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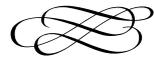


Endless Whispers

*Barrington Billionaires Series
Book Seventeen*



ENDLESS WHISPERS



DANIELLE STEWART



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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Books in the Barrington Billionaire Synchronized World](#)

[Also by Danielle Stewart](#)

[Foreign Editions](#)

[Newsletter Sign-up](#)

[Author Contact Information](#)

ENDLESS WHISPERS

In the heart-pounding seventeenth novel of the Barrington Billionaires series, Mick, a seasoned operative with the skills to masterfully manipulate his surroundings, finds himself in a perilous game. His life is a delicate balance of secret missions and moments of stillness.

Two years have passed since Mick's last contact with Charlize, his former partner and the woman who once held his heart. Things ended terribly between them but now they have no choice but to give it another try.

Charlize, donning a new identity, infiltrates a nefarious organization. This group preys on vulnerable individuals, promising them salvation but ensnaring them in a web of exploitation. With Mick by her side, they aim to dismantle the organization from within, exposing the truth behind its charitable facade.

In this electrifying thriller, can Mick and Charlize stay alive long enough to rewrite their story?

CHAPTER 1



MICK

There was a way to turn off the senses. He'd mastered it. A therapist might call it something technical like disassociating. But for him it was a way of managing the waiting. This job had its share of sitting around. Orders would come in. People to be followed or watched. Maybe someone higher up the chain would change their mind about the timeline of a mission and things would shift dramatically. The brakes would be metaphorically pumped.

When that happened, he'd click his brain off. Right now the television was on but he couldn't make out what it was saying. The faint smell of bacon wafted to his balcony from the breakfast place downstairs. Maybe birds chirped or a breeze blew but he wouldn't let that in. If he did, he'd remember what he was waiting for. Who he was waiting for. And that would be a bad thing.

Charlize hadn't spoken to him in two years. They'd both worked hard to make sure their paths didn't cross. In a job that took them all over the world, it was easy to avoid each other. Carmen probably meant well. She likely thought enough time had passed that the two could have some sort of amicable working relationship. Poor thing. She had no idea how irreparable the damage had been.

Mick knew he could stop glancing down from the balcony, wondering if the next person rounding the corner might be Charlize. She wouldn't come. She would never work with him again. Not after last time.

But the one thing Charlize always loved was proving him wrong. As he continued to stare onto the bustling street below, his attention was suddenly drawn to a figure walking toward his building. At first, it was just a silhouette, a distant memory that couldn't possibly be real. But as the figure drew closer, Mick's heart quickened the way it always did when he saw Charlize.

There, on the sidewalk below, stood the woman he once called his partner. Best friend. Confidant. And now, stranger.

He was grateful for the chance to see her before she got a look at him. Drinking in every inch of her, he realized she hadn't aged a day since the last time he'd seen her; her golden hair still shimmered in the bright sunlight. Dressed in a sleek, black trench coat and sunglasses, she exuded an air of confidence that had always drawn him in. No one messed with Charlize and lived to tell. That was how she carried herself and when pressed how she handled things.

Mick's mind raced, his senses suddenly fully engaged. Carmen's words echoed in his mind, but he couldn't fathom the idea that Charlize would be willing to work with him again after what had transpired during their last mission.

As Charlize neared the entrance of his building she looked up in his direction and their eyes locked for a fleeting moment; it was as though time stood still. Of course she spotted him. She knew his habits. He'd have the high ground. She didn't smile, blink too hard, or flinch at all. Nothing on her face changed even slightly as she looked at him. That hurt more than if she'd flipped him off.

Mick felt a jolt of electricity shoot through him, a mixture of longing and regret. He couldn't help but remember the times they had shared, the moments of intense connection and passion.

Before he could gather his thoughts and decide how to react, Charlize entered the building and disappeared from his view. She was coming up. For a brief second he contemplated how hard the hit would be if he jumped from the balcony and ran away. A busted ankle maybe. Some scrapes for sure. But

that might be a gift compared to what Charlize could do to him.

Standing, he peered over the balcony's edge one more time then down on the files Carmen had given him. This job was something different. A whole new challenge. Maybe that was why Charlize was here too. It mattered more than their past. Or maybe she was here to fight him to the death. That was also a possibility. Flashes of all their shared history had whispered endlessly through his mind for the two years they'd been apart. And now, the whispers turned to shouting. Maybe they were saying: Jump.

CHAPTER 2



CHARLIZE

Kicking the door would have matched her feelings, but instead Charlize knocked. Maybe she pounded. It was somewhere between the two.

“Uh, yeah hang on.” Mick’s voice was uneasy and she was glad for that. Let him be back on his heels, unsure what she might do to him when they finally saw each other again. In fairness, she didn’t know either. Maybe she’d ice him out with stifled answers and cold looks. Or maybe she’d punch him in the throat. It could go either way.

When he finally pulled the door open, his eyes darted down the hallway to make sure she wasn’t followed, then he ushered her quickly inside.

“We’re not on duty,” she cut out quickly. “No one is following me. I know how to handle myself.”

“Yeah, of course. Sorry. Old habit.” He gestured to the non-descript couch in the middle of the living room. This was furnished corporate housing. The Kinross family owned hundreds, maybe thousands of these kinds of places all over the world. When they weren’t needed for people like Charlize and Mick to do work, they served as exactly what they were. Temporary housing for relocated employees starting out in a new city.

Today it was the location of a hostile meeting, and Charlize was going to make sure it was a meeting that wouldn’t last long.

“I didn’t know you’d be working on this until five minutes ago,” she asserted angrily. “Carmen blindsided me.”

“I understand if you want to go.” He gestured to the door and she found his dismissal infuriating. He should be groveling. Begging for her forgiveness. He looked nervous but not sorry.

“That’s all you have to say to me?” She propped her hand up on her hip and squeezed at her own bone in an effort to keep from squeezing his neck until he apologized.

“I told Carmen you’d never work with me. I tried to explain this was a bad idea.” He tossed his hands up in defeat.

“It’s a terrible idea. Disastrous. This type of work can only be done with complete trust, and you’ve lost mine. I’ll never partner with you again.”

“You don’t trust me?” He huffed out the words and she was taken aback by his reaction. She’d expected to at least get him to admit he was to blame. “More like I shouldn’t trust you. We were a team and you went rogue. You should have looped me in. But that’s not how you roll, right? It’s all about a team of one with you.”

“Loop you in?” She jabbed a finger in his direction. “You know there isn’t always time to communicate when shit is going down.”

“Bull, you knew what you were going to do long before you did it. You kept me in the dark because you knew I’d talk you out of it.” He puffed his chest out and waited for her to lie. She wouldn’t. It didn’t matter now anyway.

Instead, Charlize lowered her voice and sighed. “He was going to kill them all if I didn’t.”

“He nearly killed you.” Mick’s tone started rough and then softened. “Robert Albanese held a gun to your head and pulled the trigger.”

“It jammed.” She smiled wryly. “And if I hadn’t been there to get all those kids out, they’d be dead. We knew it was at a boiling point. It was clear he couldn’t be stopped. I had to go in.”

“We could have gone in together,” Mick bit out.

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t lie to yourself, please. There was only one way that was happening that day. The basement window was small. Time was ticking. You were still fifteen minutes away. I had to make a call.”

“It was the wrong call.” He set his jaw angrily. “You were a cop for how many years? You know you don’t go in somewhere without backup. You don’t go in unarmed. It creates more risk.”

The rage built in her again. “And you made sure to tell anyone who would listen how I’d screwed up. They sidelined me for a year. I had psychological evaluation. Mandatory therapy. You sold me out. You could have covered for me. I got those kids out that window. I did what I had to do and you hung me out to dry.”

“We risk our lives all the time for this job, but we do it in a calculated way. We do it together and with the intel we get from the people we work for. I understand bending the rules. You know I do, but you should have waited for me to get there.”

“They’d be dead. I’d rather live with your judgement than their blood on my hands.”

“The problem is you almost didn’t live. That’s what I’m saying.” Mick shook his head.

“Almost doesn’t count. You should be familiar with that sentiment.” She eyed him closely, waiting to see if he was reading between the lines. They’d had a lot of almost moments over the years. Near misses of a relationship that never was. Almost was.

The unspoken memories hung between them for what felt like ages. She sure as hell wasn’t going to get sentimental out loud about all the times they’d stayed up all night on a stakeout and laughed until their sides hurt. How his hand would always brush hers. The way their stares lingered. She knew, for a guy who ran toward danger, he wouldn’t be brave enough to bring it up either.

“I thought he shot you that day. The last thing I heard over the phone was the gun cocking. Then the line went dead.” The way he blinked, slow and deliberate, made her wonder if he was fighting off tears.

“You should have trusted me.”

“You should have waited for me.”

This is why she'd never reached out before now. She knew he wouldn't back down. In his eyes, she'd screwed up that day. Broken protocol, and it nearly cost her everything. The problem was, he'd never been some hard and fast rule follower. She'd seen him push boundaries. Work around protocol. The look on his face confirmed what she'd always wondered. It was different when she did it because he was more afraid to lose her than to lose his own life. He cared about her. Not just as a partner.

“None of it matters,” Charlize finally offered firmly. “We aren't working together again. That part of our lives is over. I came here as a courtesy to Carmen. I had no clue you'd be here. This could never work again.” She gestured between the two of them.

“I agree. Do you want to call Carmen or should I? She'll need one of us to stay on this. It's monumentally bad. Needs to be dealt with. The file reads like a horror movie script.”

Charlize tipped her head to the side and looked down at the open file on the coffee table. “What are we dealing with?” The word *we* had just slipped out. She had no intention of working with Mick again. But it was time to decide if she'd stay and work the case on her own.

Mick had a funny look on his face which intrigued her. This wasn't going to be like any normal situation they'd handle for the Kinross family.

“Read it through. It's messed up. Apparently, there is this group going around Florida and rounding up people experiencing homelessness. Young folks. Desperate. Single parents. They're promising them resources and a new start.”

“Too good to be true, I'm sure.”

“It’s awful. They get them in housing. Make it look like they’re going to finally get a chance to succeed then put them to work selling or making drugs. Sometimes getting them hooked too. They essentially hold them hostage and force them to work, taking all the money they make selling. There is a really special element to what they do. Something so heinous.”

“Worse than forcing people to sell drugs and keep them captive?”

“It’s single mothers. They target them. Their children become the collateral. This group is parading around as a charity trying to give mothers a chance at a new life. Then they threaten them and their children into doing what they want.”

Charlize was skeptical. “Why do they need us? It’s clearly a criminal enterprise. The cops would be all over this. Trafficking. Endangering minors. Kidnapping. It has no shortage of prosecutable offenses. Some young detective out there would love to slap their name on a high profile bust.” Charlize furrowed her brows and thought of all the pushy and eager detectives she’d worked with who’d step on anyone in their way to get their name in the paper.

“The women are getting busted and won’t turn on the people putting them out on the streets to sell. They know if they do, they’ll lose their kids for good one way or another. So cops pick the women up for selling drugs, try to get them to turn on the next rung up of dealers, and they’re too afraid. The organization has a good front. They’re legit in a lot of ways. They do help find housing, and even real employment, offer childcare, but this other faction is a form of trafficking that’s not on the radar yet.”

“So how do we know about it?” Charlize understood the Kinross organization had a far-reaching network of people, but if an organization was trying to keep their dealings quiet, maybe someone at Kinross had gotten it wrong.

“Kinross was tasked with tracking down a missing woman who was thought to be in danger. At first, once they knew

she'd been taken in by the Angels of a New Day Charity, they nearly closed the case. She was found. Living with her four-year-old son in one of their rent-controlled apartments. It all looked positive."

"But we know not to take anything at face value." Charlize thought of all the cases she'd seen over the years that were far more sinister than they appeared.

"Right. After some recon they realized things were not as they seemed. They were only able to have one brief conversation with the woman where she confirmed she and her child were not permitted to leave. She was spooked, terrified her son wouldn't be there when she got home if she said anything else to the Kinross investigator. They spent a little more time watching the group. Researching. Digging deeper. It's confirmed now, this is a trafficking organization with a legit charity front that's holding women against their will."

"It's brilliant." Charlize grimaced at her own assessment. "You convince struggling women you are their way out. Offer them a little bit of real support and then you use the one thing they would die to protect in order to control them. If it weren't horrible, it would be impressive."

"If the women aren't going to turn and become witnesses for the prosecution, other evidence has to be found. Something to break this wide open and protect the children in the meantime. We need to get them talking, even if it's not to the cops."

"They'll never talk to you," Charlize interjected knowingly. That was the point of all this. Mick could do a lot to help here, but traumatized women with everything to lose were not likely to open up to him.

"I think what makes the group more dangerous is they are operating under the guise of a reputable nonprofit. We're not just contending with the crimes but the reputation of those involved."

"We," Charlize remarked with the roll of her eyes. "I thought it was clear that wasn't an option."

“You want this case?”

She glanced down again at the papers. There were a few Polaroids peeking out of some scared children. She couldn't imagine too many things worse than this. “Of course I do. You know me well enough. I'm not walking away from this.”

“So you want me to walk away? It's not like this is something you can do on your own. We can call Carmen and see who else she can get down here.” He was baiting her. He knew the last thing she'd want to do was call Carmen and admit she couldn't get the job done with Mick. This work required grit and the ability to put aside your own feelings to help people. She'd been working alone since they'd had their falling out and the idea of a new partner didn't sit well either.

“We can at least look into it. Make a plan. Then if we need to, Carmen can send someone else.” She didn't mean that, but also wasn't ready to admit the truth. They'd take this job together. They'd help these people.

Mick only nodded.

“I thought you were getting out of this business anyway,” Charlize pressed.

