at the end of the line, but Bart was standing outside the door, obviously making sure everyone was inside before he entered.

Once inside, Cassidy squeezed Mario’s shoulder. She wanted to hug him tightly one last time, but didn’t want anyone to get suspicious of what she was about to do.

Her heart breaking, Cassidy moved quickly.

Archer was busy helping Molly get comfortable, and Bart was trying to calm the other women and answer their worried questions. With everyone distracted, Cassidy slipped out of the room and shut the door to the safe room. Turning to the keypad on the wall, she hit the emergency lockdown code that Leo had told her about.

She couldn’t hear anything from behind the steel door, but she could imagine how upset her son would be. Not to mention the others.

They wouldn’t understand. They’d tell her to get inside, to stay safe with them, but no one knew Lloyd and Martin like she did. They’d *never* stop. They’d hurt everyone she cared about until they found her. But if she gave herself up . . . if

Lloyd killed her . . . there'd be no other reason for him to linger in the States. The others would be safe.

It was a sacrifice she was more than willing to make in order to prevent anyone else from getting hurt or killed.

If Leo was here, he might be able to help her, but he wasn't. It was up to her to protect her son and friends. She'd told Leo that no one would ever come before Mario again, and now was the time to prove it.

Turning and heading for the stairs, she ran up them two at a time. She had no idea where Lloyd might be, and the last thing she wanted was for him to set the building on fire or something. She wouldn't put it past him. Thinking of her friends burning to death inside the building was horrifying. More terrifying than anything Lloyd might do to her.

The garage was eerily silent. She couldn't hear anything going on outside. She was tempted to go into the dispatch room and look at the cameras, but she doubted she had the luxury of time. Taking a deep breath, Cassidy paused at the back door. She calmly reached for the name tag on her shirt and took it off, then placed it back on the magnetic board. She felt as if she were outside her body, hovering, watching from above.

She felt numb.

But if sacrificing herself would save Mario, and baby Kevin, and Molly's unborn child . . . then she'd do it. They didn't deserve to die. Not because of *her* mistakes. No one did.

Glancing up at the camera she knew was pointed at the door, she mouthed *I love you* before reaching for the doorknob.

She quickly stepped outside and made sure she heard the lock engage before walking away from the door. She headed around the side of the building, looking for Lloyd.

She turned the next corner leading to the front of the building and almost ran smack dab into the man himself. He was surprised for just a second, then he grinned in triumph and grabbed her biceps so hard, Cassidy flinched. But it was just

the beginning of the pain he was going to inflict. She knew it . . . and she refused to give him the satisfaction of knowing how much he was hurting her.

“Got ya, bitch!”

She’d never thought she’d hear his voice again, but he was truly here. In Indiana.

“Where’s the brat?”

Pressing her lips together, Cassidy decided she wasn’t going to say a word.

Lloyd stared at her, then turned her in his arms. “Martin, convince her to tell us where her son is.”

This wasn’t what she’d thought would happen when she gave herself up. They were supposed to grab her, stuff her in their car, and take off.

Before she could blink, a meaty fist was flying straight toward her face. Cassidy couldn’t even duck to avoid it because Lloyd was holding her too tightly. Pain bloomed in her cheek. The punch hurt *bad*. She’d been hit before, but for some reason, maybe because she’d known nothing but love since Leo had found her, this time the pain was so much deeper.

“Again,” Lloyd ordered.

“No—” Cassidy moaned, immediately forgetting her vow to keep quiet.

But Martin didn’t hesitate, using his other fist, his knuckles making contact with her opposite cheekbone. Now her entire face was throbbing.

“Where’s the brat?” Lloyd seethed, shaking her hard but not letting her fall to the ground.

And just like that, Cassidy knew she’d made the wrong decision . . . again.

She’d thought she was protecting her son and her friends, but instead of being satisfied to have her at his mercy, Lloyd sounded almost desperate to find *Mario*.

“You’ll never find him,” she said, knowing her bravado was ruined by the quake in her voice.

“*Wrong*. I’m not only going to find him, I’m gonna make him watch as I fuck you,” Lloyd spat. “The boy needs to see firsthand what it’s like to be a *real* man. Then he’ll watch as *Martin* fucks you . . . and the last thing you’ll ever see is your precious boy getting beaten to within an inch of his fucking life! But we won’t kill him. Oh no. We’ve got other plans for Mario. You’ll die knowing he’s *ours* now. I’m gonna make him the fiercest and most ruthless enforcer the organization’s ever seen. He’s gonna sell drugs to kids. Gonna kill people . . . and *like* it. He’s mine.”

Cassidy whimpered in horror. She didn’t fear for herself. She’d known when she’d walked outside that Lloyd would violate and kill her. She was ready to suffer that, if only to keep her son safe. No. She feared for Mario. Knew Lloyd would do exactly what he threatened if he got his hands on him.

Deep within, her resolve firmed. Lloyd couldn’t do anything to Mario if he couldn’t find him. Leo would keep her son safe after her death. He and his friends would track down Lloyd and Martin and kill them. They wouldn’t stop until every threat to Mario was dead.

She’d die knowing Leo would do whatever it took to keep Mario safe.

One of Lloyd’s hands ran down her arm before caressing her ass suggestively. “Gonna love taking you back here,” he said almost conversationally.

Cassidy stiffened when he discovered her cell phone in her back pocket. He pulled it out and laughed. “Don’t want you using this,” he said, dropping the phone to the dirt and stomping on it as hard as he could.

Cassidy had been harboring the tiniest shred of hope that maybe Leo and his friends could track her using her cell phone signal. Or that she’d even find a chance to call him. But she realized how stupid that hope was now. That only happened in movies and the romance books she’d been reading lately.

“When do I get my shot at her?” Martin asked.

“When I fucking say you can,” Lloyd fired back. “Asshole.”

The last word was said under his breath, but Cassidy heard it.

Maybe . . . she could use Lloyd’s obvious irritation with Martin against him. She had no idea how, but if they were fighting each other, maybe they’d take their attention off her and she could somehow escape.

As terrified as she was, Cassidy tried to put on a brave face. Her chin came up, and she did her best to meet Martin’s gaze. She wasn’t surprised to see him here with Lloyd. She’d immediately suspected he was the other man who’d broken into her parents’ house. Probably the one who’d killed Alfred. Martin wasn’t the smartest man, but he was loyal. He did whatever Lloyd asked, without question.

Martin grinned then. A smile so evil, Cassidy immediately broke out in goose bumps. He cracked his knuckles—then stilled when a familiar sound wailed in the distance.

Sirens.

*Thank God.*

“Shit!” Lloyd swore, spinning her so quickly, she would’ve gone flying if he wasn’t holding her arm. He started walking fast. Cassidy had to jog to keep from being dragged along the ground.

“What about the boy?” Martin asked.

“No time,” Lloyd bit out. “The cops are on their way. We’ll snatch him later.”

Cassidy didn’t know if the police were coming. It could just be an officer on his way to some other call or trying to pull someone over, but she kept her mouth shut. If it got Lloyd to leave, keeping her son and the others safe, she was all for it.

Martin jogged ahead and got behind the wheel of the four-door sedan. The front grille was completely smashed in, probably from slamming through the fence surrounding the



property. Lloyd pushed her into the front seat, smushing her between his body and Martin's as he squeezed in next to her.

“Go, go, go!” Lloyd yelled.

Cassidy closed her eyes in terror as the car shot forward. The fog was still heavy, and she couldn't see more than ten feet in front of them, but Martin didn't seem to care. He slammed his foot on the gas and turned, careening toward the front gate. The gates began to roll open as the car approached, and they'd barely cleared them before Martin floored it, the car bouncing over the gravel road that led away from Silverstone Towing.

She felt Lloyd's hand squeezing her thigh, and Cassidy kept both her eyes and her legs tightly shut. She had no idea what was going to happen next, but she could only pray Lloyd killed her quickly.

# Chapter Eighteen

Gramps was standing off to the side scowling when his phone rang.

Smoke, Eagle, and Bull were talking to the guys from Fallport Search and Rescue, and they were all still waiting for someone, anyone, to utilize them. He was frustrated at how unorganized things were at the accident scene.

“Gramps,” he said brusquely into the phone.

“It’s Bart. The shit’s hit the fan here.”

Gramps immediately straightened. The normally unflappable man was definitely not happy about something. His words were shaky, and he was breathing way too loud and fast. “What’s wrong?” Gramps asked, gesturing to his friends.

As Bull, Smoke, and Eagle came toward him, he listened as Bart did his best to explain why he was calling.

“Some crazy asshole drove right through the fence on the east side of the property. He didn’t even slow down. I didn’t stick around in dispatch, just headed down to the safe room. Got the women and kids in there, and Archer. I figured whatever was going on wasn’t good and it was better to be safe than sorry. Skylar opened it, and we all got inside, but I was distracted, and . . . Cassidy left. The next thing I knew, the door latched, and she just wasn’t there. I tried to open the door, but it won’t budge. Molly said Cassidy must’ve hit the override code. We can’t get out, boss.”

Gramps’s stomach knotted. “Did you get the computers up and running in there to see what’s going on?” he asked.

“Yeah. It took a couple of minutes, and by the time I logged in and pulled up the cameras, Cass was nowhere to be seen. And whoever it was who came through the fence was gone too. I can’t figure out how to access the tapes from in here, though. I can only see the live feeds. I’m sorry,” Bart said. “I did call the cops.”

“Is everyone else all right?” he asked.

“Yeah. Mario is freaked, but he’s hanging in there.”

“And the women?”

“They’re good,” Bart said.

“Okay.” He gave Bart instructions to override the emergency code that Cassidy had entered, effectively locking everyone inside the safe room. “But don’t leave yet. I’m going to review the tapes with the guys. If this is an ambush, you’re safer right where you are.”

“You know who did this?” Bart asked.

“No,” Gramps said grimly. “But I’ve got a pretty good guess. Put Mario on.”

Gramps knew he should hang up. He had to check the security video and see what the hell was going on, but he needed to reassure Mario first.

“Leo?” Mario said in a trembling voice.

“Yeah, it’s me, bud. It’s going to be okay. Understand?”

“Why didn’t Mama come in here too? She left me!”

Gramps hated the pain and fear he could hear all too clearly in the little boy’s tone. “You know how much your mom loves you, right?” he asked.

“Yeah . . .”

“She would do whatever it takes to protect you.”

“It’s them, isn’t it?” Mario asked, his voice hitching. “I asked Mama the same thing, but she didn’t say.”

Gramps didn’t need to ask who he meant. “I don’t know. But it doesn’t matter. I’m gonna get your mom back.”

“I’m scared,” Mario whispered.

“Me too.”

“You are?” the little boy asked in shock.

“Yes. I love your mom. I’m proud of her for doing what she thought was right to protect you, but I’m still scared for

her. I'm gonna find her, Mario. I give you my word."

"Okay."

One word. That's all it took for Gramps's resolve to strengthen. Mario believed in him, and there was no way in hell he was going to let that little boy down. He'd been through enough in his life. He wouldn't lose his mother if Gramps had anything to say about it. "I've got to go," he said. "Stay where you are, and take care of the others, okay?"

"Okay. Leo?"

"Yeah, bud?"

"I love you."

Gramps's heart clenched. "I love you too, champ."

The call ended, and Gramps turned to his friends. They were watching him with furious looks on their faces. He quickly summed up what had happened back at the garage. Bull, who'd overheard enough to know they needed to look at the security tapes, already had his phone out and was clicking on the app.

Within two minutes, four heads were huddled over the phone, watching what had occurred.

They saw the Crown Victoria crash through the fence and go careening across the yard toward the garage. Switching cameras, they saw Bart ushering everyone down the hall toward the safe room. Gramps watched breathlessly as Cassidy stepped outside the room, then slammed the door shut, quickly entering the override code.

She ran up the stairs to the back door. His heart beat overtime when she looked up into the camera before she headed outside and mouthed *I love you*.

He knew she was speaking straight to him. He wanted to scream at her. Tell her not to go outside. But nothing he did or said would change what had already happened.

All four men watched as Cassidy walked straight into the arms of a man lurking out front. Gramps's fists clenched helplessly when he saw Cassidy get punched twice in the face

by a second man. Then the guy holding her dragged her to the car, and they took off, disappearing after they went through the gate.

“Who the fuck are they?” Smoke asked.

“Lloyd Robinson and his sidekick, Martin,” Gramps growled.

“I’m guessing they’re from Jamaica?” Bull asked.

“You’d guess right,” Gramps answered.

“I’ve got the plate,” Eagle said.

“Where do you think they’re taking her?” Smoke asked.

“Maybe we can show the video to the cops here on scene,” Bull suggested.

Gramps shook his head. “There’s nothing they can do from here.”

“They could call in reinforcements. Put a BOLO out on the car,” Bull said.

“Bart called the cops already. They should be at the compound by now. If those assholes come back, they’ll protect everyone still inside.”

“Do you think they would’ve hurt the others?” Eagle asked.

Gramps nodded. “Without a fucking doubt.”

“She sacrificed herself to save them,” Smoke said.

And she had. It was obvious Cassidy had been terrified, but she’d still walked herself right into the hands of men who’d done more to hurt her and Mario than anyone else in her life.

“We’re gonna find her,” Smoke said. “I don’t know what I’d have done if anyone hurt Molly again, or did something that would’ve made her lose our baby.”

“Or Kevin and Taylor,” Eagle said.

“And Skylar,” Bull added.

His friends had already liked Cassidy, but what she'd done, putting her own life on the line to protect their wives and kids, solidified their loyalty. Gramps knew she'd done it mostly to keep Mario safe, but he had no doubt the safety of her friends was in the back of her mind as well.

"Is there anything we can do to help?" a deep voice asked from behind them.

Gramps turned to see the seven men from the Fallport Search and Rescue team looking concerned behind them.

"We don't know what's going on, but if you need us, we're more than willing to help. We've all got either law enforcement or military experience, and if you need assistance in finding someone, we're in. Not to mention, there's a whole convention of men and women just like us back at the hotel who wouldn't think twice about aiding in a search."

Gramps appreciated the offer. "Thanks, but at the moment, all I know is that my woman is missing. I don't have any place to start looking."

"Right," Talon said, reaching into his pocket. "Here's my card. Go do what you need to do, and if you want our help, call. We'll drop everything to assist."

"Preciate it." And he did. Gramps pocketed the card and nodded at the men. They all looked concerned, but they backed off, giving him and his team space.

"What about tracking her phone? She might have it on her," Eagle said.

"It'll take too long to get the trace," Smoke said. "We could call in for some help, but it'll still take a while."

"We've got the license plate number—the cops can be on the lookout," Bull reminded them.

"Right, but most of the cops are *here*. There aren't going to be that many out on the streets patrolling in this fog," Eagle said. "There aren't enough eyes on the road for the BOLO to do much good."

His friend's words triggered something within Gramps. "Then we need to get more eyes," he muttered, turning and running for the tow truck he'd parked along the side of the road. Talon's willingness to help swam in his mind, and he might just take him up on that offer. An entire convention full of men and women—whose entire job was to find people—would definitely be more eyes.

But he needed help immediately, and it would take time for the Search and Rescue teams to get on the road. He needed people who were already scattered around Indianapolis in their vehicles.

Gramps climbed into the cab and reached for the CB radio. He turned the knob from the private channel they used to talk to dispatch at Silverstone Towing to the open line used by most of the towing companies in the greater Indianapolis area.

The towing industry was competitive but respectful. It wasn't often anyone tried to horn in on someone else's scene, and many of the drivers knew each other. There was always an asshole or two in the bunch, but for the most part, towing employees in the Indy area were courteous and professional.

"Attention to anyone who can hear this. This is Gramps from Silverstone Towing. My woman's been kidnapped. Be on the lookout for an older-model brown four-door Ford Crown Victoria. The front is smashed to hell. License plate is five-four-seven P-H-F. Repeat, five-four-seven P-H-F. There are two men with her who are most likely armed and highly dangerous. Do not engage, but if you find them, report in. Please," he added when he was done. "She's my life. I can't lose her."

Bull listened to the call, then ran toward a police officer, probably to get him to put out the same information on the emergency frequencies the police and fire departments used.

Putting the radio mic down, Gramps was relieved when he immediately began getting ten-four calls and other commentary from the drivers out and about in the city. If anyone could find the car, it would be the vast network of

trucks. He also knew some tow drivers would relay the information to semitrucks passing through the area. It was only a matter of time before someone spotted the car. He just hoped it wouldn't be too late for Cassidy.



Cassidy held on to the dashboard in front of her with a white-knuckled fist. She was never scared to be in a car with Leo, because she knew without a doubt he wouldn't let anything happen to her. But Martin was a shitty driver. Maybe it was because in Jamaica, the cars drove on the opposite side of the road from here in the States. Maybe it was because he was thinking too hard about raping her. Or maybe he was just an idiot.