“You hoped I was.” He eyed her closely.

“I did.” She was careful not to smile.

“I've been talking about a vacation for over a year now. Taking a break. One that might turn into something longer. But Carmen keeps calling.”

“Same. I'm not sure I have much more of this in me.” Charlize sighed. “It's hard to say no.”

“So I guess we're both saying yes to this one for now.” He gestured to the files. “It'll be different this time.”

It was as close to an apology as she might get and would have to do for now. Maybe she'd been a little rash that day too. She knew she'd saved lives, but put her own on the line. All she could hope was this time would be different. No one would need a gun to jam to stay alive.

CHAPTER 3



MICK

“It looks like you’ll need a ball gown,” Mick said with a half-smile. “Carmen has quite the plan laid out here. Apparently, the Angels of a New Day organization has been looking for a grant writer for over eight months. You’re going to get the job.”

“I am?” Charlize snatched the papers out of his hand and began to scan them. “Why has the job been open so long?”

“Because grant writing is complex and highly regulated. Their illegal business practices would likely be discovered by an astute grant writer digging around. They’ve been looking for just the right candidate.”

“Someone willing to bend the rules and stretch the truth?” She was getting the picture now.

“Yes. And apparently, your background lends itself perfectly to that. Carmen’s been building this for some time. She’s worked up a profile on you and even had people start dropping your name in the industry. You’re going to become their grant writer and help them get funding to keep lining their pockets. These grants will legitimize them even further.”

“And I’m supposed to expose this from the inside?” She shuffled some papers around and then tossed them down. “It can take real time to establish enough of a reputation at a company to be trusted with incriminating information.”

“That’s the plan. Get close enough to some of the women being held and forced to sell narcotics and get them on record. Or you can try to find some financial trail to follow.”

“And the ball gown?”

“There’s a gala in a week. They’re going to have some of their success stories featured. Women who are actively being trafficked and held are going to speak to how wonderful the organization is. That can be your first entry point to connecting with them.”

Charlize nodded and read further into the file. “And you’re my date?”

“Your husband.” He straightened up a little at the idea that he might be marriage material. Was it too soon to waggle his brows playfully? They weren’t there yet. He was lucky she hadn’t bailed on him completely.

“That’s fine.” She shrugged and rolled her eyes. “There are tons of loveless marriages. We can play it that way.”

Mick couldn’t hold back the chuckle. “Right. You go in tomorrow for an interview, onboarding should be pretty quick since Carmen has built a rock-solid identity that will have no problem making it through the background check. Then you get in there and see what you can dig up. Our goal is to make a solid case to turn over to the police.”

“You see this information on the safe houses?” Charlize started pacing around nervously, the bumble bee burst of worry he recognized all too well. “It isn’t as if we can hand over a decent tip and hope the cops do something about it. This company covers its tracks and the women won’t talk. If we don’t shut it down completely, the safe houses could turn into houses of horror. They’ll be desperate to silence other witnesses. Hide evidence. This is widespread, far-reaching. An investigation by the police will be slow. What we hand them needs to be something they act on in a sweep.”

“I know.” He cleared his throat, wondering if he should stand and try to calm her. No matter how tough she’d tried to be about what happened on their last mission, he knew better. History had a chance of repeating itself. They’d worked that case for weeks and when it came time to finally do what needed to be done, the execution was sloppy. They didn’t have the backup they needed because they hadn’t done enough to

get the local police on board with what had been going on in that house. This could be the same if they didn't get it right. Maybe even worse.

Cops were limited in what they could do without evidence or at least probable cause. In their last case officers knocked on the door, asked a few questions of the man living in the house, and believed him. In reality, Mick and Charlize hadn't built enough of a case. It was on them. And the guilt was clearly gnawing at both of them now.

"We'll make sure it's rock-solid," Mick promised. "You'll have a lot of access from the inside. Nothing happens before we know where every woman is being kept and how her children are. I'll be working an angle too."

"You will?" Charlize furrowed her brows. "Gaining trust is not going to be easy, especially when these women have so much on the line. They see you coming, and they'll get all freaked out."

"Are you suggesting I don't have a warm and fuzzy vibe or a trusting face?" He batted his eyes comically.

"You usually look like you just fell off a special forces truck and are ready to bash some heads in. That might not be the energy they need to feel ready to open up."

"Well good thing I'm taking the drug-dealer angle instead. I'll be connecting on the distribution level. These women are being sent everywhere. Universities. Clubs. Street corners. What and how much they sell determines what their life will be like the next day. How much access they'll have to their children. I might be able to make some connections there. Carmen made sure we're well stocked with cash. I could be a buyer who makes their life easier and gets them talking. It isn't clear yet how closely they're monitored or by whom."

"They'll definitely have a handler." Charlize stopped buzzing around long enough to crumple her face in thought. "Not that the women are flight risks, they're not going to put their child's welfare on the line. But still, someone will be watching them. Making sure they're doing what they are supposed to. Collecting the money. Just be careful you don't

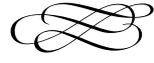
blow your cover. What kind of husband would you be if you were hanging around clubs buying drugs from young women?"

"One in a loveless marriage," he smiled wryly. "I think it could play perfectly."

Charlize nibbled her lip. "If we blow this there could be hundreds of children in danger."

"They're already in danger and no one is coming to help them. If we pull this off, they'll finally have a shot at a real life."

CHAPTER 4



CHARLIZE

This outfit was not her preferred attire. The pencil skirt and tight silk blouse under a designer blazer made her feel trapped and stiff. Even back in her days as a detective her suits were more forgiving than this Venus fly trap of an outfit trying to strangle the life out of her whole body. Punctuated with stiletto heels and a bun that felt too tight, she wondered how people did this every day. It was torture.

There was a theory she'd heard once that had stuck with her. Most of the clothes men found sexy also put women at a disadvantage for fleeing. The heels would slow her down; the skirt would trip her up. She laughed the idea off. Maybe that was true, sexy equated to the inability to get away, but in her case, she'd turn that red high heel into a weapon. Let someone try.

"Mrs. Glendale, it's such a pleasure to meet you." The man standing at his office door had an unflattering triangle build and coal black eyes she had a hard time looking into. But she forced a smile and tipped her head to the side diminutively. His meaty hand reached out for hers and she pretended to be equally pleased to meet him.

"Mr. Floover, thank you so much for interviewing me today. I'm really excited to discuss the position with you." She pretended not to see when his eyes raked over her. She hadn't expected to meet a man like this in an organization touting their dedication to changing the lives of women in need. But she should have known better, they were everywhere.

He ushered her into his office and quickly shut the door behind them. It sent a chill up her spine to be alone with him, and for a moment, she pictured plunging the point of her high heels into his eye. That made her feel a bit better.

“So, you’ve come highly recommended to us for the grant writing position. We’ve been searching far and wide for the right candidate. Your name kept coming up.”

“Oh that’s flattering,” she cooed, settling in to the large chair across from his desk and crossing her legs, letting her skirt ride up a bit. She was pretty sure the job was hers, but she wasn’t taking any chances. A cover could be blown anytime if someone was skeptical enough and looking carefully at the facts. It was important to make sure Mr. Floover had something else to look at.

“I’m sure you’re used to being flattered. A woman like you must get plenty of compliments for all sorts of things.” His lips curved into a devilish smile.

“You’re so sweet. I’m really excited to hear more about the position. Grant writing is my passion. I know that’s so nerdy but I really do love connecting nonprofits with important funding that can help keep the wheels greased for the work they do.”

“Right,” Mr. Floover said, straightening up a bit. “Grant writing is a tricky business, isn’t it? Lots of red tape. Very strict.”

“It is,” she agreed somberly. “That’s where I come in. I really hate the way these systems are designed. A company like Angels of a New Day is vital to society. There shouldn’t be so many barriers to funding that is just sitting there waiting to be claimed by a wonderful nonprofit. I would love to be able to help you all with that.”

“That’s great to hear. I think it’s important to note we’re not without flaws.” He cleared his throat. “We really did start out as very grassroots. There was a lack of rigor. Maybe some mistakes were made.” He waved his hand quickly. “Obviously, all in the name of helping people. We really didn’t know what we didn’t know. We would require someone who could see the

context to some of the challenges we've faced while we've been building and still help us put our best foot forward for the grant writing process. What I mean is—"

"I'm completely clear on what you mean," she replied with a disarming smile. "I'm assuming the people recommending me to you understand the position you are in and know that I'm very familiar with how to make the system work for your organization. That money goes unused and redistributed if it's not awarded during the grant process. I know how to make sure it's awarded to deserving people, not perfect people. I know grant writers tend to be very rigid. But I pride myself on my flexibility." She winked awkwardly and let a little piece of her soul die at the perverted way he'd taken her words. Creep.

"Wonderful." He clapped his hands together. "This position has gone unfilled for far too long. It's been a very sore spot and starting to draw the wrong kind of attention. I guess all that is left to say is: how soon can you start?"

"Straight away," Charlize replied, then felt self-conscious of how eager she seemed. "I just finished a consulting job and was planning to head to the West Coast for an opportunity, but honestly, this is a much easier logistical option for me."

"Wonderful. Avalon, in Human Resources, will be in touch to get you onboarded tomorrow. You'll need to meet with Brenda and Naomi right away. Can you be free for dinner tonight?"

"They head up the board?" She blushed a bit. "Sorry, I'll be honest, I've been a little fixated on my next role that might move me cross-country. This opportunity came on my radar very quickly. I'd usually be more prepared with research and understanding the ins and outs of leadership in the company. I'm a bit embarrassed. I'm not sure I can make it to dinner tonight."

In reality she knew more about the people pulling the strings and the structure of the organization than most of the public did. That was all thanks to the recon the Kinross team had done for her. But it behooved her to give Mr. Floover the upper hand. His ego would love the power.

“Don’t worry a bit. We’ll skip dinner tonight and you can meet everyone in the office in the coming days. I know we sprung this on you. I’m so glad to have snapped you up before you headed out west. I can assure you this job will be more lucrative than anything you’d have lined up.”

“Lucrative and nonprofit don’t usually get thrown around together.” She kept her expression doe-like and curious. “You must be doing something special here.”

“The grants will be rolling in once you’re on board, I can feel it.” He clapped his hands together to punctuate their meeting and stood. “Oh, and what are you doing next Friday night?”

She blinked hard at him. The Charlize he was interviewing wouldn’t know about the gala coming up. She’d be taken aback by his question, so she acted the part. “Um, next Friday night?”

“Sorry, that probably sounded like I was asking you out on a date.” His laughter boomed all around her. “I’ll have to get to know you a little better before I do that. We actually have a gala next week. There will be some very important people there who have been clamoring to know if we’ve secured someone for the grant writing role. They’ll be relieved to see you there. I know it’s a lot to ask on short notice but I feel like you’d be able to put on a fancy dress and pull it off.” The creepy double meanings were turning her stomach.

“I’d be happy to attend. Should I bring my husband?”

Without an ounce of effort to hide his dismay, Mr. Floover deflated. “Sure you can. Dates are customary.”

She tried to save the interaction. “He hates galas and events. I usually have to drag him around while he pouts. If he looks like someone kicked his dog, don’t take it personally. And bring me drinks, I’ll need it.” She rolled her eyes and watched a little light return to Floover’s face.

“Will do,” he smiled back. “Corporate events aren’t for everyone. You have to really enjoy and appreciate the finer things.”

“I do, so you’ll have to keep me company.” With a quick wave, she left the room and strode back toward the elevator confidently. It was a checklist. Tasks that needed to be done in order for the real work to begin. And she had that feeling. That sense that things were starting. And she knew she and Mick together wouldn’t be stopped.

CHAPTER 5



MICK

It would have been pointless for Charlize to have tried on any other dresses. The red one with the lace trim that hugged her waist perfectly was it. That was obvious now as she stood in front of the floor-length mirror at the corporate housing apartment, unnecessarily scrutinizing her reflection in the stunning red dress.

He wasn't a fashion expert or anything but he could easily tell the dress was the perfect combination of sophistication and allure, making her look every bit the part of a wealthy, well-dressed gala attendee. They both knew that appearances mattered in this line of work, and right now, she had to play the part of a woman who belonged in high society.

With a satisfied smile, she turned to Mick and posed playfully. He had been patiently waiting, knowing better than to rush her through her makeup and hair routine. That never turned out well for any man in history.

“Well, what do you think?” Charlize asked, giving a little twirl to showcase the dress.

Mick's eyes widened ever so slightly as he looked up at her. “You look . . . amazing,” he stammered, unable to lie or pretend he wasn't floored by her. Charlize always had a way of surprising him. Sometimes with a bright smile. Other times with a punch to his arm to scold him for a dumb joke. She kept him on his toes.

“Thank you,” she replied with a playful grin. “Now, all I need is some sparkling jewelry that makes my neck itch and to

slip on the most uncomfortable pair of heels I've ever worn. By the end of the night you'll need to carry me home."

Mick finally stood up, trying to keep his expression cool. "You know I'll piggy back your ass anywhere. And listen, I'm not too thrilled about my outfit. A tux feels like a strait jacket and my shoes aren't too forgiving either." He gestured down at the shiny black shoes he'd reluctantly forced his feet into.

"I'll be happy to trade you for these." She waved the high heels in his direction.

Mick held up his hands in mock surrender. "Not a chance."

Charlize looked suddenly somber as she glanced at the clock over his shoulder. "I need tonight to go well. We need progress. I've been in the office for the last week, pretending to be an expert grant writer, using all my skills to help these monsters win more money to fund their crimes. But I've got nothing of any use so far. I'm asking the right questions, but everyone is dancing around the answers."

"It'll take time. You're building trust," Mick reassured her, stopping himself from reaching out to touch her shoulder. That's what he would have done before. Back when they were friends and partners. Instead he stuffed his hands in his pockets and tried to stay focused on the job at hand. "I'll be working my angle too, trying to connect with the distribution side of things. We'll need to discreetly gather as much information as we can before we make any moves."

Charlize sighed. Patience was an elusive virtue. "We can't afford to mess this up, Mick. There are innocent lives at stake, especially those children."

"And we'll help them." He drew in a deep breath. "Just one step at a time."

"One step at a time," she repeated, sliding into her shoes. "One painful high heel step at a time."

CHAPTER 6



CHARLIZE

From the moment they entered the limo, they had to be on. They couldn't risk blowing their cover. They were husband and wife now. She an employee of the organization, Mick a reluctant spouse dragged to an event. When the limo pulled up to the luxurious country club, they stepped out, Charlize leaning on Mick for balance as her heels threatened to betray her with every step. It felt good to touch him again. To breathe in his cologne and know he wouldn't let her fall. She'd missed that.

The grand ballroom was adorned with chandeliers and filled with elegantly dressed guests, all seemingly oblivious to the sinister side of the organization they were raising money for. It was astonishing to Charlize how easy it was to fool people. Blind them with the promise of a night of indulgence and know they would never ask deeper questions. They'd just write a check and feel good about themselves.

"Charlize!" A familiar face from the office appeared before her. Brenda leaned in and kissed Charlize on each cheek. "I'm so glad you're here. The whole board of directors is dying to meet you. This must be your husband."

"Hello, Brenda," Charlize sang back in a friendly tone. "Yes, this is Michael."

"Call me Mick," he insisted, taking her hand and greeting her, though being sure to look unimpressed at the same time.

Brenda gushed as she put a hand on Mick's shoulder. "Well, Mick, you probably grow weary of hearing this, but

your wife is a superstar. She's already advanced our grant program light years ahead of where it was. The funding will be rolling in before we know it."

"She's something," Mick replied coolly, keeping his body language stiff. He was supposed to look uncomfortable. A fish out of water and she couldn't tell yet if this was an act or not. He looked great in his tux, but maybe it was really choking him half to death.

"Would I be able to steal her a way for a few minutes?" Brenda asked with a coy expression. "I'd love her to meet with our honored guests this evening. The women we do this for. They really make the work so rewarding."

"I'll head to the bar," Mick replied, just over a grumble. "Two hours, right?" he asked over his shoulder and Charlize loved this gruff miserable version of Mick.

She nodded and then turned toward Brenda. "This isn't really his scene. He's a good sport but corporate functions always make him squirm."

"Oh he'll grab the ear of some other uncomfortable husband at the bar and they'll start talking sports and commiserating and all will be well."

"Absolutely," Charlize agreed. "So we're meeting women who have benefited from the program?"

"Yes. I think it's important for you to see the work we do and why we do it. I know grant writing is very formal, but I think having a passion for the cause must help too."

"It does. Many grants need to include that kind of information. In order to be awarded funding, articulating what separates your organization from others, making you worthy of being the recipient, is vital. I was actually hoping I could do more than just a quick meet with some clients."

"Clients," Brenda nodded thoughtfully as if a light bulb had just appeared over her head. "I love that. That's a beautiful way to think of the people we serve."

"I find that dignity is a universal desire. People, even those in terrible positions, want to feel like they matter. It can go a

long way in your mission statement and garnering more funding and grants. Meeting some clients would inform my work and pay off well in the long run.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do. I mean I can’t give you broad access to the people we help. Confidentiality and privacy is important. But the women we invited tonight would be perfect. We have about an hour before dinner is served and the ceremony begins. Let me find a quiet corner and see if Rose has some time to talk. Rose is great, she’ll tell you what you want to hear.” Brenda smiled wide. “Clients?” She tapped her chin. “I love that.”

It had taken years of practice to keep from letting the rage boil over. There was evil in the world. That was unavoidable. People like Brenda were always justifying the things they did. Preying on those who could not defend themselves. And shockingly they seemed to sleep fine at night. They could come to these galas. Laugh. Play. Pretend they didn’t choke on their champagne or feel strangled by their conscience.

Brenda rushed Charlize toward a young woman with a simple sundress and freshly curled hair. The way she forced her back straight and held her breath for a few beats too long let Charlize know everything she needed to about this woman. There was a dodginess in her eyes even though she was working hard to make sure it wasn’t noticeable.

“Rose,” Brenda chirped, sending the young woman jumping, “I want you to meet Charlize. She’s an integral new part of our organization. Likely the reason we’ll be able to grow exponentially in the near future.”

That was probably the last thing Rose wanted, but she still smiled and extended her hand for a greeting. She was rail thin and the dark circles under her eyes were fighting against the concealer that had been slathered on them. This was a husk of a woman who was being propped up and paraded around as some victory lap for Brenda.

“We should all have a chat. Let’s step over here.” Brenda gestured to the corner of the ballroom where a small station of chairs circled around a large table. She groaned as someone

called her name and waved her over frantically. “Uh, I’m sorry ladies. I imagine there is some kind of emergency with the seating chart I’m needed for. I’ll come back shortly to check in with you. Rose, make sure you tell Charlize all the wonderful things you love about us.” She skittered away, and Charlize envied how skilled she was at moving in her high heels.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Rose coughed out nervously as she settled into a chair. “You’re just starting at the Angels of a New Day?”

“Yes, I’m working on trying to obtain various grants to fund the organization. The work being done here deserves all the capital it can get. I’m glad to do what I can to help.”

“So you’re going to help them grow the organization?” Rose’s nostrils flared. “So they can work with more single mothers?”

“That’s the plan. Can you tell me more about your experience? I’d love to hear some of the details of your story if you’re comfortable sharing.”

“How much bigger would it get?” Rose gulped nervously, obediently folding her hands and clenching them tightly together. “There would be a lot more women in the program? More children?”

“Potentially. Maybe they would even expand what they do outside of this geography. Really scale up to be able to help more women and children. Do you think that would be a good thing?” Charlize held her breath now, wondering if Rose might crack. Hoping she would.

“Great,” Rose forced out. “I just worry that when things grow, they can sometimes change for the worse. Like it can ruin a good thing.”

“That’s very true. I worry about that too. How is the leadership here? Do you think they’ll be focused on growing well or just growing?”

Rose blushed. “I wouldn’t know. Everyone is nice. They’re great. I’m so lucky.”

Charlize hummed. “Everyone is nice? That hasn’t been my impression so far.”

“It hasn’t been?” Her eyes widened with hope. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. My radar is up. Something doesn’t seem right. Part of my job is to capture the essence of a group. Try to put into words who they are and what they want to accomplish. I’ve found that hard to do. Maybe I’m way off . . .”

“No.” Rose stretched the word out and looked cautiously over her shoulder. “I don’t know if you’re wrong. I really can’t say.”

She had to go for it. “Because they have your child?” Charlize raised a brow and waited anxiously. This was an aggressive move. Normally there would be some courting. A time to make Rose feel comfortable. But tonight could be the only access she’d have to someone willing to talk. Brenda could be back any second. Charlize knew her role wouldn’t call for this kind of interaction going forward. It had to be now.

“What do you mean? How do you—?”

“Can I trust you, Rose?” Charlize asked, leaning in and watching to ensure no one was walking by. “I want to help. I’ve heard things about this organization and I want to do what I can to stop them.”

“Stop them?” A battle was raging inside Rose. It was clear she wanted to talk but had so much on the line. She had to wonder if this was a trick. And if it was, what might happen to the people she loved if she screwed it up. Charlize pressed on.

“I know you have no reason to believe me, but I’m really here to help. Please tell me what you can. Tell me where to start and I will help you.”

“I can’t,” she gasped, her eyes darting around wildly. “You don’t understand. They have our children. They keep them, watch them. If I say a word to you and they find out . . .”

The tears welling in Rose's eyes were heartbreaking. "Nothing will change if you don't take a risk to change it. I know you don't know me, but I am your best shot at getting free of these people. Will you trust me?" It was difficult to not let the emotion show on her face. Charlize didn't want to draw any attention to their conversation. This had to look like a casual chat.

"My son would be gone by the morning. You understand that? They have a network. Places to take our children so we won't see them. They have all the power. They have our children."

"Where do they keep them? I can help you protect your son. But you need to tell me how they operate. Where do I start? I'll do the digging but you need to give me something. From the outside it looks like they are providing housing, jobs, and childcare. They are saviors. You're supposed to be their success story. They saved you?"

"They . . . it's not like that."

"Then save yourself." Charlize scanned the crowd over Rose's shoulder. No one seemed to be paying much attention to their conversation. "I can't do anything unless you give me something to go on. A place to start."

"The housing," Rose choked out, holding in a sob. "They own these buildings. We have to live there. Cameras everywhere. They know every move we make. The top floor is a daycare. But it's more like a prison for our children. They don't let us see them at the end of the night if we haven't made them enough money. If we step out of line at all, they have ways . . ."

"Okay," Charlize said, painting on a fake smile and pretending to be having a lovely conversation.

"Not the buildings on Willow. Those are fronts. Something the charity uses to look like they're really helping people. It's where the women all go first. How they trick us into thinking we can trust them. Those apartments look like a dream come true. You won't find anything there."

“What apartments are the worst?” Charlize pressed, pretending to laugh and carry on as if all was fine.

“The two buildings on Clover and Elk. They are where you go if you need to be put back in line. But the security is insane. The cameras. They’d know if anyone was coming and no one would be able to get close enough to catch them and take them down. That’s how they get away with all of this. And most importantly, even if someone did get in those buildings, none of the women would talk because they know they’d lose their children. Plus they’re connected with very powerful people.”

“So am I.” Charlize knew she would need more but it couldn’t happen now. Time was up. “Brenda, this is quite the testimony. I could talk with Rose all day about the work you’ve done. Angels. There is a special place in heaven for you all.” She nearly said hell, but she was a professional.

“Oh, I am so glad,” Brenda sang as she placed a hand on Rose’s back. Rose was a pro too. She didn’t flinch at the touch. “Rose has been with us for two years now. She’s such a beacon of hope for the women who are coming into the program. On a night like tonight, her kind words about her own experience with the New Day organization is what keeps us all working so hard. Speaking of which our honored guest here is needed up at the podium soon. I’ll have to steal her away.”

“It was so nice to chat with you, Rose. Brenda, I’m going to go save my husband at the bar for a little while. I’m sure you’re very busy, so I won’t keep you.”

“We’re so glad to have you on the team,” Brenda cooed. “You’re going to bring us to the next level. I can feel it.”

Charlize scrutinized every nuanced move Brenda made. Was she on to Rose? Did she suspect she’d said more than she should have? It didn’t seem like her radar was up. That was the benefit of little twinkling lights and tables full of too many forks. The champagne was flowing. The voices rising and falling in laughter. All that could swallow up the dark truth. Tonight, Charlize was counting on that.

CHAPTER 7



MICK

“I’ve never been,” Mick said again as the inebriated man who’d stuffed himself into a too small tuxedo used his drink to point across the room.

“You have to go. You just have to. Skiing the Alps is as good as they say. My buddy over there, Don, he goes twice a year. Once with his wife and once with his girlfriend.” The chuckle roared across the bar and heads turned their way.

“Speaking of wives,” Mick grumbled, nodding his head in Charlize’s direction. “Here comes by ball and chain now.”

“That one?” the man asked, spilling some of his drink as he pointed in her direction. “You sure that’s not your mistress? She’s smoking hot.”

“Wife.” Mick shrugged. “I should check in with her and see if she’s breaking me out of this shit-fest any time soon. I’m ready to go.”

“I know, these parties are so self-indulgent,” the man slurred. “I just come for the open bar and to write whatever big check my wife tells me to. And to check out women who look like your wife. Lucky man.”

“Don’t let that figure fool you. She nags as good as the rest of them.” Mick slapped the man on the back, harder than a friendly pat, and stepped away.

“Having fun?” Charlize asked, stepping into his open arms. She was easy to hold. This wasn’t a chore of the job. Something he had to grin and bear. Quite the opposite. He

could do this part the whole night. He breathed her in for a long moment before reluctantly letting her go.

“We apparently need to go to Switzerland to ski. Or if you aren’t interested I can take my mistress. Also I got about ten insider trading stock tips and the name of the best tailor in town for my custom Italian suits.”

“Nice. You’ll certainly put all of that to good use.” She patted his shoulder as she stepped back.

“How about you? Hopefully one of us is having fun here tonight.” It was a loaded question. He was desperate to know if she’d been able to find anything out, but he also understood no one in this room could be trusted to talk in front of. But they spoke the same language. She would know what he was asking.

“I’m having a great time. Lots of good conversations. So enlightening.” She smiled coyly in that way that let him know she’d made some important progress. “We should take our seat, they’ll be starting some part of the ceremony soon. Remind me to introduce you to Rose before we go. She’s lovely.”

“He wants to go now,” the man from the bar burped out. “And if he does, I’m happy to take his place here tonight then take you home.”

“Charles Everson,” a sharp-chinned woman with tightly pinned back hair gasped. She scurried toward the man and slapped his shoulder with her perfectly manicured nails. “You absolute drunk pig. Get over to our table now.”

“Oh no,” he chuckled then hiccupped. “I’m going to have to write a check twice as big now. You got me in trouble.” He pointed playfully at Charlize as though she’d had anything to do with his shit behavior. His wife tugged him along but his eyes stayed on Charlize.

It filled Mick with rage. She didn’t wear that dress for Charles, or any other man in this room. She was his and he’d put down any man who tried to prove him wrong.

“I see you made friends with the cream of the crop here,” Charlize whispered in his ear, her warm breath sending a shock up his back.

“If he comes within ten feet of you, I’m going to knock him on his ass.”