Cassidy thought it was probably a mixture of all three. She didn't know where they were going, but they were driving too fast for the weather conditions. It didn't help that Martin and Lloyd seemed to be lost. They'd started arguing about where they should go not too long after they'd peeled out of the Silverstone Towing compound. When Lloyd had ordered her to *tell* them where to go, she'd had to admit she was as lost as they were. She didn't go many places besides her apartment, Silverstone Towing, Mario's classes, and the grocery store.

She had no idea how long they'd been driving, but it seemed like at least an hour. They'd gotten on and off the interstate a few times, and Cassidy hoped maybe they'd accidentally get on the same highway where Leo and his friends were working the big crash, but she had no such luck.

Her face hurt from the two punches she'd received from Martin. She was having trouble seeing out of her left eye and hoped he hadn't broken any bones in her face. Of course, broken bones were probably the least of her worries right now.

Lloyd had begun texting someone, becoming unnervingly quiet for the last twenty minutes, except for occasionally telling Martin where to turn.

Martin, on the other hand, hadn't shut up. He bitched about the weather, threatened her with graphic descriptions of what he was going to do to her when they got to wherever they



were going, bragged about how Alfred had screamed in pain while being stabbed, and generally continued to be an annoying asshole.

The *only* good thing about her situation was that Lloyd suddenly seemed to be in a big hurry to leave the state . . . which meant Mario might be safe.

If she was killed, so be it. As long as no one else got hurt because of her, she'd be at peace with whatever happened.

"There!" Lloyd exclaimed suddenly, scaring the shit out of Cassidy. She jumped in her seat, frowning when Martin laughed at her reaction.

"Jumpy bitch, aren't ya?" he sneered, even as he was turning into the parking area at a small regional airport.

Cassidy hadn't known this place existed. She wished they'd gone to the big international airport west of the city, but of course that wouldn't have been the case.

There was no one around. Probably because this was the worst weather for flying. The fog had seemed to thicken even more since they'd left Silverstone. Perhaps the plane wouldn't be able to take off. It could buy her some time. Maybe give Leo and his team time to find her.

But her hopes were dashed when Martin asked, "Are we good to go?"

"Absolutely. I texted our pilot. As long as I have his money, he doesn't care what the weather is—he'll take us out."

"Good. I'm ready to get out of this fucking car and pound some pussy," Martin said. "If I can't get my hands on your brat, I'll make do with you."

"Pull around back," Lloyd ordered.

Cassidy began to shake. She didn't want to go with them. Didn't want to go back to Jamaica. She had a life here now. A good one. Finally. Hadn't she paid for the bad decisions she'd made? Hadn't Mario paid? Losing her would devastate him.

He'd just begun to open up. To be the carefree boy she'd always hoped he could be.

Martin parked the car, and Lloyd immediately opened the door, as if he couldn't stand to be in the vehicle one more second. Then he leaned in and grabbed her arm tightly, hauling her across the seat.

Cassidy stumbled when she was upright, but Lloyd's iron grip kept her from falling on her ass. He turned away from the car without a second glance at Martin.

"Lloyd—" Cassidy began, but he stopped suddenly, and she ran right into him.

He turned and leaned into her. His breath smelled like something had crawled into his mouth and died, and it made Cassidy gag a little. "Don't say a fucking word," he hissed in a low, menacing tone. "You've fucked up my life completely! I'm not in a good mood—and you don't want to find out what I might do to you when I'm feeling like this. Got it?"

Cassidy nodded. She wanted to rail at him. Scream, "You think *your* life was fucked up completely?" But she knew better. She could see the ruthlessness and rage in his eyes. He wouldn't hesitate to kill her immediately.

It hit her then what a colossal mistake she'd made. She'd been ready to die for her son—but Cassidy realized she wanted to *live* for Mario instead. She should've trusted Leo and his friends with the knowledge that Lloyd was possibly in Indianapolis. She should've stayed in the safe room with Mario and the others.

She hadn't done any of those things, and now she was paying the price.

Being killed outright would be better than rape and torture, but she didn't want to die. She needed to give Leo time to find her. She had no doubt he'd do whatever he could to get to her—she just hoped he wouldn't be too late.

Martin cackled behind them . . . and hate rose within Cassidy. Rose so fast, it almost scared her.

Before she could utter a word, Lloyd reached behind his back and pulled out a pistol, aiming it at Martin. He pulled the trigger.

The sound of the gun firing was so loud, Cassidy flinched, and her ears immediately began to ring. Shocked, she looked back at Martin. He was now lying in the dirt, blood steadily oozing out of a small hole in his chest.

He coughed, a gurgling noise rising from his throat. Blood sprayed from between his lips.

Lloyd laughed, the sound almost carefree. “God, I’ve been wanting to do that for days! Jesus, the man wouldn’t shut the fuck up!”

Cassidy began to cry. She couldn’t help it. She didn’t make a sound, but tears fell from her eyes as if someone had turned on a faucet.

She was going to die.

She’d somehow still hoped she’d make it out of this alive, get back to the new life she was building with Leo and Mario. But the ruthless way Lloyd had shot a man he’d worked with for years, who’d helped him kidnap her, made it crystal clear she had no hope. He’d show her just as little mercy.

Ignoring the man at their feet, whose life was slowly ebbing away, Lloyd glared at her. “I want to know how you did it.”

“Did what?” Cassidy asked, still watching Martin.

With that, Lloyd tucked his gun back into his pants and punched her.

Cassidy cried out in pain and tried to wrench her arm out of his grasp, but he held on.

“You *know* what,” Lloyd said. “How you killed Coke.”

“I didn’t,” she protested.

“You may not have poisoned him, but I know it was still your doing. Where did you meet G? Where is he now? How

did you convince him to help you? Do you have a magic pussy or something?”

Cassidy couldn't believe Lloyd hadn't discovered G was Leo. But then again, she hadn't given Alfred his name. He also didn't know Leo was the one who'd rescued them from Jamaica.

Her mind spun, trying to figure out what to tell her captor that would appease him.

But she was too slow.

Lloyd put his hands around her throat and squeezed. “Tell me,” he ordered.

Cassidy opened her mouth, but she couldn't get enough air to speak.

“I did this to your ex,” Lloyd said conversationally. “He gasped like a fish out of water. It was hilarious to watch.”

Cassidy stared up at the man who literally had her life in his hands and begged him with her eyes to let go.

He smirked, loosening his hold. “Feel like talkin' yet?” he asked.

“I didn't know G!” Cassidy gasped out. “I wrote letters to the FBI pleading for help. I didn't ask for anyone to kill Michael.” She would tell Lloyd whatever he wanted to know . . . as long as it didn't put Leo in danger. She'd never betray him. Lloyd was going to kill her, no matter what she did or didn't tell him, so she'd protect Leo the best way she knew how . . . with her silence.

But she really, *really* wanted to live. For Mario. For Leo. For her new friends. She had a new life she was eager to explore, and it would suck if it was ended before it had barely begun. So she'd tell him everything, except who G *really* was.

“The fucking FBI?” Lloyd asked, shaking his head in disbelief. “Jesus. I didn't think you had it in you.” Miraculously, he dropped his hands from her throat.

Cassidy sucked in more air and shook with relief.

“Well, we’ll just have to keep a shorter leash on you when we get home, won’t we?” he asked rhetorically. “You were obviously treated too well, given too much freedom. This time, I’ll lock you in a closet and only let you out to service clients and the employees who live in the mansion. You’ll be our own little whore. Available to anyone and everyone who wants some pussy—and the only rule will be that they can’t kill you. How does that sound?”

It sounded horrifying. Cassidy would rather die than live as Lloyd was suggesting. But he was bigger and stronger, and no matter how hard she struggled, she couldn’t break his hold on her arm.

Lloyd laughed and turned away from Martin, now lying motionless behind them. He began to drag Cassidy toward a small plane sitting on the desolate tarmac. The fog was still thick, and she didn’t see another living soul. But she couldn’t stop herself from opening her mouth and screaming as loud as she could.

She wouldn’t go back to Jamaica without a fight. Even if no one was around, maybe she could piss Lloyd off badly enough that he’d kill her right then and there. That would be preferable to the future he had described.



Bull was driving one of Silverstone’s tow trucks, Gramps riding shotgun, with Eagle and Smoke in the truck behind them. They’d left the scene of the huge pileup and were driving around, praying for a miracle.

There was a lot of chatter on the CB about the car Cassidy had been kidnapped in. It seemed as if every tow truck and eighteen-wheeler in the greater Indianapolis area was on the lookout. It should’ve been a relief to Gramps, but with every mile they drove without a sighting, he got more and more tense.

“This is Big Red—I think I saw the car everyone’s lookin’ for.”

Gramps scrambled for the handset. “Where?” he barked.

“I was on 465 near University Heights.”

That area was south of the city. Bull was already turning the truck around.

“Thank you. Any other details?” Gramps asked the truck driver. “How many occupants in the car? Did they get off at a particular exit?”

“There were three people in the front seat—couldn’t see much more than that. The fog’s still pretty thick down here. I followed them for a while, not sure it was the car you was looking for, but saw it get off on Madison Avenue.”

“Which direction?”

“South.”

“Ten-four. Thank you,” Gramps told the man.

“You’re welcome. I hope you get your lady back.”

“Me too,” Gramps said before hanging the handset back on the dashboard. He clicked into the map on his phone and zoomed in. “There’s a small regional airport south of 465,” he told Bull.

“It’s a possibility,” his friend said.

Gramps scowled. Intellectually, he knew Bull couldn’t definitively agree or disagree with any theories as to where Lloyd might be going, but this was *Cassidy* they were looking for.

“There’s a lot of motels around there too,” Gramps admitted.

“But would they really hang around Indy? What would be the purpose?” Bull asked.

“If they were pissed they couldn’t get their hands on Mario, maybe,” Gramps said, doing his best to gain control of his emotions.

“True. Why come all this way to begin with? Why not just wash their hands of her and move on?” Bull mused.

“I didn’t spend a lot of time with Lloyd, but he was an asshole,” Gramps said. “I didn’t trust him as far as I could throw him. I mean, I didn’t trust Coke, either, but I knew his

word was important to him. I had the feeling Lloyd would cut his own mother's throat if it meant getting what he wanted."

"And he wanted Cassidy?" Bull asked.

"Yeah. But I think this is more than that. I'm guessing he was pissed I snuck in under his radar. As head of security, he should've been more careful with me. Never should've left me alone with Coke, no matter what the other man said. I think he wants revenge, and since he can't get to G, he's settling for the only person he can get his hands on."

"Cassidy," Bull said with a nod.

"Yeah."

"So what now? He's got her, but what's his plan? Kill her, dump the body, then go back to Jamaica?"

"I don't know. It's a possibility," Gramps said, the words feeling like acid on his tongue. The thought of Cassidy being killed and dumped like garbage was abhorrent. But he forced himself to think this through. "But maybe that's not enough. I think he'd want her to suffer as long as possible."

"And what better way to make her suffer than take her from her son and bring her back to Jamaica?" Bull concluded.

"Exactly."

"So he needs a way out. You said there's an airport in the area?"

"Greenfield is just to the west of Interstate 65, right in the direction he's headed."

Bull stepped on the gas, and the truck lurched forward. They were on the right track—Gramps could feel it. He dialed Smoke's number. He knew the other two men had heard Big Red's report on the car and were right on their tail. As soon as the other man picked up, Gramps spoke.

"Greenfield Airport. It's a small regional airstrip. If they're trying to get out of town quickly, that's the best way. They could've hired someone to fly them out under the radar, so to speak," Gramps said.

“Weather’s crap,” Smoke replied. “Would they still risk it?”

“Fuck yeah,” Gramps said with a nod. “They’re probably grateful for the fog. And I bet they’re gonna make it worth the pilot’s while to look the other way when they bring Cassidy on board.”

“What’s the plan?” Smoke asked.

“Do whatever’s necessary to make sure they don’t take off,” Gramps said succinctly.

“They’re not taking her,” Smoke promised, his voice low and menacing.

“No, they’re not,” Gramps agreed.

“Don’t wait for us if we get separated,” Smoke said. “We’ll be on your six.”

“Got it. Over and out.” Gramps hung up.

He and Bull didn’t speak as they drove way too quickly toward Greenfield. All Gramps could do was repeat over and over in his head, *Hang in there, Cass. I’m comin’ for you.*

Ten minutes later, Bull pulled into the parking lot of the small airport. There were a few cars parked but no signs of other people. Gramps jumped out of the truck before Bull had even completely stopped. He had his pistol in hand and immediately headed west, toward the nearest hangar.

There were several planes parked under a long shelter, but there were a couple out on the tarmac as well. Gramps guessed the small airport had become inundated with people wanting to take shelter from the weather, and they hadn’t had enough room for everyone to park under cover.

All the small planes gave Lloyd and Martin plenty of places to hide—and to possibly ambush Gramps and his team. The fog swirling around him didn’t help. As he and Bull weighed their options, Eagle and Smoke joined them, appearing as if out of nowhere.

Seconds later, they all made their way silently but steadily toward the parked planes. They needed to figure out which one



Lloyd and Martin would use to escape.

Through the fog, Gramps saw a brown four-door Crown Victoria. It was parked haphazardly near the sheltered planes, out of sight of the parking lot. Moving cautiously, Gramps approached the vehicle. He tamped down his frustration at finding it empty.

When he continued around the back of the car, he stopped.

A body was lying on the pavement. Faceup. Not moving.

For a heartbeat, Gramps thought it was Cassidy. But just as the idea went through his brain, he realized the body was too big. He approached carefully, and now that he was closer, he could see it was Martin. He had a single gunshot wound to the chest and blood pooling around his body. Not wasting time to check for a pulse, Gramps kept moving.

His teammates had fanned out around him, checking each of the planes to make sure they weren't occupied. A light rain began to fall, and that combined with the thick fog made for an eerie atmosphere.

Gramps heard voices coming from the opposite end of the row of planes.

Immediately turning toward the direction of the sound, Gramps was on the move without even thinking, but suddenly Bull was there, grabbing his arm, halting his progress.

"Easy, man," Bull said quietly.

Gramps's first impulse was to jerk away from his friend and tell him to go to hell, but he knew Bull was right. He couldn't act without thinking, even if he was terrified for Cassidy. The bullet that had taken out Martin could've just as easily ended *her* life. If he came this close, only to fail her now, he'd never forgive himself.

Out of the corner of his eye, Gramps saw Smoke and Eagle come up on his right. They had a quick discussion before Bull and Smoke disappeared to circle wide so they'd have Lloyd surrounded.

Creeping forward, Gramps and Eagle made their way in the direction of the voices. At first Gramps thought they might be coming from inside a nearby hangar, but when he heard a scream—Cassidy’s scream—he changed direction again.

She was headed toward one of the planes on the tarmac.

Breaking into a jog, Gramps was one hundred percent focused on the two figures he could now see several yards ahead of him. He didn’t have a good shot because of the fog, but it didn’t matter. Lloyd was going to die for putting his hands on Cassidy and scaring Mario. He’d decided that the second he’d learned the man had come for her.

The sound of a plane engine revving made his determination even stronger. No way had he gotten this close to rescuing Cassidy only to let her slip through his fingers.

The last thing Gramps wanted to do was startle Lloyd. Especially when he had a weapon and obviously wasn’t afraid to use it. The fog now worked in their favor as they stalked their prey. They weren’t wearing headsets, so they couldn’t communicate, but they’d been in deadly situations plenty of times in the past. They knew what had to be done.

Moving silently, he inched closer to Lloyd and Cassidy. They had to get close enough to put a bullet in Lloyd’s head without harming his hostage.

Gramps’s focus narrowed. This was ending. Now. He was close enough to see the terror on Cassidy’s face as she frantically scanned the tarmac—and shockingly, her gaze found him.

He hated that she was scared, but he wasn’t going to lose her.

He raised his pistol, taking a deep breath even as he aimed.

Which was exactly when Lloyd glanced over his shoulder, spotting Gramps near the wing of a parked plane.

He immediately raised his weapon, but instead of pointing it at Gramps, he smirked and turned it toward Cassidy.

A loud gunshot sounded, echoing through the nearby hangar and over the flat prairie that surrounded the small airport.

For a moment, Gramps froze—until Lloyd fell to the ground with a thud.

Cassidy stood there for a heartbeat, stunned, then she was running toward Gramps.

Through the fog behind Lloyd, Gramps barely saw Smoke lowering his weapon. He'd taken the shot. Succeeded in preventing Lloyd from killing Cassidy.

Gramps had just enough time to holster his weapon before Cassidy flung herself at him. He held her just as tightly as she was clinging to him. He'd come way too close to losing her. Neither said a word for a long moment as they just stood there, shaking in each other's embrace.

Finally, Gramps pulled back just enough so he could see her face. "Are you hurt?"