“Not if I get to him first.”

“You’ll blow your cover. No punching out jerks. You’re a nice corporate woman with a heart of gold. But I’m your asshole jealous husband who had a couple glasses of old scotch. I can start swinging.”

“Just one more time men get to have all the fun,” she purred, slipping her hand in his and walking him toward the table.

Don’t let go. That’s all he could think. He finally had her back in his life. And needed to hold on to her this time.

CHAPTER 8



CHARLIZE

It was nice sitting in a car with Mick again, waiting to see what might happen next. They'd done so much of this in their time together. Waiting. Watching. The tip from Rose had proven helpful. Not only did they now know where to stake out, but the address could prove important as Charlize got more access to documents within the company.

“I've had some luck keeping an eye out while you've been in the office. Some of the women work day jobs. Retail. Restaurants. Hair salons. They leave in the morning with someone who drives them and picks them up. They work that job, come home for a couple hours and then head out to sell whatever product they're pushing. I think it's mostly pills. Things they can move at clubs, bars, and college hangouts. A lot of these women are young and blend in well. Their children are held in these buildings. I've only seen three children leave.”

“Under what circumstances? Were they under duress?” Charlize kept her eyes fixed on the building. This would be the time of night the women would be heading out to go to their next bit of forced labor.

“The kids look relatively healthy, but they are always in the presence of another adult. Usually men. They looked like skilled security. Rough characters. I followed one, a child, a man, and one of the mothers to a pediatrician's office.”

“That would seem like the perfect opportunity to get away. To say something and ask for help. A doctor's office would have to step in and do something if the child was in danger.”

“The man went in with them and more than that, I looked up the practice and the doctor is the husband of one of the women on the board of directors for New Day. These women have nowhere to turn. Around every corner is another person in this web of lies. It’s got to be so defeating.”

“I saw it in Rose’s face. She’s so beat down. And I’m sure even if one woman thought she could get her child out, all the other women and children would pay the price.”

“Tonight we ask more questions. Get more answers. The busiest place these sales are going down is a dance club called Dandelions. It should be busy enough to get in and get some face time with one of the women away from her handler. The more we find out about these buildings and the layouts and security, the better shot we have of rescuing these children.”

“I can’t go in. I can have communication with you from the car, but I don’t want to blow my cover. Are you suggesting, you’re going to be the cool hip guy at the club tonight?”

“I brought a change of clothes.” He chuckled and gestured to the back of the car. “And lots of body spray and a gold chain. I’ll fit right in.”

“I guess there is always a creepy guy at the bar. You can fill that role tonight.”

“Just promise you won’t get jealous when the ladies are all over me.”

“Cross my heart.” She made the sign and gestured for him to get ready.

Mick changed into a more casual outfit in the back of the car, opting for dark jeans and a black jacket. He placed a gold chain around his neck. “No peeking,” he teased.

“I’ve seen it all before. We’ve been working together so long I know what you’ve got going on there.”

“Dammit,” he groaned.

“What?” She was holding in a laugh as he tugged on the black jacket with too many zippers and buttons.

“You were right I look creepy as hell. I wasn’t going for that look, but here we are.”

As they parked near Dandelions, a pulsing nightclub with neon lights and a thumping bass that shook the ground, Charlize glanced at Mick, concern etched in her features.

“You sure you can pull this off, Mick? You’re not exactly known for your clubbing skills. Do you even dance?”

Mick smirked. “I’ll have you know, I used to cut a mean rug back in the day. Plus, I’ve got a charming personality, remember? That will take me plenty far.” He winked at her.

Charlize rolled her eyes but couldn’t help but smile. “Just be careful, alright? We need information, not trouble. I can’t go in there no matter what. If you’re getting your ass kicked, you’re on your own. Just keeps your coms on so I can hear you getting beat up.”

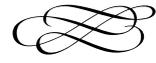
“I don’t think I’d want you coming in to fight my fight anyway. I’d rather get my ass kicked. Make sure you sit tight in here and enjoy the snacks and free time while I’m in there doing the heavy lifting.”

“Excuse me, I’m the one going into an office every day dressed in a bunch of clothes that are trying to choke me to death and listening to a lady named Susan tell me how her four boys don’t call her anymore now that they’re married. You’re going to be sipping drinks and people watching.”

“See you in a few,” he said, giving her a knowing nod. This was how they always left it when they went their separate ways on a mission. It wouldn’t be a few minutes. It would probably be hours. But this is what they always said, and it was nice to hear him say it again.

“In a few,” she replied quietly as he stepped out of the car. She tested the coms and tried to be patient. It was never fun being the one waiting around.

CHAPTER 9



MICK

With an air of disinterest, Mick made his way into the club, the music growing louder with each step. The place was packed with people dancing, drinking, and attempting unsuccessfully to shout over the music. He headed to the bar as if the most important thing on his mind was a cold drink.

As Mick leaned against the bar, he ignored the fact that he looked out of place. The dimly lit club was filled with young, energetic patrons, and he felt like a relic from another era. But he had a mission to accomplish. He ordered a drink and scanned the crowd, looking for any women who might fit the profile of someone involved in the organization.

After a while, he spotted a woman sitting alone at the far end of the bar. She had an air of confidence about her, and her eyes were constantly scanning the room. Mick decided to make his move. He walked over and took a seat next to her, flashing his most charming smile.

“Hey there,” he said, trying to sound casual. “I love this song.”

The woman turned to him, sizing him up with a critical gaze. “Oh really? Who sings it?”

“You caught me. I’ve never heard this before in my life. I was supposed to meet a date here and she never showed. I’m trying to decide if I should bail or see if there is anything decent to hang around here for.” He shot her a glance.

“Depends on what you’re looking for,” she replied, her voice low and sultry.

Mick leaned in a bit closer. “I’m looking for a good time. Something to take the sting out of my shitty night. I don’t think the booze will cut it. Know where I can find something stronger?”

The woman smirked and sipped her drink. “Maybe. But you’d need to have some cash.”

He casually scanned around and spotted her handler. A man who was locked in on the conversations of a few of the women around the bar. This one wasn’t his only captive. That numbers game would help him be able to get a few things said without being noticed.

Mick played along, acting like he was interested. “I’ve got the cash if you’ve got the fun. You actually look familiar. I think we have a friend in common.”

“I’m sure we don’t.” She stiffened slightly.

As they continued their conversation, Mick kept a close eye on the woman’s body language and demeanor. He couldn’t risk scaring her off. But wasting time wouldn’t work either.

“Rose,” he said, making sure the man in the corner had his eye on a different woman. “My friend just met her the other day at a gala. They had an interesting conversation. Maybe she told you about it.”

Her eyes wide then she quickly gathered herself. “I can’t talk to you. You need to go.”

“Rose must have told you we are here to help. To stop all that is going on. You have children?”

“Three,” the woman breathed out slowly. “Please, you should go.”

In the dimly lit club, with the deafening music and the swirling crowd, Mick continued their dangerous dance, determined to uncover the truth and bring down the organization that held so many innocent lives captive. He knew he was close to either getting tossed out of there on his ass, or getting some answers.

“How can I get in the building? Tell me about the security. There must be a way I can get in to see for myself what’s happening.”

“Buy,” she said, pretending to sip her drink, though her hand shook violently as she tried to bring it to her lips. “Buy big.”

“You bothering my friend?” The man who’d been eyeing him from the corner came over now. His broad shoulders and grizzled expression loomed above. Mick could probably take him, but he was sure this man was not alone.

“Your friend and I were working on a transaction. But I think maybe it’s above her paygrade. You the guy I need to talk to?”

“I wouldn’t have any idea what you’re talking about.” The man kept his eyes locked on Mick. He wasn’t dumb enough to start brokering a drug deal out here in the open. That was what the women were for. To take the heat and get in trouble if the deal was a trap.

“Right. Well let’s say, hypothetically, I had a hundred grand and was in a big rush. Where could I spend that money?”

“Why the rush?” The man was interested. The dollar amount was enough to at least keep the conversation going, even if he was wildly skeptical of Mick.

“I own a fishing charter company in Miami. A big one. And my clients require more than bait to have a good time.” Mick winked but the man still stared back blankly at him. “I’m done buying in Miami. It’s the Wild West. So I took my boat up the coast to try to find a new partnership.”

“You’re saying you’ve got a hundred grand?” He looked Mick up and down.

“And am very ready to spend it. I paid off a guy where I have my boat docked. I’ve got until he’s off his shift tonight to get what I want on my boat and pull out of here without any security bothering me. I need to make this happen and be on my way.”

“A hundred grand?”

“I’ve been to three other places tonight. No one has the balls to make the deal happen. I don’t plan to go home empty-handed. But if you’re not willing to deal, I’ll move on. Hopefully your boss doesn’t care that you let a lot of cash go.”

“How do you know I’m not the boss?” He narrowed his icy eyes.

“Bro, everyone has a boss. Maybe make a phone call. See if we can make this happen.” Mick flipped a coin between his fingers.

“Let me make a call,” the man sighed. “But if we do this, it’s on my turf. You bring the cash to a location of mine that’s secure. If you’re trying to pull something you’ll never walk out, you understand.”

“Okay, big man. We can do this wherever you want. Just as long as we do it quick and I get what I need. How’s your inventory? I want a mix of all sorts of stuff. You going to be able to hook it up?”

“Inventory isn’t an issue. I’ll be right back.” The man hustled away, shooting the woman at the bar a stern look as he stepped outside.

“What’s your name?” Mick asked, trying to keep the conversation going.

“Darlene.” Her hands shook again as she swigged from her drink.

“Are they going to take me to one of the apartments where they’re holding the women and children?” He was rushing his words out.

“Yes. But there won’t be anything you can do. Seven properties like this all over the city. Maybe more. Even if you get some evidence and convince the police to get into one of the buildings, the harm they can do at the others will be catastrophic. You think you can do something to stop this, but you can’t. They’ve thought of everything. They have everyone in their pocket. Cops. Judges. Child Protective Services.”

“That’s ironic. They aren’t protecting anyone.”

“I think you should leave this alone. We get to see our kids. If we do what they tell us, the kids, they eat, they learn. They get clothes. It could be so much worse.”

“You aren’t free to leave. You’re prisoners, forced to come to places like this at night and risk your freedom to sell drugs for them. Who cares if they give your kids a new pair of pants or toss them a box of cereal? What they are doing is criminal. You can’t live like this forever.”

“There is no forever here,” she bit out angrily. “You’re here and then you disappear. Maybe because you caused problems. Maybe because they were tired of you. All I know is some days we wake up and someone is gone. We take care of their kids. We do what we can. But they are just gone. I don’t want to be one of the girls that’s gone in the morning.”

“Darlene, where do I look when I get in this building? Where’s the worst of it?”

“The basement. He’ll never let you down there, but that’s the worst of it. Punishment. For the kids. For us. That’s where we all try to stay out of.”

“Who runs all of it? Does everyone on the board know what’s going on?”

“They come. Walk around. Some look worried, but most look impressed. The amount of money we make them every night with no risk to them makes it all worth it. Victimless crimes in their mind. Most of us already had nothing. We were already only trying to survive. Who cares what happens to us?”

“I promise you, the people I work with care. And they are powerful.”

“You really have a hundred thousand dollars?” She narrowed her eyes at him, tears forming in the corners. “If I had that money I would run away with it. You should just leave here.”

“That money is meant for this. For things like this. I’m not running. I’m not leaving until we help you, and everyone else

caught up in this. And if we need to bring down the people in charge . . .”

“They’re kings and queens of their own little worlds,” Darlene said in a far-off voice.

“Then it’s time for a revolution.”

CHAPTER 10



CHARLIZE

Goosebumps raised on her arms as she listened to the conviction in Mick's voice through their coms. He'd made contact, gotten more information, and now there was a plan. Action they could take.

The car idled in the darkened street near the nightclub, its engine purring softly. The time seemed to stretch on endlessly, and she knew danger was ever present. If this man began to doubt Mick, he could turn on him quickly. Surely the guards were armed. Angry. Ready to defend their lies and control by taking out a man they thought might threaten their power. Mick was in the lion's den and Charlize wished there was a way she could be in there with him.

"Heading back to the car. Be ready to move," he whispered as he stepped out of the club and finally the thumping music disappeared. She knew she had to hide. There was a chance the man would come back to the car, but they'd planned for this.

Charlize jumped to the third row of the SUV and pulled a blanket over her body. She remained hidden beneath it for another long few moments, her mind racing.

Mick had handled the situation with finesse, but if she were spotted, it would all go up in smoke. Their roles in this were so different, and his seemed far riskier at the moment. But the payoff was bigger. Nothing was happening in the office that would bring them any closer to shutting this down. Mick was their best hope of gaining access to the inner workings of the organization.

Minutes stretched into what felt like hours, and Charlize's anxiety continued to mount. She checked her phone repeatedly but he still hadn't made his way to the car. It would have only have been a minute or two walk. He must have gone to talk more with the guy, but his coms weren't picking up any conversation. She was in the dark. Literally and figuratively.

Her heart leapt as her phone buzzed with a new message.

"Had to pee. Be right there."

"Idiot," she whispered to herself, holding her hand over her pounding heart.

As he opened the door she could feel the night air was cool, a light mist clung to him as he stepped in. The entire atmosphere was eerie, thick with anticipation.

"Seriously, you had me freaking out here."

"I didn't think you wanted me leaving my coms on while I watered some plants over in the alley."

"Gross."

"Trust me, the bathrooms in that club were far more disgusting. Now hang on, I've got to get over to the apartments quick and you're going to be sliding around back there."

"Make a joke about me in a back seat and I'll ring your neck from behind."

"Can I make a joke about you being choked from behind?"

She giggled in spite of herself. "Mick, focus."

"Fine, back on track. Hopefully you heard everything that's going down. I managed to strike a deal with one of the guys in there. We're going to one of the apartments. I'll try to gather more information about the security and layout while we're inside. If it feels safe, I'll give you the signal to go to the basement. That's apparently where the worst of it goes down. Snap some pictures, gather evidence. Let's see what kind of case we can build."

Charlize finally felt there was something she could sink her teeth into. No pencil skirts and rummaging through files looking for anything incriminating.

“I can get in the basement if you have enough of them distracted.”

“I said, if I give you the signal. This place might be a security nightmare. The last thing we need is you being spotted on camera. The newest employee breaking into one of their buildings. That will blow this whole thing up.”

“You think I don’t know how to dodge cameras and get in undetected?”

“I think we’ve found ourselves at this impasse before. A basement. Kids in danger. I don’t want it to go down the same way.”

“The way it went down last time worked out pretty damn well.”

“Charlize.” His voice was stern and she jumped a bit under the blanket. “Please don’t go in unless I give you the signal. Listen for the word impressive. If I say impressive, attempt to get into the basement. If anything looks off, you need to bail.”

“Fine.”

“I’m parking in the alley to the west side of the building. Stay put. I’m getting the money out of the trunk and meeting this guy at the back door. They’re going to pat me down. They’re not going to pick up our mic in the collar of my shirt but I’m going to have to take out my ear piece. I won’t be able to hear you at all.”

“Just the way you like it,” she quipped as he put the car in park. “Careful Mick. I’ll see you in a few.”

“Watch yourself. See you in a few.”

Charlize was squeezing the blanket tighter than she meant. Wishing perhaps she was safe in her bed. Or maybe that they both could be safe under a blanket on a night with nothing to fear. Maybe that’s what it would be like someday. But today it was all danger and all up to them.

CHAPTER 11



MICK

With the man he was meeting in sight, Mick held the bag of money and crossed the small alleyway.

“Pat him down,” the man said as two others came from the shadows. “Check the money.”

“Woah,” Mick said. “I’m not handing this money over. You think I’m going to let you and your boys here roll me. Trust me, I’ve got my own contingency plan. I wouldn’t show up and walk into a trap.”

“What do you mean?” one of the men asked skeptically.

“We’re going to have to give each other a little trust here,” Mick replied coolly. “I’ve got something you want; you’ve got something I want. But I think the best thing we can do is take our conversation inside.”

They all looked to each other, unsure what exactly Mick’s veiled threat really meant. “Fine. Just pat him down. Make sure he’s not armed. No wire or anything. I want to make this quick. Brenda gave it the green light but she said we better not screw this up.”

“Your boss is a chick; I like it.” Mick slapped his hands together mockingly. It was important to know that Brenda was being brought in on these deals.

“Brock, stop talking in front of him.” The man slapped the other in the back of the head. “Take him upstairs. Top floor. The kids are sleeping. Get the stash out, make the exchange and get him out of here.”

“Where are you going?” Brock asked, starting to pat Mick down. “You’re not coming up for this, Lars?”

“I’m going to make rounds. Check everyone is where they’re supposed to be and then I’ll be up. I can’t trust you idiots to do it. Just get him up there, get the product out, and wait for me.”

“Got it,” Brock said, yanking the door open. After a few flights of stairs in the rundown building, they reached a door marked 3C.

“Be quiet in here.” Brock demanded in a hushed voice.

“Your kids are sleeping?” Mick whispered. “You keep your drugs next to your kids?”

“I don’t have kids,” Brock chuckled out. “But don’t wake up these kids or Lars will not let you walk out of here. He’s not going to want to deal with them.”

“How many kids are there?” Mick asked as the door creaked open and the light from the hall streamed into a small apartment. There were children on cots. On mismatched couches. Sleeping bags on the floor. There was barely a path to get by the children but he followed Brock and the other man’s footsteps as they crossed the room and entered a tiny kitchen.

“What the hell is that?” Mick asked, knowing any person in their right mind would have questions. “You running a daycare up here or something?”

“You tried to buy from a girl at a bar, right?” Brock asked, pushing his long hair out of his eyes. “Well those girls have kids and they can’t very well stay by themselves at all hours of the night.”

“Damn. That’s actually kind of smart,” Mick said, his voice a little louder now. He propped his bag up on the table and unzipped it. The cash drew the attention of both men.

“Shit, he really has it.”

“You think I’d come all the way up here and try to screw you?”

“People are idiots.” Brock opened a cabinet over the sink and removed a fake panel in the back. “You said you want a mix of everything?”

“Mostly pills though. That’s what most people are looking for these days. Throw in a little coke. Some weed if you have anything decent. Fentanyl but I don’t want to screw with too much of that stuff, but every now and then someone wants it.”

“Damn, who the hell is going on your boats?” Brock started pulling things from different hidden compartments in the kitchen and piling it up next to the bag of cash.

Mick took stock of the heavy curtains drawn to block out the outside world. The air was thick with the smell of soiled diapers and rotting food. A child coughed in the next room.

He was working hard to keep his senses sharp, absorbing every detail. He tried to get a sense of the layout of the rooms, the presence of security cameras, and the ominous atmosphere that clung to the place like a shroud. It was clear this was no ordinary drug den. It was a prison. And worse, there were more of these around the city, hiding the same dark secrets.

“You done yet?” Lars asked, pushing his way into the crowded kitchen. “I want him out of here already.”

Mick took the stacks of money from the bag, making room for his haul of drugs. This money was sent from Carmen for the entire job. He’d used every cent of it right out of the gate. But Carmen trusted him and she’d understand why he had to do it.

The basement Darlene had mentioned weighed heavily on his mind now. Charlize would be antsy. She was always so impatient and he knew with these three men distracted she might have a shot at getting in the building. All he could hope was that if something looked off, she’d bail.

“You’ve got impressive shit here, man,” Mick said, knowing the signal word would have her springing into action.

CHAPTER 12



CHARLIZE

“Finally,” she gasped with relief, stepping quietly out of the car and going low. Moving as silently as she could, Charlize made her way to the small windows that nearly met the ground. They were rusty hinges and old layers of paint but they looked otherwise accessible. Charlize grabbed the screwdriver from her pocket and dug it into the side of the window, trying to pry it open. It wouldn’t budge.

She tried a few more. They seemed sealed in some way. It was clear this wouldn’t be her way in. If she was going to do this, she’d have to use the same door Mick had gone through. She dusted the dirt off her pants, pulled up the hood on her sweatshirt, and dipped her head low as she darted toward the door. It was locked. Of course it was locked.

Logic told her to go back to the car. Sit in the back under the blanket and wait for Mick to come out. But fortune favored the brave. And they could use some good fortune right now. She glance up to the fire escape where a curtain was being drawn in and out of the open window by a breeze. This was not the basement. Not what she and Mick had discussed, but a moment later she was pulling herself up onto the fire escape and narrowly dodging a camera perched at the corner of it.

With a tentative peek inside, she made the decision to slide her body in. It was quiet. A small room with a few beds and what appeared to be sleeping women.

“Who . . .” A woman gasped quietly, covering her mouth, clearly more afraid of the men guarding the place than a potential intruder.

“Quiet,” Charlize pleaded. “I’m not here to hurt anyone.”

“You’re the woman from the gala,” Rose said, leaning in to be sure. “You can’t be here.”

“I know,” Charlize said, surprising herself with the agreement. “But I had to see some of this for myself. The basement. How do I get to the basement?”

“You don’t,” Rose growled. “Go back out the window before they find you here.”

“Down this hall and take a right. Then there are stairs behind a metal door. It locks from the outside so you can get in.”

“Marcy, don’t tell her anything,” Rose pleaded. “We can’t trust her.”

“She just climbed in our window at great risk to herself. We have no one else to trust, so why not the person who’s willing to do that. Who’s willing to go down in the basement in the first place. Let her try.”

“Can you tell me where all the buildings like this are? I need addresses for all of them so when it’s time to finally crack down on them we can make sure they are all taken care of at the same time and everyone gets out safe.”

“She’s crazy,” Rose hissed. “It’s not possible.”

“I don’t know all the addresses,” Marcy apologized. “But I know how you can find out. There is a woman named Susan Morales. She’s a real estate agent. She gets money to do things for them off the books. I heard them talking to her before. She would have sold them all the properties.”

“You’re going to get us killed,” Rose scolded impatiently. “If they find you in here and think we knew about it, we’ll never see our children again. They’ll be gone within the hour.”

“I’m sorry, Rose. I’m going to do everything I can.” Charlize slipped through the door and into the dimly lit hallway. She knew she had limited time and couldn’t make a sound as she made her way toward a stairwell.

The metal door was ominous. The deadbolt on the wrong side, locking in anyone down there. She pulled her hood tighter and shielded her face from the cameras as she clicked the lock and pulled open the door.

Why did it always have to be a basement?

Descending the stairs, the air grew colder, and dampness filled her senses. The basement was shockingly worse than the sparse dank room she'd just left. A world of neglect and decay. The walls seemed to close in around her as her tiny flashlight lit only one little spot at a time, horror movie style.

Charlize reached into her bag and retrieved a small camera concealed within. She needed photographic evidence of whatever horrors lay in store. With each step she took, her resolve strengthened. She couldn't turn back now; she had come too far. Mick was upstairs keeping the men busy, flashing money around. This part was up to her.

At the bottom of the stairs she spotted another door. The sounds beyond it were muffled but haunting. Charlize took a deep breath, pushed the door open just a crack, and peered inside.

Her blood ran cold as she witnessed a scene straight out of her worst nightmares. The basement was a grim chamber of despair. Rows of cots lined the space, and on them lay women and children, all in varying states of exhaustion and fear. Some children clung to their mothers, while others sat alone, their eyes vacant. These were the punished people. The ones who hadn't sold enough drugs or maybe hugged their child too long that morning and ran late for their job. Did they talk back? Argue with the armed men? This prison was full of innocent victims and it took all Charlize's willpower to not flip on the lights and have them run straight out the door.

She held her finger to her lips as she stepped out for them to see. They stared at her, hallow eyes and vacant stares. She knew every photograph she took was a step closer to exposing the truth, a step closer to dismantling the organization that had wrought such misery. But she also knew that time was running out. Mick was upstairs, playing a dangerous game, and she

needed to regroup with him before their presence was discovered.

“I will try to help,” Charlize whispered, her voice strangling in her throat. “I will come back.” A noise upstairs reminded her instantly of the damage that would be done if she were caught. She put her finger over her lips again and stepped back.

Carefully, Charlize closed the door and retraced her steps, holding her breath with every inch she proceeded. She had seen the face of evil in that basement, and she was more determined than ever to bring it to its knees. As she reached the hallway leading back upstairs, Charlize’s phone buzzed with a message. Mick was giving her a heads up.

“Get out.”

Charlize would slip back down the fire escape. She’d get back to the safety of the car. But there was one thing she needed to do first.

She’d seen it on her way down the hall. The room where the camera equipment was stored. Someone would come back to this room, know she was lurking around, and the women would be punished for not admitting they knew more.

Pulling open the door, she was relieved to see the dated equipment. It was not some state-of-the-art digital setup. It was ancient stuff with an easy solution. She ejected the tapes, pocketed them quickly, and made her way back to the fire escape, not stopping this time to utter even a word to the women as she passed them.

Mick wasn’t back at the car yet when she slipped inside and pulled the blanket back over her. This time it wasn’t to hide, it was to cry under. And the tears wouldn’t stop no matter how much she told herself she’d be back. That this would be over. Because right now, she just couldn’t see how they could make that happen without painful collateral damage.

CHAPTER 13



MICK

“You good?” Mick asked breathlessly as he tossed the bag into the passenger seat and pulled out of the alley.

“It’s bad,” Charlize said, trying to make sure she cleared all the emotion out of her voice. “I got photographs.”

“He mentioned Brenda, did you hear that? He’s tying her directly to the decision-making. I’m calling Carmen.”

She climbed to the front seat and he tossed the bag of drugs in the back to make room for her.

“Mick?” Carmen asked, sounding a bit sleepy as she answered the phone. “What’s going on?”

“Charlize and I are both here. We have an update and a bag of drugs we need to deal with.”

Charlize looked in the rearview mirror as she spoke. “We’ve gotten eyes on one property and I have photographic evidence of what’s going on in there. Deplorable conditions. Some of the women are restrained.”

Carmen seemed amped up and full of energy suddenly. “Then that’s enough probable cause for the police to go in, cease the drugs, free the women and children as well as arrest the men there.”

“There are at least seven other buildings like this in the city,” Charlize warned. “We can take down one, but never be able to tie it back to the people in charge. Not to mention the lengths they may go to at the other buildings to silence the witnesses. It’s too big a risk.”

Mick nodded at Charlize, desperate for her to know they were in agreement on this. As traffic thickened around them, he stayed focused on the road as he continued the conversation with Carmen.

“Yeah, Carmen, it’s way more complicated than we thought. We need to move carefully. I don’t want to risk the lives of those women and children in the other locations.”

Carmen’s voice crackled through the phone, the connection sounding dodgy for a moment. Mick wondered if that was the case, or if Carmen was just faltering on what to do next. It was a big decision, and one he was glad not to have to make.

They’d just witnessed multiple crimes people could be charged for. Leaving that house without doing anything about what they saw felt terrible. But they had to look at the big picture and help as many of the women as they could.

“I understand, but we also need to make sure this is addressed quickly. Now that you’ve seen it with your own eyes, we have a responsibility to get this done. You also need to get those drugs off your hands and get some cash to continue your cover. Time is running out.”

Charlize interjected, her voice rigid. “Carmen, we can’t rush this. If we move too soon, they might retaliate against the captives in the other properties. We need to be strategic.”