"Yeah."

Gramps's heart stopped. Had Lloyd managed to shoot her? "Where?" he asked harshly.

"My face," Cassidy said. "Where he hit me. And my arm is killing me. He liked to hold on too tight as he dragged me around."

It took a second for her words to register. "But you weren't shot?" he asked urgently.

"I don't think so. Was I?" she asked, clearly still in shock, her big hazel eyes staring up at him in pain and fear.

"Fuck," Gramps muttered before pulling Cassidy back into him. He held her way too tightly again, but he couldn't seem to let go. By some miracle, she was all right. Was safe in his arms. He'd found her in time.

If he could find the trucker who went by the name of Big Red, he'd give him one hell of a reward.

“Mario?” Cassidy asked, picking up her head and looking at Gramps.

“He’s fine. He and the others are still in the safe room where you left them,” Gramps said. He wanted to lecture her for not saving herself, too, but he knew why she’d given herself up. He didn’t like it, but he understood.

This nightmare was over. He hoped. There was always the chance someone else would decide to come after Cassidy, but Gramps doubted it. Lloyd had seemed to be obsessed with her. He didn’t think anyone else would care enough to track her down.

But then again, he’d thought everyone would be too wrapped up in the aftermath of Coke’s death to come after her in the first place. He’d have to be extra careful from here on out. He’d been too lax since coming back to Indianapolis. That wouldn’t happen again. No fucking way.

“They killed Alfred,” Cassidy said softly against his shoulder.

“What?”

“That’s how they found me. They went to El Paso to find my parents. But thank God they’d already left for Mexico. So they found Alfred instead. They tortured him until he told them where I was. My mom called me when she heard. I didn’t have time to let you know before Lloyd and Martin broke through the fence around Silverstone.”

Gramps shook his head. “I’m sorry, love.”

“He was a jerk, and an asshole, and he treated me like shit. But . . . he was still Mario’s father. I’d hoped one day they might be able to have some sort of relationship,” Cassidy said after a moment.

Gramps opened his mouth to respond, but Eagle’s voice cut through the fog.

“The plane’s empty!”

Gramps stiffened. “Was Lloyd going to fly the plane out of here?” he asked Cassidy.

She blinked up at him and shook her head. “No. Martin and Lloyd talked about how the pilot was prepared to leave no matter what the weather was like.”

Praying the pilot was smart enough to realize the jig was up and he’d be better off getting the hell out of there, Gramps shifted Cassidy in his grip, keeping his arm around her and pulling his weapon.

Before any of the team could move, more gunshots rang out.

Gramps immediately dropped to a crouch with Cassidy in his arms, attempting to make her as small a target as possible.

Almost as soon as the shots started, they ended.

“Eagle? Smoke? Bull?” Gramps yelled.

“I’m good!” Bull yelled. “Where’s Cassidy?”

“She’s here. We’re good,” Gramps called out.

“Pilot’s down!” Eagle said.

Peering through the fog, Gramps saw movement to the right, near the planes parked closely together under the shelter. He stood, helping Cassidy up as well.

“Shit! *Smoke’s hit!*” Bull shouted from their right.

Turning his head, Gramps saw Bull trying to hold Smoke upright, but it was a losing battle. Bull managed to awkwardly help his friend to the ground without dropping him.

Eagle ran over, and Gramps moved quickly in their direction, Cassidy glued to his side. By the time they’d reached Bull, it was obvious Smoke wasn’t doing well. He was wheezing and couldn’t seem to catch his breath.

“Fuck!” Bull growled, ripping open Smoke’s shirt. Blood covered his chest. A lot of it. Too much.

Eagle already had his phone up to his ear and was speaking to a 9-1-1 operator.

Gramps knew shit was about to hit the fan. They were sitting at the airport with two—no, *three*—dead bodies, and

now one of their own had suffered at least one, maybe two gunshots.

Cassidy let go of Gramps, and he knelt by Smoke's side. Bull was putting pressure on the hole in his chest, and they shared an uneasy look. It wasn't the first time one of their team had been injured, but this was bad.

Cassidy got to her knees by Smoke's head and held it still with her hand. "You're gonna be fine," she told him calmly. "Leo and Bull are on this. Hang in there."

Gramps was surprised by how strong she sounded after everything that had happened, but he probably shouldn't have been. His Cass had a spine of steel.

Smoke's lips moved, but Gramps couldn't hear what he was saying.

Cassidy hunched over him. "What?" she asked.

Smoke repeated his words, and Cassidy sat up straight. Her lips were pressed together, her brow furrowed in distress. "No," she said, her voice shaking. "I'm not telling her that. You'll have to tell her yourself when you see her in the hospital."

And with that, Gramps knew what Smoke had said. He'd told Cassidy to tell Molly that he loved her.

He'd thought his heart was breaking when Cassidy had been in danger, but now he felt it splinter again. He couldn't lose Smoke. One of his best friends. Molly couldn't lose her husband. Their baby couldn't lose her father. But if Smoke felt as if he was dying, things were serious.

When they'd first started going on missions for the Army, they'd made a pact to never do what Smoke had just done—unless things were bad. *Deadly* bad. Gramps knew Smoke wouldn't have asked Cassidy to tell his wife he loved her if he thought he'd live.

Looking down, Gramps saw bubbles coming out of Smoke's left side. The pilot had shot him *twice*. Asshole motherfucker! If he wasn't already dead, Gramps would've

shot him again. He pressed hard against the small hole in his side, and his friend groaned under him.

Leaning down, Gramps put his free hand on Smoke's forehead and got in his face. "You are *not* dying here," he ordered. "Hear me?"

"It's bad," Smoke whispered.

"And we've been in worse places before," Gramps retorted. "Remember that firefight in Somalia? We thought we were fucking toast then, yet we made it out. And let's not forget that time Eagle took a bullet to his femoral artery. We were all covered in blood before we got that tourniquet on him. But he's here, and he's got a fucking kid now. You hang on for Molly," Gramps said, his voice breaking. "And your unborn child. They both need you. *Fight* for them, Smoke. With everything you've got."

"Tell them I love them," Smoke said, his voice fading. His face was as white as the fog surrounding them, and his labored breaths were painful to hear.

"No," Gramps told his best friend. "I won't. Tell them your damn self when you see them."

"Asshole," Smoke said weakly, then his eyes closed, and his body went limp.

"They're comin'," Eagle said, his eyes going from Smoke's unconscious body, to the pilot, to Cassidy.

Bless his woman. Even after everything she'd been through—bruises on her face, almost being shot, and dealing with Lloyd's death while she was standing right next to him—she pushed herself to her feet. "I'll go to the parking lot and meet them," she said.

"I'll go with you. Bull and Gramps can't take pressure off Smoke's wounds," Eagle said.

"Thank you," Cassidy said simply. Then she gave Eagle a quick one-armed hug. "Thank you for saving me," she said softly. She walked over to where Bull was kneeling over Smoke and kissed him on the top of the head. "Thank you for saving me," she said again. Then she came over to Gramps . . .

and he wanted to get up and hold her. She was hurting, that was clear. Filled with guilt for Smoke getting shot.

He needed to get her head on straight, but at the moment, Smoke needed him more.

She kissed him on the temple. “Thank you for saving me,” she choked out. She got back down on her knees at Smoke’s head. Even though he was unconscious, she kissed him on the forehead and said one last time, “Thank you for saving me.”

Then she stood, and she and Eagle walked into the fog, toward the parking lot and the sirens they could finally hear in the distance.

Gramps looked at Bull. Neither one said a word. All they could do was wait and pray.



# Chapter Nineteen

Three days.

That's how long it had been since that horrible evening. For Cassidy, it seemed as if it was weeks ago. That they'd been waiting in the hospital forever for Smoke to wake up.

After he was shot, things had turned crazy at the small airport. Well, *crazier*. The ambulance had arrived and whisked Smoke away and taken him to the hospital. It had taken much longer for her, Leo, Bull, and Eagle to be allowed to leave. The cops hadn't been happy, rightly so, at finding three dead bodies. It had taken quite a while to explain what had happened. And before they'd been allowed to leave, Leo had called a contact in the FBI to vouch for his team.

The airport had surveillance tapes, but from what Cassidy had heard, with the fog being as thick as it had been that night, it was hard to see exactly what had happened. But she supposed the cops must've seen what they'd needed to, because no one had been arrested, which she was taking as a good sign.

Being reunited with Mario had been such a relief, but their reunion had been subdued because of Smoke's condition. Molly was hanging in there, but the stress of not knowing whether Smoke would pull through was affecting her greatly. She wasn't eating like she should, and her morning sickness had increased tenfold.

The doctors had operated on Smoke, patching up his lung that had been punctured by one of the bullets, but it was the other bullet that had done more damage. It had bounced around inside him, nicking his intestine, sending bacteria and waste throughout his belly. He'd gone septic, and the doctors were doing all they could to combat the infection raging throughout his body.

He was in a medically induced coma, giving him time to heal with as little stress as possible. Molly had been sitting with him as much as she could get away with. Everyone was

taking turns staying with her in his room. After hearing the entire story of what had happened, the nurses were looking the other way and allowing more than the allotted number of people in his room at the same time.

Cassidy felt Leo's arm go around her shoulders. He'd been dividing his time between holding down the fort at Silverstone Towing and staying by Smoke's side.

"You look tired," Leo told her.

Cassidy snorted out a small breath. She was exhausted. She'd done her best to get Mario back on a normal schedule. She'd insisted he return to school and to his gymnastics, cheerleading, and dance practices. Cassidy knew he wanted to be with her and Leo, but for his sake, he needed normalcy.

He'd been extremely upset with her for leaving him in the safe room at Silverstone when Lloyd and Martin had shown up, and she still hadn't had the time to sit down with him and discuss everything that had happened.

Tilting to the side, Cassidy rested her head on Leo's shoulder and closed her eyes. "I'm okay," she sighed.

She felt him shake his head, but he didn't call her on the lie. "How's Smoke?"

"Hanging in there." She wanted to be able to tell Leo that his friend was improving, but unfortunately, that wasn't the case. The doctors hadn't said he was getting worse, but they hadn't been overly optimistic he was getting better either. "All they'll say is that it takes time," she said on a sigh.

They were in a small private waiting room. Bull had just gone to relieve Eagle, who was sitting in Smoke's room with Molly, and Taylor was supposed to come by soon.

"This isn't your fault," Leo said softly.

Squeezing her eyes shut, Cassidy didn't want to do this now. Didn't ever want to have this discussion with him.

"Look at me," Leo said sternly.

Cassidy shook her head.

Leo shifted away from her side. Opening her eyes, she saw he was kneeling on the carpet in front of her chair. He was tall enough that he could look her in the eyes as he framed her face with his large warm palms.

“This isn’t your fault.”

Okay, so they *were* having this discussion now. She just needed to suck it up. “It is.”

“No,” he said resolutely.

She opened her mouth to explain all the reasons he was wrong, but he cut her off. “I know what you’re going to say, but it’s all bullshit.”

“It isn’t,” Cassidy insisted. “If I was stronger, if I hadn’t run from my problems, we never would have gone to Jamaica. Alfred wouldn’t be dead. Smoke wouldn’t be lying in that hospital bed upstairs.”

“Wrong. If I hadn’t been a chickenshit, if I’d claimed you twenty-five years ago, you wouldn’t have married Alfred. He wouldn’t have treated you and Mario like shit and forced you to flee El Paso. If Michael Coke wasn’t an asshole drug dealer, bent on taking advantage of people and using them, you wouldn’t have been trapped in Jamaica. You wouldn’t have been so desperate that you had to write the FBI for help. And if Lloyd hadn’t been a damn pervert, and if he wasn’t an entitled prick, you wouldn’t have had to sacrifice yourself to save a roomful of friends you love, and who love you in return. You wouldn’t have been kidnapped and hit in the face and almost flown out of the country back to your worst nightmare. So if you want to blame *anyone* for Smoke being shot, blame me.”

Cassidy stared at Leo in astonishment. “This isn’t your fault,” she argued.

“And it’s not yours. What I *do* know is, assuming responsibility for every damn thing that happens to those around you is taking too big a toll on you. Shit happens in life, Cass. Some of it good, some of it bad. And if you dwell on the bad, it’ll eat you alive.”

He was right, she knew he was, but it was very hard to let this go. Especially when she was terrified that Smoke might die. She'd probably lose the best friends she'd ever had. If Molly blamed her, she didn't know what she'd do.

"I heard you refuse to pass on his words to Molly," Leo said.

Cassidy flinched.

Leo shook his head. "It was the right thing to do. I've known Smoke a hell of a long time. He was looking for approval to give up in that moment. You wouldn't give it to him. He asked me to pass on the same thing. And you heard me tell him no way in hell, that he could tell Molly and his child he loved them his damn self. If that was me upstairs, I'd fight the devil himself to get back to you. Smoke will do the same. We just have to give him time."

Cassidy couldn't stop the tear that fell from her eye. But Leo didn't even blink. He leaned up and kissed it away. Then did the same to the next one.

The next thing she knew, she was sitting on Leo's lap on the floor. He cradled her as she sobbed. She wasn't even sure why she was crying, but she couldn't stop once she'd started.

Fifteen minutes later, her face was swollen, and her eyes were red, but she felt a lot better.

The door opened, and Taylor blinked in surprise at seeing two people on the floor. Leo immediately said their names so she'd know who she was looking at.

"Um . . . is there a reason you're on the floor?" she asked, shifting Kevin in her arms.

Leo didn't answer, simply helped Cassidy stand, then got to his own feet next to her. He grabbed a tissue from the box on the table next to the chairs where they'd been sitting and wiped her face gently. Cassidy still had two black eyes, and her face was sore from the punches she'd received, but all things considered, she felt as if she'd come out of the entire situation relatively unscathed.

Taylor approached, and Leo took Cassidy's hand as her friend studied her.

Finally, she said, "I didn't know what was going on that day. But I was pissed at you for upsetting Mario. He was beside himself. He couldn't believe you'd left him. Then, once I realized what you'd done, I felt so guilty about being upset for even a second. You were protecting us. *All* of us, not just your son. You left the safe room so fast, we didn't have time to even talk about what was going on."

"I'd just spoken to my mom and dad," Cassidy said. "He told me Lloyd knew where I was. I knew it was him," Cassidy admitted quietly.

Taylor nodded. "I've never seen anything braver in my life. I'm in awe of you. And I can never thank you enough for protecting my son."

Cassidy felt the tears welling up again and forced them back. She'd cried enough. Besides, she already had so much snot in her sinuses it hurt. "I'm not brave. I didn't do anything to try to get away. I didn't do anything to help when Leo and the others came to save me."

Taylor shook her head. "Being brave isn't always about making grand gestures or going all kung fu on someone. It's living each day with dignity and treating others with kindness and respect. Walking out of Silverstone Towing, straight into the hands of a killer, was as brave as anything I've ever seen. You knew what you were walking into, and yet you did it anyway. Anything that happened after that doesn't negate your gesture."

"She's right," Leo said, kissing her temple.

"Of course I am," Taylor replied with a small smile.

"You ready to go up?" Leo asked Taylor, changing the subject.

Cassidy felt a little better after talking to her friend. She knew she needed to talk to Molly and Skylar as well before she'd completely relax, but she had more hope now that

maybe they wouldn't blame her for what had happened to Smoke.

Talking to Molly scared the shit out of her, but she wouldn't push her for anything until Smoke got better. And he *would* get better. She had to believe that.

"Yes," Taylor answered Leo. "I know he's gonna wake up soon. He has to."

Cassidy agreed. She wasn't sure how much more Molly could take. She was hanging on by a thread, and it was only a matter of time before she snapped or one of the other guys forced her to step away for the safety of her unborn child. And Cassidy honestly didn't know what would happen if they tried to do that.

The three of them took the elevator up to Smoke's floor and nodded at the nurse sitting at the station. She frowned but didn't stop them. The fact that there were already more people in Smoke's room than was allowed wasn't lost on Cassidy, but Leo acted as if he didn't care in the least, and she supposed he didn't.

When they opened the door, the first person Cassidy saw was Molly. She was sitting by Smoke's bedside, his hand in hers. She had dark circles under her eyes and was obviously exhausted. Her hair hadn't been washed in days, and she was still wearing the same clothes she'd had on yesterday.

Even though Bull had come to relieve Eagle, both men were still in the room. Taylor went over to greet Molly and gave her a side hug, because Molly wasn't willing to let go of Smoke's hand long enough to stand and hug her friend. Cassidy stood back, letting the men greet each other.

The conversation in the room was subdued. Gramps asked Molly if she'd eaten anything recently, and she merely shrugged. Taylor talked about Kevin for a bit, and Cassidy saw Molly's free hand go to her belly, as if to caress the child in her womb.

The whole scene was simply sad. It felt awkward, and she wished for the hundredth time that things had turned out

differently at that airfield.

Skylar arrived about ten minutes later, immediately going to Bull's side. He kissed her briefly, then they stood against the wall with her back to his chest.

The room had gone silent, everyone lost in their thoughts and upset that Smoke hadn't so much as stirred since he'd gotten out of surgery.

Then Kevin began to fuss. At first, he just made little grunting noises, but within seconds, as if a switch had been flicked, he went from letting his discomfort be known in quiet, subtle ways to full-out wailing.

His cries echoed off the hospital room walls. The little boy had a set of lungs on him, and Taylor and Eagle were doing everything they could to comfort and quiet him.

But Molly's voice from across the room made everyone freeze.

"Bring him here," she requested.

Everyone looked at her in surprise. Ever since she'd learned Smoke had been injured, she'd seemed rather meek and introspective. But now, she sounded almost forceful.

Without questioning her, Taylor carried her screaming son closer to her friend. Molly sat forward on the chair and lifted Smoke's hand. She held it to her cheek. "Hear that, Mark?"

He didn't answer.

Cassidy pressed her lips together in distress. Had Molly lost it? What was she doing?

"Put him down here, please," Molly said, pointing to the bed in front of her.

Once again, Taylor did as she requested, placing her very unhappy son on the bed beside Smoke.

"It's not our baby . . . but she's gonna need you when she cries," Molly said to Smoke as she leaned closer. "I want you to come back to us. We need you. Who's gonna kiss her boo-boos when she gets hurt? Who's gonna protect her from

bullies? Who's gonna teach her how to climb trees and how to defend herself against overzealous boys? You've been asleep long enough—it's time to come back to us."

Everyone in the room seemed to be holding their breath.

Molly turned her head and looked at Taylor with tear-filled eyes. "He squeezed my hand when Kevin began to cry," she explained.

The baby was still crying, squirming in earnest, waving his hands in the air in distress. Cassidy wanted to go to him, comfort him, but she stayed frozen next to Leo.

Then a miracle happened. The monitor attached to Smoke's chest began to beep faster—and his eyes flickered open.

It was just for a second, but they all saw it. The doctors had started to wean him off the drugs keeping him in a coma, but he shouldn't have been able to wake up yet.

Cassidy saw Bull slip out of the room, probably to get a nurse, but everyone else simply stared at their friend on the bed.

"Right. He's a bit loud, isn't he?" Molly said lightly, glancing up at Taylor. She offered a tired smile.

Eagle moved to her side and picked up his son. He cradled him close and held out his hand to Taylor. "We'll just go feed him. He gets a little cranky when he's hungry," he said dryly.

"Ya think?" Leo said sarcastically.

Eagle ignored him and walked around the bed to Smoke's other side. "It's about time you woke up from your nap," he teased, then squeezed his friend's shoulder before walking out with his arm around Taylor.

Skylar went to the side of the bed and leaned down and kissed Smoke's temple. "I was all ready to take over as your wife's breathing coach," she told him with a small laugh. "But as much as I love Molly, I didn't want to have to see *that* much of her in the delivery room."



She hugged Molly, then approached Cassidy. “I love you, girl. So much.” She hugged her as well before following Eagle and Taylor out of the room.

Leo gave Cassidy a little push toward the bed. She walked as if in a daze. Smoke wasn’t out of the woods yet, but he was stubborn, as was Molly, so she had hope that he’d make a full recovery. She’d never been more relieved in her life than when Smoke’s eyes opened.

Well, maybe knowing Lloyd was dead—and she wouldn’t be forced to become a sex slave for a mansion full of drug dealers—was a tad better than this moment, but just by a smidge.

She felt awkward simply standing next to the bed, so she picked up Smoke’s hand in hers. “I’m so sorry,” she said softly.

“For what?” Molly asked.

Cassidy couldn’t hear anything but confusion in her friend’s tone.

“For Smoke getting hurt.”

Molly shook her head. “It wasn’t your fault, so you have nothing to be sorry for.”

It was also a relief to hear her friend sounding more like herself. For the last three days, Molly had hardly said anything.

Cassidy jolted when she felt Smoke squeeze her hand. Looking down, she clearly saw his fingers tighten around hers. She looked at his face. He still had a breathing tube down his throat, so he couldn’t talk, but his eyes opened for another brief moment and looked into her own.

The tears she’d managed to beat back earlier returned full force.

His brows furrowed slightly.

“I’m okay,” she whispered. “We’re all okay.”

His head shifted on the pillow, and he looked over at his wife.

“I love you,” Molly told him, tears spilling down her cheeks. But the smile on her face was huge. She might’ve been crying, but they were tears of joy.

Cassidy squeezed Smoke’s hand before backing away from the bed. The moment between Smoke and Molly was beautiful and so heart wrenching, it hurt.

Feeling Leo’s arm slide around her waist, Cassidy turned to look up at him. The love she saw in his eyes made her knees weak. This man was her world.

And everything was going to be all right now. She just knew it.

As the nurses burst into the room, fussing over Smoke and happily exclaiming over the fact that he’d woken up, Cassidy waved to Molly before she and Leo slipped out of the room.

Leaning against the wall just outside, Leo asked, “You okay?”

“Yeah, I am.” And she was. Smoke recovering was the catalyst. She was alive. Mario was alive. She was finally with a man she loved, who loved her back. They’d already made plans to fly out to El Paso to see her parents after they got back from Mexico. Life had thrown a lot at her recently, but with Leo at her side, Cassidy knew she’d be all right.

“Ready to go get Mario?” he asked.

Cassidy nodded. They’d been dropping him off and picking him up at school the last few days, as neither had been comfortable letting him ride the bus. Cassidy may have wanted him to get back to his routine, but that didn’t mean she was ready to let him out of her sight any more than necessary.

There hadn’t been time for anything else between shuttling Mario and sitting at the hospital, waiting for word of Smoke’s condition. Cassidy was exhausted, mentally and physically.

“I love you, Cass,” Leo told her.

“And I love you. More than you’ll ever know,” Cassidy said.

“I know. Because I love you the same way.”

# Chapter Twenty

The time to talk to Mario had come.

It was two days after Smoke had woken up, and the doctors had finally assured them that he would eventually be as good as new.

Mario had been in an extremely bad mood that morning. He'd snapped at Leo when he'd gone into his room to wake him, and he'd been stomping around Leo's house as if he were five years old instead of eleven and a half.

Cassidy knew if she sent him to school, it wouldn't go well, so at breakfast—when all Mario did was push food around his plate and refuse to meet her eyes—she turned to Leo and said, “Mario and I are going to hang out here this morning.”

Leo met her gaze for a brief moment, then nodded. “Sounds good. I need to meet with some detectives from the police department.”

“Everything okay?” Cassidy asked nervously.

Leo reached across the table and took her hand in his. “It's fine. They just want me to read over their official report on what happened and make sure they didn't leave anything out.”

Cassidy sighed in relief. “Okay.” She'd been scared to death Leo and his friends would somehow get in trouble for what had happened. The security video at the airport went a long way toward exonerating them. Even through the fog, the cops could tell that Lloyd had a gun to her head. Leo and the others had acted in self-defense.

The first night after she'd been kidnapped, all three of them had slept in Leo's king-size bed together. Mario hadn't wanted to be far from his mom, and Cassidy hadn't wanted to be separated from either of them. He'd said he was fine sleeping in his own room after that night. But it was obvious to Cassidy that she needed to sit down with her son and talk about what had happened. It wasn't like Mario to act out, and

he was most definitely having a hard time dealing with everything.

“Is staying home okay with you, bud?” Leo asked.

Mario shrugged, but didn’t answer.

“I asked you a question,” Leo said, putting a bit of force into his voice. “I’d appreciate you using words to answer me instead of merely shrugging.”

At that, Mario looked up. “It’s fine,” he said. There was still a bit of belligerence in his tone, but at least he was responding.

“Good. Because I need you to look after your mom for me. She didn’t sleep well last night, had a nightmare, and she’s feeling a bit off kilter today.”

Cassidy nudged Leo’s leg under the table. She didn’t want Mario to know about her nightmares. She was embarrassed as it was that she was having them. She was safe, Lloyd and Martin were dead, and her injuries were healing. She had absolutely nothing to complain about and didn’t want anyone feeling sorry for her.

But Leo ignored her not-so-subtle request to shut up and kept talking.

“Your mom is anxious about talking to you, but you’re old enough to know the details about what happened and why. I hope you’ll treat her with care as you have your talk.”

“Leo,” Cassidy complained, but he didn’t turn to look at her.

“Okay?” he pushed.

Mario looked from Leo to her, then back to Leo. Finally, he said, “I will.”

Leo nodded. “You gonna finish your eggs?”

Mario looked down at his plate. “Yeah.”

“Good. The protein will help your muscle mass. We’ll talk later about nutrition and what kinds of foods will help your muscles grow so you can better catch the fliers.”

It was exactly the right thing to say. Mario sat up straighter in his chair and gave Leo a small smile. “Awesome,” he said softly.

The mood in the room had lifted slightly, but Cassidy was still very nervous about the long-overdue talk she needed to have with her son.

All too soon it was time for Leo to leave. Mario was sitting on the couch watching a documentary on TV about cheerleading. Leo leaned over and kissed the top of his head and said, “Love you, Mario.”

“Love you too, Leo.”

Cassidy felt as if her heart was going to burst. Every time she heard her son and Leo exchanging *I love yous*, she got a little teary. As Leo passed, he snagged her hand and took her with him as he walked to his front door. He pulled her outside, and as soon as the door shut behind them, he backed her up against it and kissed her. Hard.

They hadn’t made love since she’d been rescued. They’d both been exhausted from the stress over Smoke’s condition. But they had slept in each other’s arms every night since then, and Cassidy had never felt safer.

This was the first hint of passion they’d shared since that awful evening, and Cassidy felt her libido stirring as Leo kissed her. She loved being pressed up against him. Loved feeling caged in by him. Leo was her safe place, there was no doubt about that.

“You okay?” he asked after lifting his head.

Cassidy nodded.

Leo studied her for a long moment. “You’re not, but you will be. Call me when you’re done talking, and I’ll come home. Take you both out to lunch. Then we’ll head over to Silverstone before Mario’s practice this afternoon.”

Cassidy swallowed hard. “You don’t think I’m a horrible parent for keeping him out of school today?”

Leo snorted. “No, Cass. You couldn’t be a horrible mom if you tried. School is important, but his mental health is more so. If that means you take him to Chicago to watch a cheerleading competition for fun, great. If it means you go to the zoo, New York City to watch a Broadway musical, or the mall, or even to fucking Chuck E. Cheese, fine. Spending time with your son, making sure he knows he’s loved and that he’s the most important person in your life, would never make you a bad parent. Besides, you both need this. Mario needs to know what happened, why you made the decisions that you did.”

“He’s upset with me,” Cassidy replied.

Leo nodded. “Yeah, I think he is. But he’ll understand once you talk to him.”

“I hope so.”

“I know so.”

“Leo?”

“Yeah, Cass?”

“Thank you for agreeing to go to El Paso with us when my parents get back from Mexico,” Cassidy said. “I know it’s not your favorite place to be, but I appreciate you coming with us.”

“No way in hell I’d let you go without me,” Leo told her.

“I love you,” she whispered.

Leo leaned down and kissed her briefly. “And I love you. You got this. That kid loves you too. You’ve been each other’s entire world for eleven and a half years. He’ll understand—just be honest with him. He’s not a baby anymore, Cass.”

“I know. And I think I hate that,” she said with a small smile.

Leo smoothed her hair back from her face, took a deep breath, and stared down at her.

“You gonna go?” she asked after a long moment had passed and he didn’t back away.

“Yeah,” he said regretfully. “I never understood why Bull, Eagle, and Smoke were so anxious to see their women at the end of the day, but I get it now. I love being with you, Cass. You make me want to be a better man, simply by breathing.”

God, that was beautiful. But Cassidy knew she needed to get inside and have a chat with her son. She’d chicken out if she waited too much longer. “Go,” she said semisternly, pushing at his chest. “The sooner you go, the sooner I can text you and let you know we’re done so you can come back and take us to lunch.”

Leo smirked and leaned forward and nuzzled the skin by her ear. Then he bit her lobe gently, and Cassidy shivered. Goose bumps broke out on her arms, and her nipples hardened. “Tonight, I’m gonna make love with you,” he said, his warm breath against her ear making her groan. “I’m gonna eat you out, watch as you come around my tongue, then I’m gonna make slow, sweet love to you . . . and you won’t be able to think about anything other than me being inside you.”

“Leo,” Cassidy complained as she struggled to get air into her lungs.

In response, Leo took a step back, leaving her feeling cold without his body pressing against hers. He smiled at her and walked backward off the porch, staring at her the entire time.

“That was mean,” she told him.

His smile grew.

But when Cassidy looked at the front of his jeans, she knew she wasn’t the only one who’d gotten all hot and bothered by his words. “Drive safe,” she called to him.

“Always,” he responded. “Inside, Cass.”

Doing as he asked, she opened the door and waved once more before heading inside to talk to her son.

She went to the couch and sat down next to Mario. She watched him for a long moment before he sighed and clicked off the TV.

“You wanted to talk, so . . . talk,” he said.



Cassidy didn't like the attitude Mario was exhibiting, but knew he wasn't purposely being mean. He was confused and struggling to come to terms with what had happened. Deciding not to beat around the bush, she jumped into the conversation headfirst.

"You're mad at me for locking you in the safe room at Silverstone," she said.

Mario blinked, then looked down at his hands in his lap and nodded.

Taking a deep breath for courage, Cassidy started at the beginning. "When I met your father, I thought I loved him. He was successful and much older than me. I wasn't head over heels in love with him, but I respected him and thought he felt the same about me. From the beginning of our marriage, things weren't great between us. But even if I could, I wouldn't go back and change anything about my relationship with him. You know why?"

Mario looked up at her and shook his head.

"Because it gave me you," Cassidy said earnestly. "You are literally the best thing to ever happen to me. The day you were born, I swore to always do what was best for you. I thought I was doing that when we moved to Jamaica. Living in El Paso wasn't good for me after your father and I got divorced. He had a lot of friends, and whenever I ran into them, they looked at me as if I was insane for divorcing him. They couldn't understand why I'd let such a good catch go. But we didn't love each other, and it was better for both of us to separate. So I went to Jamaica thinking you and I could live there for a year or so to regroup. I'd planned to come back to the States and get you enrolled in a good school somewhere. I didn't know where, but it wasn't going to be in El Paso."

"Was my father upset that you took me away?" Mario asked.

Cassidy bit her lip, then decided she needed to be as honest as possible. "I think he was, but I also think at that point in his life, it was a relief. Not because of you, but

because he wouldn't have to see me and be reminded of his failure."

"I have memories of him yelling a lot," Mario said.

Cassidy hated that, but nodded. "Neither of us were very happy," she said diplomatically. "But just because we weren't in love doesn't mean I'm not sad about his death. No one deserves what happened to him."

Mario thought about that for a moment and nodded. Then he said, "Leo doesn't yell at us. And he never looks at me as if he's disappointed. When I wanted to paint my room pink, he didn't even blink. And he doesn't care that I don't want to play football. He already said he couldn't wait for my first cheer performance, that he wouldn't miss it for the world. I also remember Dad yelling at me for playing with the doll you got me instead of the soccer ball he thought I should be kicking around."

As pleased as she was about Mario's feelings toward Leo, she was just as sad that he even remembered the doll incident from all those years ago. It had been just one of a hundred reasons why Cassidy had left Alfred. Taking a deep breath, she got back to her story. "I swear, when I went to Jamaica with you, I had no idea we wouldn't be able to leave. Michael took our passports. Trapping us there. I went along with our situation for way too long simply because I had no idea how to change it. When you were younger, things weren't as bad. We kept to ourselves, I taught you and the other kids, and that was that."

"But then things changed," Mario said.

"Yeah, they did. I'd done what I swore I would never do—put you in danger. So I secretly sent letters to the FBI here in the States and begged them to help us. I didn't know if anyone would even get the letters, but it was the best I could do at the time."

"And Leo came," Mario said.

"He did," Cassidy agreed. "I would've been happy to see anyone, but I knew Leo from when we were in high school."

He got us out, and I thought it was our second chance. I mentally renewed my vow to put your well-being first. I'd cheated you out of a lot of your childhood just because I was uncomfortable in El Paso. That wasn't going to happen again.

"Things were going well. You were happy. I was happy. Leo and I were officially together, and I thought things were finally going our way. But that day . . . the day I locked you in the safe room . . . your grandmother called. I'd learned that Lloyd had killed your father, and that it was likely he knew where we were. I didn't have time to even think about what to do before Lloyd and Martin broke through the fence.