Carmen sighed audibly, her concern evident. “Listen, these decisions are never easy, and I feel the weight of all of them. I’m going to talk to the full leadership team here and get their input. I understand your worry, but we can’t let the people you have seen keep suffering longer than needed. We’ll find a balance. Tell me about the drugs and the evidence you have.”

Mick glanced at Charlize before responding, “It’s a lot. These guys are clearly capable of moving a lot of product. Having a workforce of captives makes that possible, I guess. We have a bag of drugs, mostly pills and cocaine. But we need to find a way to dispose of them without raising suspicion. As for the evidence, Charlize managed to get photographs of the conditions inside one of the properties. She took the existing

tapes from their security systems to keep them from being able to spot her, and we haven't reviewed them yet. But the living situation is horrifying.”

Charlize leaned in close to the phone, looking like she might place her head on his shoulder. He wished she would. “It would be very easy for the guards at any of these locations to move the women quickly or even resort to killing them if they had to. They are completely defenseless and have their children to worry about.”

Carmen paused for a moment, clearly considering their words. “It’s really going to come down to how much you two can put together to make a case for the police or federal team to move in all at once and with great force. We need to expose the entire operation and bring those responsible to justice. But we also need to keep you two safe.”

Mick smiled at Charlize. They both knew their own lives would always fall to the back burner when it came down to something like this. Carmen had to do what she could to protect them and beg them to stay safe, but when push came to shove, it wouldn’t really matter. Charlize smiled back, sharing the same thought.

She squeezed his arm suddenly. “I did get one more thing, Carmen; maybe this will help. There’s a real estate agent we suspect has been instrumental in acquiring these properties. If we can find a way to expose their involvement, it could be a crucial piece of the puzzle. Her name is Susan Morales. Will you try to dig up everything you can on her? How deep into this is she? If we can get her to tell what shell companies were used to buy the properties, we could make sure they’re all taken down at once.”

Carmen sighed again, the weight of their mission pressing down on her. “I’ll see what resources I can pull together. Maybe this real estate agent has some skeletons in her closet we can rattle. In the meantime, I’m texting you an address. I have someone down there who will take those drugs off your hands and give you a bit more cash for whatever you might need. Try not to blow it all at once this time.”

“I promise it was worth the money. Now we know for sure how bad it is in there. I’ll keep you posted on our progress and you let us know what everyone up there thinks should happen next.”

“Stay safe,” Carmen insisted. “Don’t forget you’ve got that vacation planned.”

Mick chuckled. “Right around the corner. I can practically feel the sand under my feet.”

After they disconnected the call, Mick guided the car through the quiet streets, following the GPS to the address Carmen sent them.

“We’re in deep, Mick,” Charlize said, her voice low. “I don’t think we’ve ever done anything with so many people’s lives hanging in the balance. It feels different, doesn’t it?”

“I think we’re different,” Mick explained. “Maybe that’s when you know you should be through with work like this. That killed me in there. Seeing those kids all crammed together, living like prisoners. Sniffling and coughing. Away from their mothers. I used to be able to compartmentalize that stuff. Stay focused. But all I wanted to do today was demolish those guys and get every single person out of that building. I barely held it together.”

She reached her hand up to his shoulder and squeezed it tightly. “I cried.”

“What?” He shot her a sideways glance.

“I came back to the car and cried. In everything we’ve done and seen before, that’s never happened. I mean, I’ve cried over cases before, but usually when it’s over. Like the adrenaline wears off and I’m relieved. But this was different. I was crying because I was scared. Scared for us. Scared for them. You’re right. It was different.”

He reached up and covered her hand with his. “We get this done. We save everyone. And maybe we really try to figure out how to say no to the next one.”

“Both of us say no?”

“Yeah. If we do it together, maybe we can make it stick.”

The safe house they reached was a modest, nondescript apartment tucked away in a quiet neighborhood. Carmen had arranged for someone to meet them there and take the drugs. They could do a lot of things in their job but driving around with a bag of illegal substances was too much of a risk. He wasn't sure who this person was or what they'd do with the drugs, but he trusted Carmen.

They sat in the driveway and waited. Again, it was always part of the job. Hours passed, and when Luis, the person they were supposed to meet, finally arrived, it was well into the early hours of the morning. He was rugged-looking with a weary expression, the kind of person who had seen his share of the criminal underbelly. Maybe an undercover cop or, for all he knew, another drug dealer who just happened to hit the lottery tonight and get this stash.

Luis said nothing as he examined the bag of drugs, nodding in acknowledgment of its value. After a few moments he glanced at each of them again. “This is a lot of shit.”

“A hundred grand worth,” Mick explained.

“I've got twenty grand for you. That's all Carmen could put together tonight. I'll get rid of these.” He slung the bag over his shoulder and handed Charlize the envelope of cash.

Mick knew Charlize wouldn't be able to help herself. “How are you going to get rid of them?”

“Not important,” Luis said, his expression completely flat. “You better go, this isn't a good place to hang out.” He gestured back at their SUV and they headed toward it.

Mick walked around to Charlize's side and opened her door. He wasn't sure why. It wasn't something he would normally do but it felt right at that moment.

“A real gentleman,” she teased, but she touched his arm gently as she got in.

Things were different. They were different. Maybe that made them less prepared for this work. But possibly finally more prepared for each other.

CHAPTER 14



CHARLIZE

Charlize's neck ached as she stared out the car window. Mick drove back to the corporate housing without much to say. The images of the captive women and children haunted her, each scene etching itself deeper into her memory. Mick's gaze remained focused on the road, his knuckles white against the steering wheel. She knew him well, he was hanging on for dear life just like she was.

Even the walk to their apartment was eerily quiet. He'd usually be good for a joke about how this was like a depressing version of the walk of shame. But he said nothing.

When they threw themselves on to the couch, she finally spoke. "Want to open the laptop and start researching Susan Morales? I know Carmen is going to work something up, but I'm curious if there are any obvious connections with this woman and the charity."

Mick shook his head in disagreement. "Charlize, it's late, and you've got to be at work in five hours. You need some rest."

Frustration welled up within her as she fought against the fatigue that threatened to consume her. Of course she was tired. So was he, but they could keep working. "I'm not suggesting we stay up all night but—"

"You're no good to anyone if you're running on empty. You know more of what you're looking for tomorrow in the office. Maybe you can search about Morales in the records there. Right now, you need sleep."

Though she knew he was right, Charlize couldn't help but feel irritated by the delay. Every passing minute was crucial, and the guilt of not taking immediate action gnawed at her. Still, she reluctantly nodded, exhaustion winning the battle. It was so hard to admit he was right, to accept that maybe she couldn't keep going tonight.

Mick's concern for her well-being was exasperating. Not because of anything he was doing. It was a flaw in her. Charlize wasn't accustomed to being taken care of or ordered around, but perhaps tonight, she needed it more than she was willing to admit.

Mick directed her to the kitchen, pulling her up by her arms and leading the way. He instructed her to sit down while he rummaged through the fridge. He retrieved a leftover pizza box, placing a cold slice on a plate before her. "Eat."

Turning toward the counter behind him, Mick held a bottle of wine and began to pour a glass. However, he paused mid-pour, his lips curving into a wry smile as he glanced at her. With a soft chuckle, he emptied the glass of wine into the sink and reached for a bottle of whiskey instead.

Charlize joined in the laughter, appreciating his effort to lighten the mood. He was right. The smooth warm buzz of wine wouldn't be enough tonight. She needed the good stuff.

Tossing in a large ice cube, he handed her a glass, and she took a sip, feeling the warmth of the whiskey spread through her. It was a comforting burn, a reminder that they were still alive and fighting. Mick poured himself a glass as well, and they sat in the nearly dark kitchen, the silence heavy with unspoken thoughts and shared burdens.

Charlize took another swig of whiskey and nibbled at the pizza. She knew she had to eat. Sleep was a necessity too. Mick was right, even if that was hard for her to accept. He knew her, and that was terrifying.

He clanked his glass to hers and sat in contented silence. It was a fragile moment, a rare glimpse into their vulnerabilities. They had always been partners in work, but now they were considering leaving. Both of them. Together. It was heavy.

“You know,” Mick began, his voice soft, “we’re still young. We can have a whole second chapter of our lives if we want it. A completely different life.”

She managed a weak smile. “I can’t think past tonight.”

“You’re right. You need to sleep, and you won’t calm down unless you take a bath,” Mick encouraged, his eyes filled with concern as he leaned in closer to her. “It’ll help you relax and clear your mind. You love a good bath.”

She hesitated for a moment. She felt bare under his correct assessment of her needs. Charlize nodded, and Mick offered her his hand, guiding her into the bathroom.

He did it all. Lit the candles. Picked the best of the oils and bath salts. The sight of the warm bathwater was inviting, and Charlize couldn’t resist its call.

He didn’t leave. Mick stood, slipped his finger under the strap of her tank top and slid it down her shoulders. He undressed her slowly, each piece of clothing falling to the floor as she shed the weight of the night. He didn’t take liberties with the moment. His hands didn’t glide to the places she was sure he wanted to touch. Instead, he held out one hand and steadied her as she stepped into the bath.

The water enveloped her, soothing her aching muscles and calming her racing thoughts. Mick sat on the edge of the tub, watching over her like a guardian.

He poured them each another glass of whiskey. They didn’t talk about the fact that he’d taken off her clothes or what that might mean for their future.

He reached for his phone, queued up a playlist of jazz, and closed his eyes as he leaned against the wall. Occasionally he would sip his drink or she would dip her head under the water for a few long beats. He’d add a bit more hot water and she’d smile.

“I’m falling asleep,” she cooed, her eyes closed.

“To bed,” he ordered. Extending his hand he helped her step out. With the plush towel he dried her hair, his touch

gentle. Sliding the robe over her shoulders, he led her to the bed.

Is he staying?

That's all she could wonder. Would he slide between the sheets with her? Kiss her neck? Run his hands over her body? Would he stay in her bed?

He pulled back the sheets, let her lie down, and then covered her with the blankets up to her neck.

“Want me to stay?” he asked, the loaded question hanging between them.

“To tell me a story?” She giggled and kept her eyes closed.

“Sleep, Charlize,” he whispered, brushing a strand of hair from her face. “Tomorrow we get back to work.”

“I scared you that day,” she replied in a far off voice. “You were so mad because you thought you were going to lose me. I went in that basement and would have died if that gun didn't jam.”

“Sometimes scared comes out like anger for me.”

“Then you must have been terrified, because you were so angry.” The talk of their last mission seemed vital tonight. Like the buzz from the alcohol freed up something she'd wanted to say for a long time.

He was at the door, nearly gone from the room. “Losing you is about as scary as it gets.”

CHAPTER 15



CHARLIZE

She wasn't doing her part here. She was in this office. Immersed in how things were done at Angels of a New Day, Charlize was sure she should be making more progress on finding evidence of their wrongdoing. But so far everything seemed sanitized. They'd done a remarkable job of looking legitimate. She came in this morning determined to uncover something.

"Brenda, can I have a word with you?" She was standing outside the executive office, making sure it was obvious her brow was creased with worry. She needed Brenda to know something was wrong.

"Of course, Charlize, come on in." Brenda eyed her closely.

She stepped in and closed the door behind her. "I'm struggling a bit and I was hoping you could help me."

"Struggling how?" Brenda put down her cell phone and turned all her attention to Charlize. "Please have a seat."

"I don't feel very connected here. It's as if everyone is keeping me at arm's length. Don't get me wrong, everyone has been very kind, but from an operations standpoint, I'm on the outside. It makes my work very challenging."

"Tell me more." Brenda was a master communicator. You couldn't rise to her level and not know how to make people feel seen and heard.

“Grant writing is technical and can sometimes be tedious, but there’s an art to it. I need more access. More involvement. I live by the idea that the written word has the power to change hearts and minds. I’m passionate about my role in getting funding that can improve communities and empower underserved, marginalized populations.”

“I hear you, Charlize. You represent the largest opportunity for growth in order to do our important work. I’m going to be very transparent with you; I don’t have much in-depth experience in the world of grant writing. I’ve always been focused on leadership and building strong teams around me. Tell me how you’d like to attack this differently.”

“I’ve always found the most success when I really dig into the inner workings of the group. I need to develop a deep understanding of all of the programs and activities, as well as the populations you serve. I should be contributing to writing additional funding materials, like donor communications and stakeholder reports. At this point I’m not really tuned into who your top donors are. How you communicate with them and why they’re committed to your organization. I’m sorry to lay all this on you so abruptly but I’m concerned I won’t be able to deliver what you expect if I can’t take these other steps.”

Brenda hesitated, and it was telling. She pushed her red framed glasses to the top of her head. “I completely understand Charlize. I really appreciate you coming to speak with me on this. We have been keeping things from you. You’re astute to notice.”

“You have?”

“Yes. Frankly the work we do requires discretion. From our donor level right down to all the women and children we serve. Not everyone agrees with what we do.”

“How so?”

“Some of the women we help have had drug problems. They’ve resorted to prostitution at times. They’re unwed or divorced. Some people don’t believe these women are worthy of help. Some of our largest private donors are also closely affiliated with their churches or other religious charities that

don't take the same approach we do toward these types of situations. Maybe they have clients in their organizations who would take exception to the fact that they donate some of their profits to prostitutes.”

“I see,” Charlize nodded. Brenda was good. Smooth. “I appreciate your candor and clarifying that for me. It can be delicate for sure. I won't ask you to share any information with me that you aren't comfortable sharing. Forgive my frankness but I'm either on this team, or I'm not. That's a decision you'll make, but where we land will determine if I stay in this position. I don't want to set both of us up to fail. I'd rather move on and allow you to fill this position with someone you can trust fully.”