"I was terrified, Mario. They were there, and the only thing I could think about was making sure you were safe. That they couldn't get to you and force you into selling drugs for them again. I was sure once they had me, they'd leave you alone. I locked you in that room to protect you . . . and if I had to make the decision again, I'd do the same thing. I wasn't able to keep you safe in the past, but I would do whatever it took to keep Lloyd from ever touching you again."

Cassidy was crying, but she didn't look away from Mario's face.

"I love you, son. I'm sorry you were scared, but sacrificing myself was the only way I knew to keep you safe. I never would've done something like that if we were still in Jamaica, because we were all we had, and it would've left you alone. But here? If something happened to me, I knew Leo would take care of you. So would the others. We're no longer alone—we've got friends, good friends, who won't hesitate to step up to the plate if necessary."

Mario was crying now too. "But, Mama, I don't ever want to live without you!"

Cassidy reached for her son, and he came into her arms willingly. The sullen, moody preteen was nowhere to be seen. This was her vulnerable baby. The boy she'd rocked to sleep more nights than she could count. "I know, but protecting their children is what mamas do. I didn't do that in the past and hated myself for it. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I brought such evil

into our lives. I'm sorry that I scared you. I'm sorry that I've been a bad mother, but I promise things will be different from here on out."

"You aren't a bad mama," Mario told her, his voice muffled because his face was buried in her chest. "You're the best mama in the world. I was mad because you abandoned me. You *left* me."

"I left you with people who I knew would protect you with their lives," Cassidy countered. "And . . . I had to protect little Kevin too. And Molly's unborn baby. What do you think Lloyd would've done to them if he'd gotten his hands on them?"

She felt more than saw Mario scrunch up his face in response.

Cassidy pulled back and framed Mario's face with her hands. "I love you, son. No matter what. You'll make bad decisions in your life, and I'll love you anyway. You'll make mistakes, and I'll still love you. You might fail a test, or yell at me, or disobey me. But no matter what, my love for you is absolute. No matter where you go or what you do, your mama will always love you. Understand?"

Mario nodded.

Cassidy couldn't deny that she felt so much better now that she'd talked with Mario about everything. He still would probably have questions, and she knew his hurt feelings wouldn't go away in the blink of an eye, but she hoped he felt better about what had happened.

"Mama?"

"Yeah, baby?"

"Are you gonna marry Leo?"

Just hearing those words made Cassidy's heart beat faster. "I don't know. I hope so. I love him. But I can't see the future. If I could, I never would've taken us to Jamaica."

Mario smiled a bit at that, then he got serious again. "Will you change your name if you *do* marry Leo?"

“Probably.” She would *totally* change her name. She’d dreamed about being Cassidy Zanardi since she was fifteen years old. After her divorce, she’d taken her maiden name back, but she’d go through the headache of switching all her legal documents for a third time if she and Leo ever got married. “Why are you asking? What’s brought this on?”

“Do you think Leo would mind if I changed my last name too?” Mario asked, wrinkling his brow in concern.

Cassidy’s heart beat uncontrollably. She wanted to sob.

“I just . . . I love him. And he said he loves *me*. I think I’d rather be Mario Zanardi than Mario Pepper. I’m sorry my real dad was killed, but I didn’t know him that well, and he never even tried to come see us when we left, or when we came back. And he was mean to us. I’d rather have Leo’s name.”

“I think Leo would be honored if you wanted to change your name,” she told her son honestly. “But . . . I don’t know if we’ll get married. Sometimes relationships just don’t work out for one reason or another,” she warned.

Mario shrugged and snuggled back into her. “This one will,” he said with confidence. “I know it.”

Cassidy couldn’t help but smile. “I hope so,” she whispered. Though deep down, she knew it would too. She couldn’t feel the kind of connection she felt with Leo and *not* have it work out. If Leo wanted to marry her tomorrow, she’d say yes. She knew that wouldn’t happen, that all three of them needed some time to get used to being a family, but she couldn’t help thinking about the kind of wedding she wanted. Something small and intimate. With the people she cared about most in the world.

“I love you, son. In the future, if you’re mad at me, or worried about something, please don’t hesitate to talk to me. Or Leo, if you don’t think you can discuss it with me. I’m your mother, but I’d like to think I’m your friend too. I’m your champion, your cheerleader, and someone you can always count on to have your back, no matter what. Okay?”

“Okay,” Mario said. Then he sat up. “Can I finish watching my show now?”

Cassidy studied her son. A huge weight seemed to have lifted from his shoulders, and the shadows in his eyes were gone. Smiling, she nodded. “Of course. It’s a bit too early to go to lunch. If you don’t mind, I’m gonna go to the other room and call Leo.”

Mario shrugged. He’d already reached for the remote.

Shaking her head, Cassidy knew she’d have to get used to this new Mario. An independent, slightly aloof preteen. She would miss the little boy he used to be, but couldn’t wait to see him morph into a man. And with Leo there to help guide him, as well as Bull, Smoke, and Eagle, she had no doubt he’d be respectful, considerate, and protective.

Cassidy got up and grabbed her phone off the counter. She looked at her watch and was surprised to see more time than she’d thought had passed since she’d sat down with Mario. It felt as if the conversation had taken only ten minutes or so. She figured that was probably a metaphor for how the next few years would be. She’d look back on Mario’s teenage years and wonder how they’d gone by so quickly.

Heading upstairs to their bedroom, she clicked on Leo’s name. She couldn’t wait to tell him how well the talk with Mario had gone. She’d save the news about her son’s desire to take Leo’s last name for another day.

Cassidy knew she’d lucked out. She’d survived living with a drug dealer, then Lloyd and Martin’s coming to take her. She had a man she loved with all her heart, who amazingly loved her back, and a great group of friends; her parents were safe; and her son was adjusting to his new life with amazing ease.

Life was good.

# Chapter Twenty-One

Gramps looked around the table at the three best friends he'd ever had. Silverstone had been through a lot over the years. First on the Delta Force team in the Army, including their last mission in the Middle East resulting in the reprimand by their commanders. They'd started Silverstone Towing and had worked their asses off to make it a success.

The missions they'd gone on as Silverstone had been just as exhilarating as the ones they'd completed for the Army, maybe more so. They'd helped countless men, women, and children get their lives back. But just like everything in life, things changed.

A decision needed to be made about the future of Silverstone. The team had been putting off this conversation for months, but now that Smoke was out of the hospital and almost back to his old self, it was time.

"How're you feeling?" Bull asked Smoke.

"Surprisingly good, actually. The doc approved me for all activities earlier this week," he said with a grin. "I've been spending as much time as possible showing Molly how appreciative I am of her nursing skills over the last few weeks."

Everyone chuckled.

"And her pregnancy?" Eagle asked.

"Normal. Our little girl is cooking right along. She'll be here before we know it."

"You're okay with a girl?" Bull asked.

"Okay with it? I'm over-the-moon excited. Honestly, I couldn't decide if I wanted a boy or a girl, but the second she told me our baby was a girl, I couldn't imagine having anything else."

"Happy for you, Smoke," Gramps said.

Eagle and Bull added their felicitations as well.

“Have to admit that I was scared there for a bit,” Smoke admitted. “At first it was like any other op. But when I felt myself get hit, I knew I was in trouble. I wasn’t scared for me, but for Molly. I didn’t want to leave her alone. I hadn’t even met my baby, and I didn’t want to leave her either.”

And that was the perfect opening. “We’ve changed,” Gramps said. “Silverstone’s changed.” He wasn’t surprised when his three friends all nodded in agreement. “If Willis called today about that case we were researching a bit ago, would we want to take it?”

Silence greeted his statement as everyone thought long and hard about their answer.

“Taylor’s pregnant again,” Eagle blurted.

Everyone turned to stare at him in disbelief.

“Damn, man,” Bull said.

“I know—we didn’t plan it, but we got careless one night, and that was all it took,” Eagle said a little sheepishly. “Kevin went down early that night, and we hadn’t spent a lot of time together for a few days, and one thing led to another . . .”

“Congratulations!” Smoke said, laughing.

“Yeah, that’s awesome. How far along is she?” Gramps asked.

“Not even six weeks yet, so it’s still really early. But we’re cautiously excited about it,” Eagle said. “So if Willis called and said we needed to ship out tomorrow, I’d have big-time reservations about it.”

“Skylar and I don’t want children,” Bull said, “but after seeing the absolute hell Molly went through when Smoke was hurt, I can’t imagine ever doing that to Skylar. I understand there are inherent risks to life in general, and I could be hit by a car tomorrow, but willingly putting myself in dangerous situations doesn’t seem like the best idea anymore.”

“I’ve lived my entire life helping others, with no second thoughts,” Gramps said. “I’m proud of what we’ve done in the



Army and what we've built here with Silverstone, but after wasting over two decades that I could've had with Cassidy if I'd been braver . . . it makes me less eager to risk my life to possibly miss out on more."

"Coming as close to dying as I did has changed my perspective too," Smoke added.

Gramps nodded. "It looks like we're all on the same page." He wasn't surprised. They'd done everything as a team. When they were younger, they'd partied together, they'd fought together on their Delta Force team, and they'd been all in when Willis had offered them the opportunity to form Silverstone and continue to serve their country in a different way. They'd also put everything they had into making Silverstone Towing a success, exceeding all of their expectations.

"Who's gonna tell Willis?" Smoke asked.

"I don't think we'll really need to. I think it's been more than obvious in recent months that our hearts haven't been in things. We've barely taken the time to sit down and discuss the cases he's sent us, and we certainly haven't been communicating with him about any of them," Eagle said with a shrug.

"I'll call him later today," Bull said.

"No time like the present," Gramps said.

The others all nodded.

"Let's do it," Smoke said.

Gramps got up and got the secure satellite phone they used to communicate with their FBI contact. He dialed Willis's number and put the phone in the middle of the table.

The phone rang several times before he picked up.

"Willis."

"It's Silverstone," Gramps said.

"Ah, it's good to hear from you. It's been a while," Willis said.

“We need to talk,” Bull said.

“I’m thinking I know what you want to tell me,” Willis replied a little dryly.

Gramps wasn’t surprised.

“Silverstone is retiring,” Smoke said firmly. He didn’t ask permission—he was simply informing Willis of their decision. “My daughter will be here soon, and Eagle’s wife is pregnant again. Gramps has an almost-teenage son to worry about now, and Bull has his family too.”

“How are you doing, Smoke?” Willis asked, not reacting to his statement.

“Good now,” he said. “You do understand what I just said, right?” he asked.

They all heard the FBI contact sigh on the other end of the line. “I do. I knew this was coming—I just hoped maybe I was wrong. You should all know, I fully understand. I regret being so focused on my work and not spending as much time with my own wife and daughter. I couldn’t even bother to take an afternoon off to go shopping with them when we were in Paris. Maybe if I had, they wouldn’t have been kidnapped. If I could go back, I’d do things differently. But I *can’t* go back. And I knew if you guys ever found women yourselves, things would change. I wish you all the best of luck.”

No one knew what to say. They all knew Willis’s story, how his wife and daughter had been murdered, which was why he was so determined to track down the worst of humanity.

“In the next few months, you’ll all find a token of your government’s appreciation for your service in your bank accounts. No, you can’t refuse it. It’s a done deal, and the money can’t be returned, so suck it up. And I know *you* don’t need the money, Smoke, but tough shit. Go buy your wife and daughter something pretty. Or you can all spend the money on some new tow trucks. I don’t care *what* you do with it . . . but you’re keeping it. Got it?”

All four men chuckled.

“Got it.”

“Understood.”

“Thanks.”

“Will do.”

“Thank you for your help,” Willis went on. “Seriously. You’ll never get awards or medals. No one will ever know what you’ve done. But it’s appreciated more than you know. When we hang up, this phone number will no longer be in use, and I won’t contact you again. Live your lives. Be happy, and be safe.”

And just as suddenly as the man had come into their lives, he was gone as the call ended.

Gramps took a deep breath and looked around at his friends. “I’m not sure whether to be pissed at him or relieved that it went so well.”

“Right?” Smoke asked.

“I suddenly feel as if the weight of the world has been lifted from my shoulders,” Bull said softly. “Am I the only one?”

“Nope,” Eagle said. “I mean, we’ve still got Silverstone Towing to run, and Lord knows it’s not easy. But I’m looking forward to figuring out how to be a ‘normal’ husband and father. Whatever that means.”

“Do you think we’ll miss it?” Gramps asked.

Smoke shrugged. “Yeah, I think sometimes we will. It felt damn good knowing we were taking out some of the worst criminals in the world. But last night, I was lying in bed next to Molly with my hand on her belly, and I felt my daughter moving. The feeling was almost overwhelming. Soon, I’ll have a little human being to raise. To guide and teach. To protect. That’s bigger and more important than anything else. It’s a huge responsibility, one I’m not sure I’m really ready for, but I’m willing to give it a shot with Molly by my side. And it’s something I almost missed out on.”

Gramps nodded. He felt the same with Mario. The boy wasn’t an infant, but Gramps had a feeling he could still help

by being a good influence in his life.

“You guys mean the world to me,” Bull said. “I love that we’ve expanded our team to include Skylar, Taylor, Molly, and Cassidy. And Kevin, Mario, and the two babies who will be coming in the next year. Our lives might be changing, but I have no doubt we’ll be kept on our toes. I’m proud to have served with all of you and hope we’ll be together for many decades to come.”

“You can’t get rid of us, man,” Smoke said.

“Nope. And you might not have kids of your own, but you should know that Taylor has been talking about making you and Skylar godparents to our children,” Eagle said.

Bull grinned. “Seriously? That’s awesome. I can’t wait until they’re older and we can spoil them rotten, stuff them full of sugar, then send them home so you can deal with them.”

“Asshole,” Eagle said without heat.

Gramps went over to the refrigerator in the corner of the room and pulled out four beers. It was a bit early in the day to be drinking, but it seemed the right thing to do. They all popped off the caps, and Gramps held up his bottle.

“To Silverstone Towing. And three of the best friends a man could ever have.”

“Cheers!” Smoke, Eagle, and Bull all said, clinking their bottles together.

It was a new beginning to an old friendship, and Gramps couldn’t wait to go home and tell Cassidy that she didn’t have to worry about him going on any more dangerous missions. He knew she’d thought about it, and talked about it with the other women. But none of them would have ever complained. They’d just smile and wish them luck, then stress the fuck out the entire time they were gone.

For the first time in years, Gramps was content. Life wasn’t perfect, but with Cassidy at his side, he had a feeling they could get through anything.

# Epilogue

## *One year later*

Gramps held his breath as he waited for Cassidy to walk down the aisle toward him. It wasn't much of an aisle, per se, just a strip of grass in the backyard of their house, but this was where Cassidy wanted to have their wedding ceremony, so this was where it was.

He'd asked her to marry him about six months ago. She and Mario had moved out of her apartment in Southpoint, and they'd settled in as if they'd been together forever. Mario hadn't had any issues adjusting and generally was an amazingly positive kid. He had his moments of moodiness, but Gramps loved being a father figure to him.

He looked over at Mario now, standing next to him as his best man. He looked older than his twelve years in his tuxedo, and Gramps couldn't help but smile at the sight of the bright-pink bow tie he'd insisted on wearing. He had a very unique style and didn't care what others thought about it.

Recently, one day after school, Mario had asked to speak to Gramps privately. He'd worried about what the boy wanted to talk about—until he'd blurted that he wanted to change his last name to Zanardi after he and Cassidy got married. Gramps couldn't remember ever being more touched.

Gramps thought Mario was done with their talk after requesting to change his name, but he surprised him by saying, "There's something else I want to tell you."

"You can tell me anything," Gramps said.

Mario shuffled his feet and looked down at the ground as he said, "I talked to Mom yesterday, but I wanted to tell you too." Then he looked up and met Gramps's gaze. "I'm gay."

The words were said with a combination of desperation, fear, and defiance that made Gramps's heart hurt. "I know," he told him.

Mario stared in surprise. “You do?”

Gramps laughed then. “Yeah.”

“And?”

“And what?” Gramps asked.

“Do you still love me?”

In response, Gramps reached out and embraced the boy he loved as if he were his own flesh and blood. “I’ll love you no matter what,” he said. “You’re my son in all the ways that matter. *Nothing* will ever change that.”

Mario’s eyes had watered, and Gramps could tell he was doing everything he could to keep from bursting into tears. “I love you too.”

Looking at Mario now, standing tall and confident, waiting for his cue for his part in the ceremony, Gramps couldn’t have been prouder.

His eyes wandered to the front row, and he smiled yet again at his soon-to-be mother- and father-in-law. Cassidy had convinced them to move to Indiana several months ago, and they were all extremely happy with the arrangement.

Next, Gramps lifted his chin in greeting at the large man sitting next to Cassidy’s mother. Big Red. The trucker who’d spotted Lloyd’s car. Gramps had tracked him down so he could thank him personally, and he and his wife had ended up being frequent guests at their house when Big Red wasn’t on the road. He owed the man everything.