Brenda let out a breathy laugh. “You're good. A straight shooter. I like that about you. And you know what, you're right. You can't be half in. So if you want full access to what we have, consider it done. You can see our donor lists, help draft communications to them, get more access to the executive team and our meetings.”

“And what about the day to day work being done on the ground? I'd like to roll up my sleeves and do the work. That's what informs my writing and may improve the odds of you being awarded these funding opportunities.”

“You're either on the team or not,” Brenda parroted back. “So you don't have to talk about this company as though you're an outsider. You can say we, when talking about Angels of a New Day. You're one of us.”

Charlize acted as though a weight had been lifted from her. With an over-exaggerated sigh, her shoulders straightened. “Thank you so much for hearing me out. This is a team I know I want to be on.”

“I'm glad you came in. These are the conversations I love to have. Direct. You know what you need. I wish I had a hundred more people on my team just like you. I'm sending a message to my assistant now to update your credentials and access. If you have any more questions, I know you won't hesitate to ask.”

Charlize walked out with her head held high. Brenda could interpret this posture as the result of a compromise reached. A happy employee feeling empowered. For Charlize it was simply a move on the chess board and hopefully one bringing them closer to checkmate.

CHAPTER 16



MICK

Mick sat in his parked car. He was becoming one with this seat and he shifted to try to stretch his back. He was concealed between a rusted dumpster and the crumbling wall of a long since closed restaurant on a deserted street.

This was another one of the suspected locations linked to Angels of a New Day. Over the past few days, he'd been staking out these properties, attempting to gather critical intel on their operations and the guards' routines. They didn't know all of the buildings yet but he was making his way through the ones they had confirmed. When he wanted to jump from the car and get as far away as possible from the monotonous hours of surveillance, he reminded himself these women couldn't leave whenever they wanted to.

As he maintained his vigil, his thoughts lingered on the horrors he and Charlize had witnessed earlier during their encounter in the other apartment building. The haunting photographs Charlize had taken of women and children held in captivity plagued his mind, their desperate cries echoing like a relentless storm.

This afternoon however, his focus shifted. Mick noticed movement near the building's entrance—a woman and a young boy, who appeared to be around eight years old, were emerging from behind the spray-painted metal door of the building. A guard followed closely behind them, his towering presence casting a long shadow. He was a menacing figure, standing tall with a broad, muscular build that exuded an air of physical dominance. His face was chiseled and stern. Mick

took note of the cold, unfeeling eyes. He had a rough, unkempt beard, adding to his intimidating appearance. Mick couldn't imagine how scary this man must have seemed to the little boy and all the other children in the building.

The child's eyes lit up with excitement suddenly as he spotted a brightly colored ball nestled in the tall grass by the sidewalk. There were no other toys around. Nothing at all that indicated children lived here. But this ball was like a beacon, calling the boy over. Begging to be played with.

His small feet carried him toward it, his face beaming with innocent enthusiasm. The woman, likely his mother, watched him with a tired but loving smile. It was quickly replaced with a realization that had her expression crumbling. "Wait," she cried, trying to call her son back to her.

Mick's heart ached for them, knowing the unimaginable suffering they must have endured. He continued to observe, his trained eyes capturing every detail. But then, in an instant, the scene took a dark turn. His gut sank.

The guard, an embodiment of cruelty, yanked the child roughly by the collar, halting the boy's jubilant progress. The child's eyes widened in fear and confusion as he was jerked backward. Panic painted his face, a stark contrast to the joy that had shone just moments ago.

The woman, driven by sheer desperation, reacted instinctively. She reached out, her trembling hand grasping the man's arm in a futile attempt to free her son from his merciless grip. Her voice, filled with anguish, pleaded for mercy. But it was obvious, mercy was a rare commodity in this place.

In response to her defiance, the guard's temper flared. With a brutal shove, he sent the woman sprawling to the ground. She landed with a painful thud, her cries mixing with those of her terrified son.

Mick's blood ran cold. Every fiber of his being urged him to step out of the car, to intervene, to defend the defenseless. His training had instilled in him the duty to serve and protect, but he knew he couldn't act impulsively now. Their mission

was at a critical tipping point, and any interference could jeopardize hundreds of other people.

Just as Mick hesitated, torn between his duty and his compassion, his phone rang, shattering the tense moment. He fumbled to grab it from the passenger seat, and Charlize's name illuminated the screen.

"Hey," he answered, his voice tinged with urgency.

"Mick, it's me," Charlize's voice came through the line, her voice holding some positive notes. "I've made progress here at the office. I talked to Brenda about how I felt like I was held at a distance here and that if she didn't trust me to be on the team, I should just go. It worked. I've gained access to more digital files, including donor information. It's a potential gold mine for us when we partner with law enforcement. It will help ensure we don't turn to the very people making a profit from these women to try to protect them. I'll send you the list of donors shortly."

Mick wanted to congratulate her. To take a minute to appreciate the success and the risk Charlize was taking. Yet, as he watched the woman and her son from his car, the desire to share his current turmoil with Charlize welled up within him.

"Charlize," he began, his voice heavy with hesitation, "I'm at one of the buildings. Right when you called I . . ."

"Mick, what's wrong?" Every ounce of potential hope in her tone was gone. She knew the moment was about to take a turn.

Taking a deep breath, he struggled to find the words to convey the torment he had witnessed. "One of these assholes is crossing the line. It's happening right now. Right in front of me. I want to get out. I want to kill this guy. Put this mom and her son in my car and drive the hell away from this place."

If anyone would understand, he knew it would be her. There was very little that could ever stand in her way when she saw someone being hurt.

Finally, Charlize's voice broke the silence, gentle yet resolute. "Mick, I get it. I understand how difficult this is. But

stepping in might make things worse for that woman and child, and for everyone else held captive in that building. It's a volatile situation, and we need to stay strategic. It might feel good to go out there and knock that guy out, but you'll blow your cover."

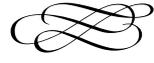
"I know, but it goes against everything I stand for. I can't just sit here and watch."

Charlize's tone softened even further as if she were trying to verbally diffuse a bomb.

"Then don't look. Just talk to me. Know you're doing the right thing. It's all you can do right now."

He wouldn't look away. He couldn't. Now wasn't the right time to act. But he wasn't going to close his eyes to the horrible thing happening. Instead, he'd etch every detail of it into his mind and when the time came, he'd get that kid a ball to play with. And more importantly, he'd make that man pay for his cruelty.

CHAPTER 17



CHARLIZE

Charlize sat by the waterfront, her legs dangling over the edge of the worn wooden dock. The rhythmic sound of lapping water against the shoreline provided a soothing backdrop to the weariness that weighed on her shoulders. The setting sun cast a warm, golden hue over the tranquil scene, its fading light reflecting off the calm surface of the water.

It was Mick's idea to come. He reminded her that water had curative properties. Even sitting by it could be healing. And he was right. She could breathe again for a moment.

He reclined in a weathered lounge chair, his eyes focused on the horizon as if searching for answers among the distant waves. The events of the past few days had left both of them shell-shocked. Even seasoned professionals like them could get knocked off-kilter.

As Charlize gazed across the water, her phone buzzed softly, interrupting the silence of the moment. She reached into her pocket and retrieved it.

"It's Carmen," she called to Mick who leaned forward in his chair to hear the call more clearly.

"Hey, Carmen. Any update?"

"Charlize, Mick," Carmen's voice was brisk and businesslike. She got like that occasionally when things were close to boiling over. She was one of those people who tried to keep others calm by modeling it. "I've had a chance to look over the donor list you sent me. It's quite a treasure trove, loaded with names of judges, lawyers, politicians, CEOs—you

name it. We can't be certain if everyone donating is fully aware of how the organization operates, but we can't afford to take any chances. We need to err on the side of caution."

Charlize was relieved to hear the list was helpful and their plans aligned. The last thing they wanted to do was turn all this over to some agency loaded with people loyal to the

charity. "Right. Thanks for the updates," Charlize replied, her hand covering her tired eyes.

"Yeah," Mick agreed. "That's good."

Carmen seemed to sense something amiss in their voices, the weariness that had settled in. "Is everything alright, you two? You don't sound right."

Mick glanced at Charlize and she uncovered her eyes and offered a weak smile.

They were pretty pitiful at the moment.

Mick tried to offer an explanation. "We had an incident earlier, Carmen," he began. "I was staking out one of the suspected locations, and a guard was excessively rough with a woman and her son. It was . . . hard to watch. Hard to just watch I guess. I could have stopped him."

"Oh," was all Carmen could offer back.

"It's eating at me."

"It can't." Carmen was more serious again. More composed. "There's no room for that here. If you feel like you can't get a handle on your emotions, there's no shame in taking a step back. We can bring in another team, allow you both to finally take that vacation Mick has been talking about. Someone else can catch up on the case. You've done more than your share."

Charlize and Mick exchanged a quick glance, a silent affirmation. They weren't ready to back down or step away from the mission prematurely.

"No, Carmen," Mick responded firmly. "We appreciate the offer, but we want to see this through. We need to move quicker, that's all."

“You couldn’t drag us away from this. We’re ready to make something happen.”

“I hate to say it, but one step at a time. I know that’s not what you want to hear. I’m still working on finding the right agency to execute the takedown when the time comes. The donor list you provided will help narrow down potential allies. But we need to make a strong case tying the drugs, the buildings, and the nonprofit together. We’ll also need some of these women to go on record, and perhaps even a few of the guards to flip.”

Mick’s brows furrowed at the mention of the guards cooperating. Charlize wanted to stand, come to his side and calm him. She knew he would strongly disagree with the idea of offering them immunity in exchange for their statements incriminating the charity.

“These men don’t deserve a shot at getting immunity,” Mick protested.

“You can’t cut the head off the snake without striking some unsavory deals, Mick,” Carmen reminded him. “We need to do whatever it takes to ensure justice is served.”

Charlize jumped in before Mick could argue his point further. “We’ll make another attempt to get some of the women to talk and seriously consider getting a guard or two on board. We need all the leverage we can get.”

“Good. Keep pushing forward, but remember to take care of yourselves. You’ve got each other’s backs, and that’s invaluable. Stay safe, both of you. I’m really glad you decided to work together again.”

As the call ended, Charlize and Mick remained seated by the water’s edge. The sun had dipped below the horizon, and taken with it their last bits of energy. They were cast instead into the cool embrace of twilight. She could close her eyes, lay her head back, and sleep right there. But after a few long minutes, Mick’s hand was on her shoulder.

“We’ve got to get these women to trust us. We need them to talk.”

“Would you risk it?” She challenged him. “If it were you?”

Mick laughed at the question. “Just like most things, I think you could talk me into it. And that’s what we’re depending on here. You need to do your thing.”

“My thing? What exactly is my thing?”

“When you dig your heels in, become relentlessly determined, and don’t shut up until you get your way.”

“Oh that thing. Yeah, I can do that.”

“Should we swim?” Mick asked, pulling her to her feet and then pretending to give her a little push toward the edge of the dock.

“Try it and I’ll drown you.” She needled his side with her elbow.

“You think you’re so tough?” He turned her and held her body against his.

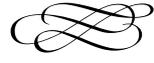
“Tougher than you. Don’t make me show you.”

With a rush of impulsivity, Mick leaned down and kissed her lips. It was both shocking yet not surprising at all. A long time coming. Melting in to his arms she let the sound of the waves create the rhythm of the kiss, the movement of their bodies.

A far-off car horn blared and broke them apart. He stared down into her eyes, searching her face for a reaction. Finally he spoke, his arms still wrapped around her.

“I know you’re stronger than I am. I’m weak as hell when I’m around you.”

CHAPTER 18



CHARLIZE

There was no other way to get through this. They were falling. Careening toward the ground without a soft place to land. And so they would make that soft place in one another.

It was both selfish and short-sighted. Impulsive and dangerous. And yet she knew from the moment he kissed her there would be no turning back. The deserted beach was calling out to them. A siren song of relief. The promise of ecstasy on the sand.

They didn't speak, they could hardly pry their lips away long enough to breathe, let alone find anything to say. Words were dangerous. Charlize knew either one of them might say the wrong thing. Create doubt that they should keep going.

Mick lifted her off the ground and she wrapped her legs around him. Effortlessly he carried her off the dock and his feet were soon sinking in the sand as he kissed at her neck, sending chills through her body.

This moment required a vulnerability she hardly felt prepared for. To give herself over to him in the sand, under the moon and stars was all she wanted, but she also understood it was baring herself in more ways than one. She craved order. Prided herself on her ability to remain in control. This was not planned. Not well thought out, but as he laid her on the sand, all thoughts left her mind. There was only the heat between their bodies. The sound of the waves. The feel of his hand beneath her shirt.

“Mick,” she gasped out as he squeezed and nibbled his way across her chest. The exhilaration was enough to make her want to shriek. She panted out his name a few more times as he stripped her clothes away. Pulling at his shirt, she lifted it off his body and tossed it to the side. For a brief moment the light of the moon cast a glow behind him as he hovered over her. His muscles chiseled and flexed, sweat gathering on his chest.

She reached for his belt, frantically pulling it away. She was desperate to be filled by him. A longing in her core to finally know what it would feel like to take all of him. To take every ounce of exhaustion and defeat they were feeling and turn it into a blaze of passion.

“Take me, Mick,” she breathed into his lips.

“Charlize,” he said, pulling back slightly and brushing her hair away from her eyes. “I’ve wanted you for so long. I never wanted to lose you.”

“You have me now. Right now.” She unbuttoned his jeans and slipped them over his hips. She was ready for him. All of him. Without another beat of hesitation he entered her wet core, plunging deeply, filling her.

The soft sand was on her back. The stars above her head. And the only man she was certain truly understood her was taking her to the brink of sheer ecstasy. If there was a perfect moment in this life, she was living it.