His attention jerked back to the aisle when the wedding march sounded from small speakers that had been set up. Then he saw her.

Cassidy.

His woman.

The other half of his soul.

She was wearing a cream strapless dress that went down to her calves. It was formfitting at her torso and flared out at

the hips. Her hair was swept into a fancy updo, supporting the tiara Mario had insisted she had to wear.

The second her gaze met his, Gramps sighed in contentment. She looked carefree and happy. It was a look he wanted to see on her every day for the rest of their lives.

Mario stepped forward as Cassidy started walking. He met his mother halfway down the aisle and took her arm in his. Then the two most important people in his life made their way toward him, and Gramps couldn't help but wonder how he'd become so lucky. He'd gotten one hell of a second chance with Cassidy. He'd thought he was too old to find a woman who could put up with him. His only regret was that he hadn't gone back to claim her years ago.

The second Cassidy reached him and put her hand in his, everything within Gramps relaxed. She was here, and in a few minutes, she'd legally be his. Later that week, Mario would officially be his son.

This was the best week of his life, and Gramps couldn't stop smiling.

He didn't remember much of the ceremony. He knew he'd get shit about that from his friends later, but all he could do was look into Cassidy's hazel eyes and marvel at his luck. When it came time to kiss his bride, he had to laugh at the warning look Cassidy gave him.

Gramps tried to control himself; he didn't want to embarrass his wife in front of their friends. He bent her backward and kissed her quickly, but passionately. He kept her bent over his arm for a long moment, simply staring into her eyes. "Everything I've done, I've done for this right here. For the reward of having you here, wearing my ring and in my arms," he told Cassidy quietly.

She closed her eyes briefly, and when she opened them, they were full of tears. "I've loved you almost my entire life," she admitted. "But I think we both needed to live a bit before we could be together."

Gramps wasn't sure about that, but he was so grateful they were together now, he wasn't about to contradict her. He'd missed twenty years with her, but he was going to do everything in his power to make up for that in whatever years they had left together.

He pulled her upright, and they turned to face Shawn Archer, who'd battled with Bart for weeks to get the honor of being the officiant for their wedding. Mario stepped to his mom's other side and took her hand.

"May I present Cassidy, Mario, and Leo Zanardi!" Archer exclaimed happily as he gestured to the threesome.

Everyone burst into cheers, and Gramps knew he'd never forget the image of Cassidy smiling from ear to ear, their son at her side, as they walked back across his yard.

Later that night, after one hell of a party, Gramps stood on the edge of his backyard with Bull, Smoke, and Eagle. Their women were all sitting at a table nearby, laughing and gossiping. Skylar was holding Kevin, who'd zonked out a couple of hours ago. Molly had her little girl tucked against her chest, and Mario was in the yard dancing with Sandra.

Eagle had his newborn daughter in his arms, and Gramps couldn't remember ever being as relaxed as he was now. In the past, he'd always been keyed up. Ready for danger to strike. Ready for the phone to ring and for them to head off to the farthest edges of the earth to keep the world safe. Tonight, and for the last year, his biggest worries were making sure shifts at Silverstone Towing were staffed adequately and juggling his schedule with Cassidy's so they never missed one of Mario's many practices or performances, or driving him to one of his social outings.

"Do you miss it?" Bull asked, as if he could hear what Gramps was thinking.

"The excitement, adrenaline rush, and the euphoric feeling of knowing we had a hand in making the world a safer place?" Gramps asked.

"Yeah, that," Bull said with a laugh.



“Not at all. You guys?”

“Nope,” Smoke said.

“No,” Eagle agreed.

“I’m proud of what we did,” Bull said. “But I don’t miss it. I’m more than content to drink a few beers with my best friends and wonder how the hell the four of us ever conned our beautiful wives into loving us.”

Everyone chuckled.

“Every time I look at my kids, I can’t help but feel extremely grateful for you guys,” Eagle said.

“Same,” Smoke said, staring at his wife.

“I thought I was a badass,” Gramps said with a headshake. “I know how to kill someone a hundred different ways. But one word from Cassidy, and I’m putty in her hands.”

“And you love it,” Bull said, grinning.

“Fuck yeah I do. I don’t know what the future holds for us, but I do know that it’ll be good. That with all of you by my side, I feel as if I can do anything, get through any situation life might decide to throw my way. I love you guys. Seriously.”

Gramps didn’t know what had come over him. He and the others never really talked about their feelings for each other. They had a close bond, and they all knew it. But today, of all days, he felt the need to make sure Bull, Smoke, and Eagle all knew how much he loved them. How much he needed them in his life.

“Same,” Bull said quietly.

“Wouldn’t be able to do this family thing without you guys,” Smoke agreed.

“We’re in this thing together,” Eagle said.

Gramps smiled. He remembered Eagle saying the same thing when they’d first been put together as a Delta Force team. They’d vowed to have each other’s backs then, and even though everything had changed . . . nothing had changed.

“Gramps?” Smoke asked.

“Yeah?”

“What the fuck are you still doing here? Take your wife and leave already.”

Gramps chuckled. “Didn’t want to be rude, leaving my own party.”

“It’s your wedding night—I think we all understand,” Eagle said dryly.

“You sure you’re okay staying the night?” Gramps asked Bull.

“Of course.”

“Mario’s got dance practice early in the morning. He likes to be early so he can gossip with everyone. You’ll need to leave by eight, and wake him up by seven. He takes *forever* to get ready. Shit, better make that six thirty, because he’s gonna be a bear since it’s so late. He’ll need the extra thirty minutes to lie in bed and moan about how early it is. I’ve got his protein shake all made and in the fridge—”

“Gramps?” Bull interrupted.

“What?”

“Take your wife to the hotel, would ya? Skylar and I got this.”

Shaking his head and chuckling a little at himself, Gramps nodded. “Yeah, right. Thanks. It’s just that this is the first night we’ve been away from him in a very long time.”

“Go,” Smoke said. “We’ll help clean up here.”

“I’ve got a cleaning service coming tomorrow, so don’t worry too much about things,” Gramps said. Then he gave his friends a chin lift, kissed baby Alessa, who was sound asleep in Eagle’s arms, and headed for Cassidy.

She looked up as he approached, and he didn’t miss the flush on her cheeks.

“Ready to go?” he asked.

She nodded eagerly and stood without hesitation. Gramps mentally shook his head. He'd been giving her time to talk to the others, but it looked like she was just as anxious to leave as he was. She wrapped her arm around his waist and leaned into him.

Gramps whistled for Mario, and he came running over. He hugged his mom and Gramps and listened patiently as Cassidy told him to be good for Bull and Skylar. She was about to start in on tomorrow's schedule, but Gramps pulled her toward the house. "Time to go," he said firmly.

"Have fun!" Mario said, then turned to go back to where he'd left Sandra dancing on the lawn.

When they were on their way to the hotel, Gramps held Cassidy's hand tightly in his own. "So, Mrs. Zanardi, was it everything you wanted?"

"Yes. But even if we went to the courthouse and had a quickie wedding, it still would've been. Because I'm finally yours, and you're mine. That's all I ever wanted. Everything else—the party, our friends being there—was all icing on the cake."

"I love you. So much," Gramps told her.

"I love you too," Cassidy said. Then she chuckled.

"What?" Gramps asked.

"I was just remembering how nervous I used to be to make love with you when Mario was in the house."

"We've kinda gotten over that, huh?" Gramps said with a smile.

"Yeah, but I'm looking forward to tonight. To not being quiet."

The smile she shot him was carnal, and Gramps shifted in his seat. His cock was hard, and he couldn't wait to sink into her gorgeous, welcoming body. He pressed a little harder on the accelerator.

When she giggled, Gramps couldn't help but be thankful they were here. So many things could've gone differently in

their life journeys. Even changing one thing might've guaranteed they never would've met up again. He made a mental vow right then and there to never take his wife for granted and to do everything in his power to hear that giggle every day for the rest of his life.



### *Five years later*

Bull smiled up at his wife as she walked across the stage to accept her award. She'd been nominated as Teacher of the Year for her school district and had won. Then she'd been in the running for the same award, but for the entire state of Indiana. And she'd just learned she'd won that too.

The last five years had been hectic, but Bull couldn't remember ever being happier. Skylar loved teaching, and even though it was tough at times, his wife would never want to do anything else.

One of the best things about tonight's ceremony was that Sandra Archer was presenting the award. She was in middle school now, but she and Skylar were as tight as ever. They'd forged a bond that would never be broken when they'd relied on each other after being kidnapped.

Sandra's dad, Shawn, was still working at Silverstone, and had gotten married the year before to an absolutely drop-dead-gorgeous Sudanese woman named Khouidia. She had the darkest, most stunning skin Bull had ever seen; she literally seemed to glow. She and Shawn had met when he'd been hired to cater an exclusive event being held at the historic Tinker House in downtown Indianapolis. Apparently, he'd overheard one of the guests making a racist comment and called him out on it. He and Khouidia had started talking, and it turned out she'd just moved to the area with her son and was trying to find a good school for him.

Shawn had recommended Eastlake, and that was that. Sandra got along famously with her new brother, and now they both hung out at Silverstone Towing all the time. She was turning into quite the lovely young woman herself, and Bull could only laugh when Shawn bitched about all the hours she spent texting and talking to boys from her school.

Tonight, Sandra was wearing a dress that made her look older than her eleven years. She was even wearing a pair of one-inch heels, which she'd practiced walking in for at least two weeks, afraid she would fall on her face and embarrass herself at the ceremony.

Bull's eyes went back to his gorgeous wife. She'd spent the day at the salon with Taylor, Molly, and Cassidy. Her auburn hair cascaded down her back in lush curls. She wore more makeup than normal, and while Bull appreciated the striking look, he honestly preferred her natural beauty. She had on an emerald-green dress that matched her eyes perfectly. It was cut low in the front and back, making him want to slip his hand beneath the fabric to touch her warm, silky skin.

He'd kept his hands to himself thus far, but he knew the second he got her back to their bedroom, all bets were off. He might not even make it that long. Images of shoving the dress over her hips and bending her over their couch and taking her from behind flashed through his mind.

He blinked the image away, concentrating on Skylar as she smiled at the crowd from behind the podium. She held the trophy in hands that shook and took a deep breath.

Bull smiled, encouraging her as she began to speak.

"Thank you very much—I'm overwhelmed by this honor," Skylar said. "When I first got into teaching, I was frequently asked why I chose to work at Eastlake. Everyone told me how miserable I would be, how poor the area was, how the financial support from the district was extremely lacking. My answer to them was that I wanted to work in a school where I was truly needed. Where I would be appreciated. Where I could make a difference. The children who attend Eastlake are just as smart as those who attend the most expensive private schools—they just need someone to believe in them. Teachers who are willing to look past their families' bank accounts and do what they were hired to do . . . *teach.*

"Our children are the future. They'll be the ones to come up with the cure for cancer, they'll be the leaders in our

government, they'll be the men and women who show up at your house when your septic system has exploded and sewage is shooting out of your toilet.”

Everyone laughed at the imagery, and Skylar grinned, waiting for the commotion to die down before speaking again.

“Every child deserves to be treated as if he or she is the next Albert Einstein. They need to be told they're smart and capable and that they can be anything they want to be. A plumber, a rocket scientist, or even a stay-at-home parent. The world is their oyster, and I feel proud that I can help them start their journey toward what will hopefully be a long and rewarding life.

“I wish every teacher could receive this award. Teaching is hard. We spend long days and nights preparing our lessons, only to have to completely scrap our plans when learning opportunities arise that we hadn't counted on. Teachers are frequently yelled at, spit on, talked down to, and generally disrespected. And yet we go back, day after day. Why? For our kids. For our future. On behalf of every teacher, thank you very much for this honor today.”

Skylar nodded, and the room exploded in applause.

Everyone at the table with Bull stood up and gave Skylar a standing ovation. Eagle and Taylor, Smoke and Molly, Gramps and Cassidy. Skylar's parents. Shawn and Khoudia. Bull could see Skylar blushing from where he stood. He was so proud of and happy for her. She was doing what she loved, and being recognized for it was an extra blessing.

Later that night, after he'd done just what he'd fantasized about—bending her over their couch and fucking her hard and fast from behind—Bull carried his exhausted wife to their bedroom. After she'd washed her face clean and taken what seemed like hundreds of bobby pins out of her hair, he helped her get out of the dress. He watched as she stripped off her hose, skimpy panties, and bra. Shaking his head, he took off his own clothes and followed her back into their room. He crawled under the covers and took her into his arms.

He could feel her heart beating against his chest and closed his eyes in contentment. “Congratulations,” he said softly.

“Thanks. You know I couldn’t do it without you, don’t you?” she asked.

Bull snorted. “Whatever.”

“I’m serious. You make my life easy in so many ways, I can concentrate solely on teaching.”

Bull knew she was wrong, that she’d be an amazing teacher even if she hadn’t met him, but he also knew his wife was stubborn. She’d argue all night just to make her point if he didn’t agree with her.

“I love you, Sky.”

“I love you too. Thank you for being there tonight.”

“No way I would’ve missed it.”

“Carson?”

Bull smiled. He loved how she always said his name before she asked him something. “Yeah, sweetheart?”

She ran a fingertip over his chest in small circles and looked up at him shyly through her lashes. “You looked really handsome in your tux tonight.”

Bull felt his dick stir. Again. “Yeah?”

“Uh-huh. Are you tired?”

He smiled. It was a little surprising that Skylar was still shy after all these years, but it was just one of a million reasons he loved the woman. Somehow she’d kept her innocent air about her, even though he’d thoroughly debauched her time and time again. “You have something in mind?” he asked.

In response, Skylar sat up and straddled him. The blankets fell back, and Bull stared up at the most beautiful woman in all the world. His woman. His wife.

“I thought maybe if you were tired, I could do all the work.”

“Knock yourself out,” Bull told her.

They both knew by the time they came, she'd be under him, Bull having taken over. He couldn't help it. He loved when Sky took the reins, but he couldn't control himself when he saw her tits bouncing on her chest as she rode him.

Skylar got up on her knees and scooted back just a bit. She took his cock in her hand, and he was rock hard in seconds. Then ever so slowly, teasing them both, she took him inside her body. They both groaned when he was all the way in. Every time he took her, it felt like the first time. He had no willpower when it came to her.

“I love you,” she said as she slowly began to rock. “Best day of my life was when you showed up to tow my car.”

“That's my line,” Bull said. He put his hands on her hips and squeezed. He wasn't going to last long. Not tonight.

Within three minutes, Bull had spun them and was pounding in and out of Skylar. “So. Proud. Of. You,” he told her as he thrust.

“Love you,” she gasped back, wrapping her legs around his ass and locking her ankles together.

The second Bull felt her fly over the edge, he let himself go. Holding himself as deep inside her as he could, Bull saw stars as he orgasmed.

Flopping back to the bed, he barely kept himself from crushing her. Not wanting them to be separated, he rolled until she was lying on top of him once more. He put a hand on her ass and held her to him as they both panted and tried to catch their breath.

“Carson?”

“Yeah?”

“Love you.”

“Love you too.”



Within seconds, he felt Skylar's breaths even out. She was exhausted from a very long, exciting day, and Bull was more than happy to hold her close as she slept.

Smiling, he eventually fell asleep himself, happier than he'd ever been in his life.



### *Ten years later*

“Pass it to Alessa, Kevin!” Taylor called out.

“Easy, woman,” Eagle said with a chuckle. They were at their kids' soccer game, and Taylor always got a little crazy when she cheered them on.

The last ten years had been a mixture of pure terror and exhilaration. Taylor's entire pregnancy with Alessa had been touch and go. She'd started bleeding at three months, and they'd thought they'd lost her. But she'd hung in there, and the next six months had been extremely stressful.

Thank God for their friends. Skylar, Molly, and Cassidy had pitched in with Kevin, and when Taylor had been forced to go on bed rest, they'd practically taken turns living at their house, entertaining Taylor and helping her take care of their son.

When it was time for Alessa to be born, Eagle had never been so happy. But his joy had been short lived. Taylor had almost bled to death during the birth.

Now, thankfully, here they were, both his daughter and wife as healthy as they could be. They'd had high hopes Alessa would be as lucky as Kevin, that she wouldn't inherit her mom's condition, but that wasn't the case. It'd been obvious from almost the first week that Alessa didn't recognize either of her parents.

Taylor had been heartbroken, while Eagle had been determined to find ways for Alessa to “know” her parents. Every time he went into her room, he hummed the same song, “To Make You Feel My Love.” It seemed to embody what he felt when he looked down at his baby girl's perfect face. Because Taylor had been breastfeeding at the time, he also

made sure to grab one of her worn shirts to throw over his shoulder before he picked up Alessa.

It seemed to work. She'd cry and fuss right upon waking, but as soon as she heard her daddy's voice and got a whiff of her mommy's unique scent, she'd quiet right down. It hadn't been easy all the time, but Taylor had done her best to explain the condition as soon as she thought Alessa was old enough to understand, reassuring their daughter that her mommy had the same thing, and it was going to be okay.

Alessa and Kevin were close enough in age that they did just about everything together. Eagle and Taylor had talked it over, and ended up keeping Kevin back in school a year so he and his sister could be in the same class. Having her brother with her seemed to give Alessa the confidence she needed. And Kevin was extremely protective of his little sister, making it very clear that if anyone made fun of her or was mean to her in any way, they'd have to answer to him.

Eagle and Taylor weren't perfect parents, but he knew their kids felt safe, protected, and loved.

They'd also decided, after how hard Alessa's birth had been, to not have more children. Taylor had been disappointed, but she'd bounced back quickly, throwing herself into raising their two children the best she knew how.

And apparently that included making sure they were involved in every activity under the sun. Eagle wanted to complain, but secretly he loved watching his kids run, jump, swim, draw, act, and whatever else they happened to be involved in at the moment.

No matter how many activities their kids were enrolled in, Eagle knew their favorite thing to do would always be playing pinball. He'd given in and bought an old *Star Wars* pinball machine for their house a few years ago. He and Taylor played all the time, and after watching them for a while, both Kevin and Alessa had wanted turns.

Kevin currently had the high score, with Alessa not far behind. The two kids were even better than their parents,

something that Eagle was proud as hell over, even though he bitched about it to his friends all the time.

“Did you see that?” Taylor exclaimed in a huff. “That boy totally cut Kevin off. Get him!” she yelled at Alessa. Their daughter’s brown curly hair was in disarray on her head, held off her face with a scrunchie. It was thick, like her mom’s, and Eagle guessed in a few years it would be both the bane of his daughter’s existence and her best feature. He knew because Taylor complained all the time about how long it took for her hair to dry and what a pain in the ass it was, but he couldn’t keep his hands out of it and couldn’t imagine her cutting it.

Eagle could only shake his head as Taylor ranted. He never would’ve expected it, but he knew where Kevin and Alessa got their competitive streaks.

“Go, go, go!” Molly yelled from next to him.

Well, maybe his kids’ competitive streaks weren’t *all* from their mom.

“Block him!” Cassidy yelled from the other side of Molly.

“Get a goal, and snacks are on me!” Skylar called out.

The women around him all laughed, and Eagle could only roll his eyes. Skylar and Bull took great delight in spoiling his kids. He claimed it drove him crazy, but secretly he loved it. Kevin and Alessa loved their “aunts and uncles” almost as much as they loved their parents. The entire gang hung out all the time.

They all used to go to the high school football games to watch Mario cheer, and they did their best to attend as many musicals, games, and activities as they could. The six men and women around him were truly his family. And Eagle knew he could count on them for anything, any time of the day.

“Go, Alessa!” Kelsy called out. She was Smoke and Molly’s daughter, and Alessa’s best friend. They’d been together practically since birth and were as different as night and day. Kelsy was outgoing and loved being the center of attention, while Alessa was content to hang back and take in her surroundings before joining in the activities. Part of that

came from her prosopagnosia, but with Kelsy's and her brother's help, she'd become more and more confident over the years.

Eagle was happy. More content than he'd ever thought he could be.

Leaning over, he kissed Taylor's temple.

Taylor glanced at him, and Eagle saw her eyes go to the faded scar on his forehead. He'd gotten it a decade ago when the serial killer who'd targeted his wife had forced their car to crash. For Taylor, it was a blessing. It gave her a way to recognize him even from across the room, something she wouldn't have been able to do otherwise because of her condition. For Eagle, it was a daily reminder every time he looked in the mirror of how precious life was. Seeing it made him mentally vow to do whatever it took to keep his wife and children safe from the evil in the world.

He'd spent years keeping other people safe, and now his entire mission in life was to raise his children to be thoughtful, kind, and decent human beings.

"What's wrong?" Taylor asked as she stared up at him.

"Nothing," Eagle told her.

"You only get that look when you're thinking too hard," she scolded lightly.

"I'm just wondering how I got so lucky," he said.

Taylor rolled her eyes. "How about you wonder what we're gonna feed these kids when they get home? You know as well as I do they're gonna be starved—and don't get fast food again. That stuff'll rot their bodies from the inside out."

Eagle chuckled. "Right. I'll make hamburgers. How's that?"

"Better than hot dogs," Taylor grumbled.

His wife hated hot dogs, but their kids loved them. She did everything she could to keep the things out of the house, but every now and then, Eagle would sneak them in as a treat for Kevin and Alessa. It wasn't as if they ate like shit—not at

all—but Taylor was determined to give them the best of everything, including the food they ate.

Just then, everyone around them started screaming, and Eagle looked up in time to see Alessa kick the ball into the net. The other team's goalie had made a dive for the ball but missed.

Kelsy and everyone else were jumping up and down, yelling in excitement, and Eagle was as proud as he could be when instead of joining in the celebration, his daughter went up to the goalie and patted the young man on the back. Only when he'd stopped scowling and smiled at her did she turn to her team and pump a fist in the air.

He and his friends had made sure everyone knew the meaning of being sportsmanlike, and the lectures had really sunk in. Or maybe it was just Alessa being who she was.

The game went on for another thirty minutes, and at the end, the score was twenty-two to eighteen, with their team winning. Soccer for preteens wasn't exactly up to professional standards, as there were more goals made than blocks, but it made for a fun, exciting game.

Kevin and Alessa ran off the field toward them, his son in front, leading the way as usual. Every time Eagle thought about how hard Alessa's life was with prosopagnosia—without her brother, she'd have a hard time even knowing which group of spectators were her parents and friends—it made him more determined to make sure his daughter felt loved and safe. Thinking about how his wife grew up feeling alone and being bullied *still* made him want to seriously hurt someone.

He squatted down and waited for his daughter to get close. Then he said, "Good game, Les." He always used her nickname when he greeted her, just so she'd know who he was.

Smiling, Alessa threw herself into his arms. Closing his eyes, Eagle soaked in the moment. He knew it was only a matter of time before his little girl grew out of needing his hugs. Before she decided he was annoying and didn't

understand her at all. He wasn't sure he was ready for the teenage years, but together, he and Taylor could get through anything.

"Good job!" Kelsy said, smiling at her friend. Alessa pulled out of Eagle's arms and hugged her friend.

"How about pizza?" Smoke asked the group.

Taylor opened her mouth to protest, but Eagle wrapped an arm around her chest from behind. "Shhhh," he said into her ear.

"But they had pizza yesterday," she protested.

"They did. But Smoke said he and Molly would be happy to look after Kevin and Alessa and bring them home after everyone eats," Eagle told her.

"You knew this when you suggested hamburgers?" she asked, trying to look mad.

Eagle nodded.

"And we aren't going with them?" Taylor asked, turning in his arms.

Eagle grinned suggestively. "Nope."

She opened her mouth to ask why, then closed it suddenly when it dawned on her what her husband had done. "Oh," she said.

"Yup. Oh. You ready to go?"

"Definitely," she said, snaking one hand down to his butt and squeezing.

"We're out of here," Eagle said suddenly, waving at their friends as he steered her toward the parking lot.

Laughter followed him, but he didn't care. Smoke and the rest of their friends were giving them at least an hour or so to themselves. He planned to take advantage.

Taylor leaned close and sniffed him as they walked toward their car. "You stink," she said.

"I do?"

“Yup. I think you need a shower.”

Eagle grinned. “Yeah? You gonna wash my back, flower?”

She smiled at him and hooked a finger in the belt loop at his back. “If you insist.”

“I insist,” Eagle said as he stopped at the passenger door of their car. He leaned down and kissed his wife, long and hard. He’d never get enough of her. No matter how old they got, he’d still want her as much as he did right this moment. She was his everything. He loved Kevin and Alessa, but he loved spending time alone with his wife too.

“Eagle,” Taylor said on a moan when he finally pulled back.

“Love you, flower. Now, get in the car so we can have our full hour before our hellions get home.”

She smiled up at him, and Eagle had never seen anything as beautiful in his entire life. He brushed her unruly curls back, away from her face, before reaching for the door handle. He kept his eyes on her gorgeous legs as she sat, then forced himself to shut the door.

As they drove home, Eagle caught a glimpse of the scar on his forehead in the rearview mirror. It reminded him once more of how lucky he was. How lucky *they* were.



### ***Fifteen years later***

Smoke stood against the wall with Bull, Eagle, and Gramps as they watched the frenzied activity currently happening in his living room. Tonight was prom night, and Kelsy, Alessa, and Kevin had all gathered at his house to take the obligatory before-prom pictures. Skylar, Taylor, Molly, and Cassidy—and the parents of the other children—were in their element, directing the ten boys and girls on where to stand and how to pose.

It was chaotic and loud . . . and Smoke wouldn’t have it any other way.

The last fifteen years had seemed to go by in the blink of an eye. When Kelsy had been born, he'd held her for hours, simply staring at his tiny daughter, so damn thankful he was there to hold her.

Being shot had scared him. Badly. He'd known his job could be dangerous, but he'd never really thought about dying. As he'd lain on the tarmac of that small airport all those years ago, he'd been terrified that he was about to leave Molly and his unborn daughter alone.

Quitting Silverstone hadn't been a hard decision. Not at all. Not when he'd gazed down at Kelsy and seen how fragile and vulnerable she was. And Molly. Now, the thought of not having these last fifteen years with them was unbearable.

They'd laughed, cried, fought, made up, and lived their lives to the fullest. Kelsy was their only child, but sometimes it felt as if Kevin and Alessa were theirs too. They slept over at their house almost as much as they did their own. The children were three peas in a pod.

"Mom, enough!" Kevin told Taylor with a low growl that reminded Smoke of his father.

"Never," Taylor fired back. "You're gonna want these pictures later."

It was somewhat amusing that Taylor was the one all fired up to take a gazillion pictures, considering she couldn't recognize anyone in them, save for her son. But that didn't keep her from documenting almost every second of her children's lives.

"They look amazing," Bull said from next to him.

Smoke nodded, but he wasn't looking at the teens. He only had eyes for his wife. Molly had aged extremely well. He actually loved the small wrinkles around her eyes and mouth, because they meant she laughed and smiled all the time. He could still remember the moment he fell on top of her in that hole in Africa. She'd been disheveled and dirty as hell, but he'd been immediately struck by her composure. Her strength.



And she'd shown him that strength time and time again in the last fifteen years, but never more so than when she had been pregnant, and while he had still been recovering from his gunshot wounds.

"One more group picture!" Molly ordered the teenagers.

The group of friends all lined up in front of the fireplace and smiled for the cameras pointed their way. The five young men and five young women looked much older than their fifteen and sixteen years.

"We did good," Eagle said quietly from Smoke's other side.

Without looking away from the group, Smoke agreed. "We did."

Then it was more controlled chaos as the kids all headed for the door and the huge limo that was waiting in the driveway. Smoke had insisted on renting the monstrosity for the kids because he didn't want anyone making a dumb decision to drink and drive. He'd spoken to Kelsy about being smart when it came to drinking and drugs, but she was still a teenager. He didn't want any impulsive decision she might make to ruin the rest of her life. The limo would stay the entire night and take all the kids home when the dance ended. It was a small price to pay for his peace of mind.

More pictures were taken of the group in front of the limo, and then suddenly they were gone. The other parents headed home, then it was just his friends and their wives.

"Prom was never like that when we were their age," Cassidy said with a sigh.

Gramps chuckled and wrapped his arm around his wife's shoulders. "You didn't even go to prom," he told her.

"Yeah, well, even if I *had* gone, it wouldn't have been like that," Cassidy retorted.

"I remember lots of hair spray and pictures, though," Molly said.

“I can’t remember much about the dance, since my date spiked my punch and I was completely hammered throughout most of it,” Skylar said.

“I never went to prom either,” Taylor said with a shrug.

“You didn’t miss much,” Eagle reassured her. “Loud music, everyone attempting to dance but looking more like they were having convulsions on the dance floor. Bullshit prom king and queen ceremonies. The best part was *after* prom.”

Everyone laughed.

“You sure you’re okay with Kelsy crashing at your place tonight after the dance?” Smoke asked Eagle and Taylor.

“Of course,” Taylor said. “She and Alessa are gonna be pretty hyped up and will want to talk about everything that went on. I’ll bring her by after breakfast tomorrow.”

“So around two in the afternoon?” Molly quipped.

“Pretty much,” Taylor agreed with a smile.

“Thanks for coming over,” Smoke told Bull, Skylar, Gramps, and Cassidy. Mario had long since graduated high school and college, and was currently living and working in New York City. He was determined to earn a spot in one of the huge Broadway shows. And Bull and Skylar didn’t have children of their own.

“Wouldn’t have missed it,” Gramps told him.

“If you think I was going to miss prom night, you’re crazy,” Skylar said with a wide smile.

Molly gave each of her friends a hug, and Smoke gave the guys a chin lift as they all headed for their vehicles.

He stood on the front porch with Molly as they watched everyone head out. When it was just the two of them, Molly sighed.

“What’s wrong?” Smoke asked.

“Nothing. Everything’s perfect,” she told him. “I’m just already dreading the time in the near future when we don’t

have this anymore.”

“Have what?” Smoke asked.

“This. Chaos. Noise. Crazy,” Molly said.

Smoke turned them and headed back inside. He looked around and understood what his wife was talking about. The great room looked like a tornado had hit it. Chairs were out of place, pillows were on the floor, champagne glasses they’d filled with orange juice for pictures were everywhere. He could barely remember what his house had looked like when it had just been himself living there. But he did recall that it had seemed big and cold. And empty.

Molly had not only filled his heart, she’d filled his home too. With her love and energy. Memories of her were embedded in every nook and cranny of their house.

Looking at the kitchen, he remembered the day Molly had learned her book about her time in captivity in Nigeria had been picked up by one of the Big Five publishers. She’d been cooking dinner and had absently checked her email.

They’d been sitting on the couch when she’d gotten word that the book had hit the *New York Times* bestsellers list.

He’d been in his office when she’d come to the doorway and informed him that her water had broken and they needed to get to the hospital.

The easy chair she’d spent many an hour in, rocking and feeding Kelsy. The dining room table she’d insisted on eating at every night when Kelsy was younger. The laundry room where they’d snuck off to have sex when Kelsy was sleeping in the living room, and they’d been scared of waking her up if they moved her.

Sleepovers, Halloween, Christmas mornings, birthday parties, tears, tantrums . . . he was a blessed man, and he knew it.

“I’m kind of afraid to go upstairs and look into Kelsy’s room,” Molly said with a small laugh.

Smoke nodded. It would likely be a disaster. Alessa had come over to get dressed here, and he knew from experience the two girls weren't exactly neatniks.

"Later," he said firmly, pulling Molly toward the laundry room.

"What are you doing?" Molly asked, but she didn't try to pull away.

Smoke shut the door behind them and backed Molly up against the counter along one wall.

"Mark?" she asked, her brows furrowing in confusion.

"When's the last time we snuck in here to make love?" he asked.

Her confusion cleared. "Um . . . eight years ago?" she said with a laugh.

"Exactly. I've missed this place," Smoke told her, looking around and smiling.

Molly's hand came up, and she caressed his cheek, running her thumb over his dimple. "I love you," she said softly. "I know I'm not the easiest person to live with, but you never even blink when I get in one of my moods or when I'm being crazy."

"I love your crazy," Smoke told her honestly. "You've kept me on my toes for fifteen years, and I expect you to keep doing so for the next thirty."

"We aren't as young as we used to be," she told him. "I'm not sure washer sex is gonna work anymore."

In response, Smoke reached for the fastening of her jeans. He undid the button and zipper and pushed the denim and her panties down until they fell around her ankles. "Hop up," he ordered.

Smiling, Molly did as he requested, and he helped her sit on the counter sans pants. She winced at the coldness of the granite under her ass, but Smoke didn't hesitate to do what he'd been thinking of all night.

His wife made him feel as if he was perpetually fifteen. He wanted her every minute of every day. Simply seeing her laugh at something made him hard. He knew more than most men what he'd almost lost, and it was as if his body was still determined to make the most of his second chance.

Pushing her legs apart, Smoke leaned down. Unfortunately, Molly was right—sex on the counter in here probably wasn't something they could do comfortably anymore. It took him longer to orgasm, and he preferred for her to be in their soft bed while he took her anyway. He never wanted to hurt her.

But Smoke knew he could get her off without too much difficulty. She loved having his hands and mouth on her body, and never failed to orgasm when he went down on her.

“Mark,” she halfheartedly protested. “We need to clean up.”

“Tomorrow,” he said absently, licking one of her inner thighs. When she spread her legs open to give him better access, Smoke smiled. God, he loved her. She was perfect for him in every way.

Forty minutes later, they were in their bed, his clothes and her shirt thrown haphazardly on the floor, and he was deep inside the woman he loved more than life itself. As he lazily made love to her, he looked into her eyes.

Her pupils were dilated, and she clenched his cock tightly every time he pulled out of her.

“I love you,” he said softly.

“Love you,” she panted in response. “Harder, Mark. Please.”

He wasn't the kind of man who liked to hear his wife beg for anything, so he immediately obliged. Giving her what she wanted. Needed.

Truth be told, as much as Smoke loved his daughter, and loved the craziness of their life, he was looking forward to being an empty nester. He liked spending time with Molly. Liked when it was the two of them and they sat around talking

about anything and everything. He had no idea what life would bring them in the future, but as long as she was by his side, he didn't care.

Leaning up on one hand, Smoke freed the other so he could reach between them. He knew as soon as he began stroking her clit, Molly would go off like a rocket. He began to play with her, and before long, she threw her head back and arched. Her nails dug into his biceps, and she began to tremble.

The second her body flew over the edge, Smoke began to take her hard. Within thirty seconds, he groaned as he filled his wife with his come. Every time seemed as if it was the first. He loved her more than he had yesterday, and tomorrow he'd find that he loved her more than he did today.

Rolling over, Smoke pulled a slightly sweaty and exhausted Molly into his arms. Her warm breaths puffed against his shoulder, and as they did most nights, her fingers went to the faint scar on his side where he'd been shot fifteen years ago.

"Love you, Mark. Thanks for not dying."

She said that almost every night too.

"Thanks for not giving up on me," he replied, as *he* did every night.

Then she sighed deeply and completely relaxed against him. Smoke loved this part of their day. When Molly gave him all of herself, and he could simply lie in the darkness and hold her tight. It was a time to reflect on what a lucky son of a bitch he was.

He'd done things in his life he wasn't proud of, but he'd do them all again if it meant he'd end up here. With the woman he loved safe in his arms and his daughter happy and healthy.

"Sweet dreams," he whispered to Molly, closing his eyes and letting sleep overtake him, content in the knowledge that all was right in his world.



### *Twenty years later*

Cassidy knew she had a huge stupid smile on her face, but she couldn't help it. Leo had brought her to New York City so they could watch Mario's Broadway debut. He'd done a lot of different things in his life thus far, but this was perhaps one of the most important to him.

He'd gotten interested in theater in high school, especially musicals. He couldn't sing worth a darn, but her son could definitely dance. His interest in gymnastics and cheerleading had eventually morphed into an obsession with hip-hop dancing. He'd watched YouTube videos of Shakira, Jennifer Lopez, and other famous singers, and learned the routines of the backup dancers. When he'd graduated from high school, he'd chosen to go to New York for college.

Cassidy had been heartbroken, but she'd done her best to hide it. She and Mario had been together just about every day of his entire life, and when he'd moved so far away, it had felt as if a part of her had been ripped from her chest.

But she'd also been proud of him. He'd come so far from the shy, awkward eleven-year-old he'd been when she'd first reunited with Leo. And she attributed so much of his self-confidence to her husband and their friends.

They'd stood up for him when he'd been bullied. Taught him to love himself exactly the way he was. And she would always believe he'd done as well as he had because of the honest and true love Leo showed him day in and day out. Leo didn't care that he was gay. That he liked pastel colors, sometimes wore nail polish, and would rather spend the day watching reruns of *Gilmore Girls* than football.

Mario had struggled a bit with finding a partner, like most people did, but three years ago, he'd finally settled down with a man who reminded Cassidy a lot of Leo. He was tall and gruff, but whenever he looked at her son, she saw deep respect and love in his eyes. And he was protective, too, which Cassidy loved. Mario was always mock complaining that Roberto didn't even think he should walk to the theater by

himself, so he accompanied him to and from work every single day.

Tonight was Mario's debut in a highly anticipated Broadway show that had gotten amazingly good reviews from the early critics. He wasn't the star, but he did have a main part. He'd explained it to her and Leo by comparing his role to that of one of the monkeys in *Wicked*. He was in quite a few scenes, dancing and acting, but not speaking. It was the culmination of years of hard work, and Cassidy was so proud of him she could burst.

And not only had Cassidy and Leo traveled to New York to see Mario's debut, but their entire clan had decided to come as well. Bull, Skylar, Eagle, Taylor, Smoke, and Molly were all there. Eagle and Taylor's children, Alessa and Kevin, were in the middle of the semester at Purdue University back in Indiana, and Kelsy, Smoke and Molly's daughter, had wanted to come, but the rocket club she was involved in was having a test flight she couldn't miss.

"Do you think he's nervous?" Skylar asked as she leaned over Leo to speak to Cassidy.

She chuckled. "He said he's not, but I know him. He's probably freaking out."

"He'll be fine," Leo said firmly.

"He's gonna rock it," Molly agreed from Cassidy's other side.

Looking at her friends, Cassidy couldn't stop smiling. The last two decades had been amazing. Filled with ups and downs, but more laughter and comradery than pain. It was as if fate had done its best to make up for Cassidy's first forty years by surrounding her with love and happiness for the second part of her life.

Cassidy wished that her parents could be here right now. Her mom had passed two years ago, and her dad had died last year. It was as if he couldn't bear living without his Alice. Before passing, Cassidy's mom had told her how proud she was of her, and how thankful she was to have gotten to spend



so much time with her and her grandson. Cassidy couldn't help but be sad that her parents weren't here to see Mario kick some Broadway ass.

As if he could read her mind, Leo took hold of her hand and intertwined his fingers with hers. He held on tightly as the lights began to dim. Cassidy's heart beat hard in her chest, and she had a cheesy smile on her face, but she didn't care.

Two and a half hours later, Cassidy was still smiling. Mario had been amazing. The musical had been entertaining and funny, and she suspected it would be a huge hit. She was so proud of her son. Who would've thought twenty-one years ago, when they were being held captive in Jamaica, that this would be his life? Or hers?

It took a while for Mario to appear from backstage, but when he did, he made a beeline for his mom. Cassidy could only laugh as he hugged her, then picked her up and spun her in a circle. The joy on his face was the best gift Cassidy could've ever received.

Then he turned to Leo and gave him a huge hug as well before embracing the others. Molly, Taylor, Eagle, Smoke . . . everyone got a hug. Roberto stood off to the side, simply watching Mario with a proud smile on his face.

They all went out to a local hole-in-the-wall gay bar that Mario and Roberto frequented. The food was good, and the mood was festive.

It was two thirty in the morning before Cassidy and Leo made their way back to their hotel room. Leo opened the door and held it as she stepped inside. Feeling hyped up and not the least bit tired, Cassidy walked over to their balcony and went outside. Leo had splurged and gotten a room that overlooked Times Square. The neon lights were bright, and even at this hour of the morning, the place was hopping.

She felt Leo's arms snake around her waist as he stepped up behind her.

"Happy?" he asked.

"Ecstatic," Cassidy said on a sigh.

Over the years, she and Leo had traveled a bit. They'd had their first fight when Cassidy had wanted to do something new and different, begging Leo to take her to Uganda to see the gorillas, but he'd refused.

Cassidy had pouted and complained, even accusing him of never wanting to go anywhere.

She'd never forget what he said in response.

“Cass, when we got married, I promised to take care of and protect you for the rest of our lives. I've been to many places in this world that from the outside looking in seem perfectly safe. The tourist brochures show scantily clad women lying on beaches drinking fruity frozen drinks and looking perfectly relaxed. But what they *don't* show is the underbelly of evil that might reside there. It's often a facade, and no matter how much you beg, I refuse to take you anywhere you could come face to face with that evil. Evil I've seen firsthand. You've already seen more than your fair share of it, and I'm not willing to risk your life for a bit of fun and sun.”

She got it then. As well as she knew Leo, there would be parts of his life she'd *never* know about. The places he'd been, the people he'd taken out. He was protecting her the best way he knew how. Cassidy could have argued countries that might've been dangerous two decades ago weren't necessarily dangerous today, but his own experiences would tell him differently.

So she'd accepted the fact that she and Leo would never be world travelers, and honestly, that was all right with her. They'd been to Hawaii, which she'd loved, but she hadn't had any desire to set foot in the Caribbean ever again. Even Florida seemed to be too close to the hell she'd escaped. So they vacationed in Alaska, and they'd traveled all over the United States and Canada. One year, Leo had taken her and Mario to Finland to see the northern lights. It had been cold as hell, but he'd rented a glass igloo, and the three of them had stayed up almost all night, talking and watching as the night sky lit up around them.

Leo was protective, but Cassidy didn't mind. He wasn't overbearing—most of the time—and she always knew she was loved and missed when she wasn't with him. No matter where they traveled, he was constantly on the lookout for anyone or anything amiss. One year, when they were in New York visiting Mario, she'd wanted to go shopping on her own, and Leo had refused to let her. She'd been irritated with him then, too, but after he'd told her the story of an FBI agent who'd let his wife and daughter go shopping in Paris without him, and how they'd been kidnapped and murdered, she'd relented. Having Leo tag along wasn't a hardship, and honestly, she always felt safer when he was around.

She'd just learned over the years that she'd have to order most of his birthday, anniversary, and Christmas presents online.

“What are you thinking about?” Leo asked quietly from behind her.

Cassidy sighed, then turned in his arms. He clasped his hands together at the small of her back, and she leaned into him, loving how perfectly she still fit against him, even after all these years. “Just how wonderful tonight was,” she told him.

“It was, wasn't it?” he asked.

“Being with you, surrounded by our friends, seeing Mario doing something he loves, and being with people who like and respect him exactly how he is . . . twenty-one years ago, I couldn't have pictured this was how my life would be right now.”

Leo leaned down and kissed her forehead. She laid her head on his shoulder, and they swayed back and forth. Not quite dancing, but not standing still either.

Then Cassidy smiled. She loosened her hold and slowly sank to her knees in front of him.

“Cass?” he asked, furrowing his brow.

She smiled as she began to work the button of his slacks. She was still wearing the black sequined dress she'd bought

especially for tonight. She and her friends had gone all out, dressing up in fancy gowns, having their hair and makeup professionally done, and getting manicures and pedicures as well.

“We’re outside,” Leo warned.

“I know,” she said as she slipped her hand inside his boxers and began to stroke him.

She watched as Leo looked around them, then back down at her. “Your dress stays on. There are way too many windows around us.”

Cassidy loved this man. So damn much. He didn’t give a shit if anyone saw his dick, but he wasn’t going to allow anyone to see *her* naked.

Lowering her head, she got to work pleasuring her husband. She didn’t go down on him often, mostly because he was too impatient to get inside her. So she took her time, loving the feel of Leo growing hard in her mouth. It wasn’t long before one hand tangled in her fancy hairdo, most likely messing it up beyond repair, and the other caressed her shoulder as she went down on him.

She knew he wouldn’t let her take him all the way. He liked to come inside her, and since he was old enough to only be able to orgasm once a night, he didn’t like for her to finish him off this way. All too soon, he’d stepped back from her and taken hold of her arm. He helped her up and hauled her into the hotel room.

“Off,” he ordered, nodding to her clothes.

Smiling coyly, Cassidy stripped. Peeling her dress off slowly. Then the thigh-high hose she wore. Then the black panties and bra. She wasn’t as young as she used to be, and her body was sagging in places more than she liked, but the look Leo was giving her was just as impatient and hot as it had been on their wedding night twenty years ago.

Their loving wasn’t quite as energetic as it had been fifteen or twenty years ago, but it was still just as pleasurable. They’d gotten to know each other’s bodies quite well over the

years and knew just where to stroke, to lick, to caress to make each other moan in ecstasy.

Cassidy's orgasm wasn't explosive this time—it came upon her slowly, but it was no less satisfying than the hard-and-fast ones Leo had given her in the past. He smiled down at her, then threw his head back and came himself. They didn't make love every night anymore, but that was okay. Cassidy still slept snuggled up against her husband every night. It was one of her favorite things to do—to simply be near him.

Leo got up to get a wet washcloth, as he did every time they made love, and waited while she cleaned herself. Then he took the cloth back to the bathroom. He pulled her into him after he'd crawled back in bed, and Cassidy sighed in contentment.

“Roberto looked so proud of Mario tonight,” she murmured.

“As well he should've been,” Leo responded.

“They're good together,” Cassidy said.

“They are.”

“I'm glad he found someone who loves him like you love me,” Cassidy told him, tilting her head up so she could look into Leo's eyes. “I wish I could make you understand how much I adore you.”

He chuckled. “It can't be more than I love you.”

They'd had this argument many, many times, and it never failed to make her smile. “Thank you for being you,” she told him.

Leo nodded. “Go to sleep, love. We've got to get up fairly early, especially considering how late it is right now, to meet the others for brunch. Are you sure you want to go watch Mario again tomorrow night?”

“Yes,” Cassidy said immediately. She'd watch Mario perform every night if she could. But eventually, she and Leo and their friends would go back to Indianapolis. The four friends still owned Silverstone Towing, but they were in

negotiations to sell it to Sandra Archer and her husband. The little girl had grown up in the garage, and even after getting her MBA degree, she'd stayed close. She knew everything about the business, and Leo and his friends couldn't imagine selling it to anyone who would love it more.

"How'd I know you were going to say that?" Leo said with a small chuckle. "It's a good thing I already got us seats."

"Thank you for humoring me," she told him.

"I love watching him perform too," Leo reminded her. "I went to every one of his recitals and performances in middle and high school."

"And we went to as many as we could get to when he was in college," Cassidy reminisced. "Are you sorry we never had a kid of our own?" she asked quietly.

"What? No! First of all, you would've been at a very high risk if you'd tried to have a baby in your forties. I know it happens, but I didn't want to take any chances with your health. Second of all, Mario *is* my kid. I may not have met him until he was eleven, but that doesn't mean I love him any less."

Cassidy nodded against his chest. That was true. Leo was more of a dad than his own father had been.

"What brought this on?" Leo asked.

Cassidy shrugged. "I don't know. I just sometimes feel as if I've taken more from you than I've given back in return."

"Listen to me," Leo said sternly. "You've given me *everything*. Without you, I was just going through the motions of life. In the last twenty years, I've laughed more, *felt* more, than I did the previous forty-five. You've given me a son, and I can't imagine going through one day without you by my side. The only thing I regret with regard to our relationship is not having the balls to claim you when I was eighteen and you were fifteen. We could've had so much more time together. But you're mine now, and I'm yours. We're making the most of the time we have left. Understand?"

Cassidy smiled. "Understand," she told him.

“Crazy woman,” Leo muttered under his breath as he hugged her to him once more. “If I was any happier, I’d be locked up in the loony bin.”

“There aren’t loony bins anymore,” Cassidy informed him. “And that’s a derogatory term nowadays.”

“Sleep, Cass. I mean it.”

He tried to sound stern, but Cassidy simply shook her head. “Okay.” A few minutes went by, then Cassidy said, “I like us. I like how we are together. I like our laid-back life that many people would probably say was boring. I like our friends, and I like how much time we spend together. Thank you for giving me this life, Leo.”

In response, Leo merely kissed the top of her head. But she’d felt his breath hitch and knew he was doing his best to hold back his emotions. She loved him all the more for it.

Leo might be in his sixties, but she had no doubt he could still protect her from anyone who might want to do her or Mario harm—and look damn good doing it too. But he wasn’t so macho that he couldn’t tell her that he loved her, or get choked up when she got too mushy.

Taking a deep breath and releasing it slowly, Cassidy let herself relax.

Life was crazy. Full of ups and downs. It wasn’t easy, was damn hard a lot of the time. But she’d learned over the years that she was stronger than she’d ever thought she could be. She’d made mistakes, but she’d learned from them and done her best to stay positive. She didn’t know how much longer she had to live, but she was determined to eke out every morsel of happiness from every day.

She’d continue to do so at brunch with her Silverstone family tomorrow.

Cassidy fell asleep with a smile on her face, contentment in her soul, and a bone-deep knowledge that no matter what tomorrow might bring, she’d get through it with her friends and family at her back.

Thank you for reading the Silverstone series! If you haven't read the Mountain Mercenaries by Susan Stoker, check out book one, *Defending Allye*.



# About the Author



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Susan Stoker is a *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author whose series include *Badge of Honor: Texas Heroes*, *SEAL of Protection*, and *Delta Force Heroes*. Married to a retired army noncommissioned officer, Stoker has lived all over the country—from Missouri and California to Colorado and Texas—and currently resides under the big skies of Tennessee. A true believer in happily ever after, Stoker enjoys writing novels in which romance turns to love. To learn more about the author and her work, visit her website, [www.stokeraces.com](http://www.stokeraces.com), or find her on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/authorsusanstoker](http://www.facebook.com/authorsusanstoker).

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