His breath was rapid and his biceps rock solid. Mick’s eyes locked on hers. She felt the heat in her body grow as she tensed against his firm pulsing shaft. He pinched at the peaks of her breasts, nibbled at the soft spot where her neck met her shoulder. He knew. He knew her well, even though they’d never ventured down this path before. Every spot was tantalized as he brought her to climax.

Her gasps of his name were swallowed up by the sounds of the sea. She could feel he, too, was exploding with pleasure. Their frenzied groans and gasps of climaxing mixed together, a language they were both speaking fluently.

A moment later his arms gave way and he collapsed to her side. She rolled against him, the warmth of his body enveloping her cool skin. This was not just an escape. A distraction. A release. As she lay in his arms, she knew it was something far more transcending. Their souls had connected, and even after the waves of pleasure had subsided, it remained. It would always remain.

CHAPTER 19



MICK

This might have been the best thing about what had happened on the beach. If there was anything to top that amazing moment, it was that they were laughing. Effortlessly giggling. There was no awkwardness between them. The jokes came as easily as the passionate kisses had.

Mick couldn't help but grin as he and Charlize made their way back to their corporate housing apartment. It had been more than he had dreamed, and there had been so many dreams of Charlize. The soft glow of moonlight guided their path, casting silhouettes on the pavement as they headed to the door. Despite the gentle breeze that rustled their clothes, the warmth of their connection lingered.

As they reached their apartment, Mick couldn't help but tease Charlize, "You know, I just found sand in places I didn't know existed."

Charlize chuckled as she fiddled with the doorknob, her voice filled with delight. "Same here. Let's hope no one saw us out there. We were like two college kids with nowhere better to hook up. It's a little embarrassing."

"As the one with my ass in the air, I wasn't embarrassed at all; we could have charged for that show we put on."

Inside the apartment, they discarded their sandy clothes and shared a playful laugh about their impromptu escapade. The lingering traces of the beach clung to them, as if the ocean itself wanted to remind them of the passion they'd shared.

Finally cleaned off and fresh from the shower, Mick pulled Charlize into his arms, their bodies fitting together effortlessly. They sank into the couch, pulling the throw blanket over them.

Charlize, her voice still tinged with laughter, rested her head on Mick's chest. "You know," she began, "I think I might be done with all this work soon. I really mean it this time. I know we've said it before but I can picture it now."

Mick raised an eyebrow, genuinely curious. "I would love to see you really sail off into the sunset."

She chuckled softly, her fingers tracing patterns on his chest. "This organization, it's bigger than just us. It's strong, and it'll continue even after we leave. I've been grinding away for so long, answering Carmen's calls for new cases like it's my sole purpose in life. But I've come to understand that there might be more to life than this. And just because I'm not there to save the day doesn't mean someone else can't do it."

Mick listened attentively, his heart swelling with affection for the woman in his arms. He couldn't help but wonder what her plans might entail, and if there was a place for him in them.

"So," he asked gently, "If not literally sailing into the sunset, what do you think you'll do when this is over?"

Charlize's expression turned somber, her eyes cast away from him. "It'll depend on how it all goes down. If we manage to pull this off, if everyone is safe, and justice is served, maybe I'll find myself back on a beach somewhere."

A wistful smile played on his lips as he squeezed her tightly. "I never used to like the beach all that much, but after tonight, I can't wait to go back."

Mick could tell something had changed. She didn't laugh this time, and he knew that joke was funny. "And if things don't work out as planned? If we fail, or if people lose their children or their lives because of us? What will you do then?"

Her gaze turned haunted as she finally looked back up at him. She spoke quietly, her voice carrying a hint of resignation, "If that happens, Mick, I'll be gone. In the night,

without looking back, I'll simply disappear. The darkness will swallow me up, and I won't find my way back out."

"Not if I don't let you go. I won't let you disappear. You can't run away when my arms are wrapped around you, holding you tight." He squeezed her again.

Their fingers intertwined as they sat with their breaths in sync. There was one more thing he knew she needed to hear. Something she deserved to hear.

"The fight we had, and the time we spent apart, it was torture for me. I screwed up, Charlize. I should have been there for you, supported you through it, instead of trying to force you into getting help. Like I'm the picture of perfect mental health. What do I know?"

"Mick, don't." She leaned up a bit but he shook his head and continued.

"I thought I was doing the right thing, but I see now that I should have been your partner and had your back, not turned it into some big thing that could have cost you your job. I made things worse for you and I was too stubborn to admit it."

She reached out to touch his chin making sure she had his full attention.

"Mick," she began, her voice soft but resolute, "you weren't completely wrong. I did have some darkness inside me that led to reckless choices and impulsive decisions. Some of the things the Kinross Organization did after you outed my rash actions actually helped me. I think I needed to be called out on it in order to deal with some shit. But I can feel it rising again, an antsy impatience, and a desperation that's been gnawing at me. Maybe I don't have it under control."

Mick's heart ached at her words, and he tightened his grip around her, trying to be the anchor that kept her from floating away. "It'll be different this time."

"How do you know?"

"Because last time you had to decide if you should wait for me or go it alone. This time, I'll be there no matter what."

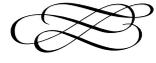
We're going to be exactly this close together from this point forward."

Her laugh was like a lightning bolt through his body.

"This close?" she asked, gesturing to their current cuddling position. "That might make getting the job done a little difficult."

"Maybe, but it'll certainly be more fun."

CHAPTER 20



MICK

All the watching he'd been doing had finally paid off but it brought him no joy. He'd found what Carmen had asked him to and it only turned his stomach. There was a guard. A man he'd spotted that could be turned. It was obvious in the way he interacted with the children. How he went out of his way to bring whatever small comforts he could to their mothers. In the dark hell all around them, this particular man subtly tried to offer bright spots.

In his mind, those small kindnesses shouldn't matter. Being the nicest one among the monsters wasn't enough to earn you a free pass for all your wrongdoing. For all the times the man stayed silent. But that's why Mick wasn't in charge. He'd never be diplomatic enough to make decisions that would pay off in the long run if it meant giving something to the scum in return.

Mick watched from the shadows as Harry Wallen Charinski, one of the guards employed by Angels of a New Day, parked his car outside the diner. Over the past few days, he had carefully observed Harry, trying to gauge the man's character, searching for any signs of weakness or vulnerability that could be exploited. It was a dangerous game he was about to play. It could end in blowing his cover completely.

As Mick entered the diner, the familiar aroma of sizzling bacon and freshly brewed coffee enveloped him. The place was nearly empty, except for a few folks who sat with the posture of regulars, scattered at the counter and in various booths. It was the perfect setting for what he had in mind.

Taking a seat at the far end of the diner, Mick was careful to choose a booth that offered a clear view of the entrance. He had to time this encounter just right. He couldn't afford to raise any suspicions. With his back to the wall, he ordered a cup of coffee and waited.

It didn't take long. Harry entered the diner, his shoulders slumped, and his weary eyes scanning the room for an empty spot to sit. He seemed like a man burdened by a heavy secret, and that was a good sign. At least it bothered him to be a bastard.

As Harry approached an unoccupied booth, Mick seized the opportunity. He rose from his seat, his footsteps quiet on the worn linoleum floor. With calculated precision, he slipped into the booth across from Harry just as the guard was about to sit down. Apparently, his skills for watching his surroundings were not all that impressive for someone in his line of work.

"Easy, Harry," Mick said softly, his voice a soothing balm to the guard's frayed nerves.

"Who are you?" Harry leaned back, his face tight and unimpressed.

The diner buzzed with the low hum of banter, masking their conversation from prying ears. Harry's eyes darted around, but he realized there was no escape from this encounter.

Mick leaned in closer, his grave tone intended to make a point. He had to make Harry understand the urgency of their meeting without arousing too much suspicion from the other patrons.

"I've been watching you," Mick began, his voice low and steady. "You have an interesting job. Fascinating really. But you're not that good at it."

Harry's brow furrowed, and he leaned in closer. "What do you know about my job?"

"I know who you work for, Harry. I know what they're involved in, and I know it's eating you up inside. You don't

smile when you have to do the dirty work like the other guys do.”

Harry’s gaze darted around, his paranoia evident. He leaned in even closer, his voice barely above a whisper. “You need to be careful talking like that. You have no idea who you’re dealing with.”

“I unfortunately know exactly who I’m dealing with and I’m going to make sure when I’m done no one will have anything to say about them for years to come. You can make sure that happens.”

“What do you want from me?” Harry asked, his voice shaky. “I’m no one. You’ve got the wrong guy. I can’t help you.”

Mick leaned back slightly, giving Harry a moment to process. “You know the secrets. You know how things work. I need you to go on the record, to testify about everything you’ve seen and done while working for them. It’s time to bring them down, so you can either help clear the path or get bulldozed by me.”

Harry swallowed hard. “I don’t like this any more than you do. But you have no idea what these people are capable of. I’m not getting involved with this. I can’t.”

Mick had anticipated push back. It was a risk for Harry to turn on his employer. One he didn’t seem willing to take.

“I didn’t expect you’d do this out of the goodness of your heart. You’d need a push. Consider this a shove in the right direction.” Mick slid a large envelope across the table. “Inside you’ll find plenty of incriminating evidence against you. Help us and that goes away.”

Harry’s eyes widened, then narrowed quickly with anger. “I don’t need you to do shit for me.”

“The thing is, you do.” Mick shrugged coolly. “This whole thing will topple. This is your one shot not to get crushed in the rubble.”

“I’m not worried about saving my own ass,” Harry began, his voice angry.

“I’m not a fan of this plan either, but if you cooperate, if you help us bring these people to justice, we’ll ensure you’re cleared. We’ll relocate you somewhere safe, where they can’t touch you. But I think you know you’re on the wrong side of this.”

Harry slumped back in his seat, the weight of the decision slugging him like a heavy cement block to his gut.

“Think about it, Harry. You hate this shit. I’ve been watching. This isn’t what you want to be doing. You can be a part of something bigger, something that will make amends for the past. We need you to help us save those women and children. Are you in?”

“Who do you work for?” Harry pressed, seeming to already know he wouldn’t get an answer. “I want more. Details. A guarantee that you’re not going to screw me over. I want a deal on paper.”

“Because you’re going to give me enough to put all these men away?”

“If that’s what it takes. I just want to know for sure the people I care about are not going to pay the price for the things I’ve done.”

Mick’s gaze bore into Harry’s, a silent reassurance that they were in this together. “We’ll protect you. I don’t personally think you’re worthy of that protection but the people way above my paygrade think making deals with devils pays off in the end.”

“I’m no devil.” Harry seemed insulted and Mick found that laughable.

“The good news is we don’t have to agree on that. All I need to know is that you’re willing to be our man on the inside. I need information. The locations of all the properties. Best times to strike them to keep people safe. I want to know who in the leadership of this organization is culpable. I want to take them all down.”

“Gee is that all?” Harry sighed loudly. “You have no idea who you’re up against. These people are well-connected. At the end of the day, you can bring this all to light and odds are someone will just bury it again.”

“The people I work for have the right kind of shovels to dig it all up. Just get me what we need and I’ll take it from there.”

With their fate now entwined, Mick and Harry sat in the quiet diner, hashing out the details of what was to come next. The battle against Angels of a New Day had just escalated, the scale of success tipping in their direction now.

“You think I’m a piece of shit?” Harry asked, looking suddenly concerned about Mick’s opinion of him.

“Who cares what I think? You give me what I want, and you get what you need. That’s all that matters here.”

“I’m not a monster,” Harry mumbled, pulling the menu up as though he had a sudden urge to read it. “I started this job thinking I was going to do some good. I’d heard about this charity helping single mothers. That’s how I grew up. My mom busting her ass to keep us fed and off the streets. For her, there was nothing that could really make a difference. We were always falling behind. Always scraping to get by. She decided having a man was better than doing it alone. She just didn’t choose very wisely. He decided something too. She didn’t deserve to live.”

“I uh . . .” Mick sat up a little straighter.

“I signed up to help women like my mother. At first that’s what I was doing. Intakes. Convincing women this organization would save them. That was a year ago. Six months ago, I was sent to one of the buildings where they were short-handed. A flu or something broke out and suddenly they’re sitting me down in some shit hole apartment building, telling me I can’t let anyone leave. That the women weren’t to leave without an escort. The children were kept separate. At first, I was told these women were struggling. Not safe to be around their kids. This was a last ditch effort to help them stay

in the program and keep their children. I thought I was helping them.”

“You didn’t notice the chains and the criminal behavior?”

“It wasn’t like that, or they didn’t let me see that at first. A month went by. I was supposed to be keeping the children safe. Keeping the women from leaving so they couldn’t get themselves in trouble.”

“When did you know?” Mick could see the pain on Harry’s face growing. The story was plausible. An organization this vile could certainly pull people in.

“One night there was this argument. I overheard one of the other guys fighting with a woman named Alexia. He was pushing her around. Saying she hadn’t worked hard enough that night. I pulled him off her, started asking questions, and it all unraveled from there. I didn’t know they had these women out selling drugs, I thought we were trying to keep them from using. It hit me like a ton of bricks.”

“And you didn’t say anything? You just went along with it?”

“They were watching me. Waiting to see if I would turn on them. I knew enough by then to realize one guy wouldn’t be able to take them down. I’d be silenced instantly.”

“So you joined in?”

“No, of course not. But I made them think I was fine with it. That I wouldn’t say anything. They started giving me more responsibilities. And I started helping where I could. Keeping them safe as much as possible. I sneak extra food in. When I’m on duty, I take the moms upstairs to spend time with their kids. And I’ve been trying to figure out how I could bring these people down. I’ve had no clue, but I knew it would have to be from the inside. The moment I left, people would suffer. Can’t you understand that?”

“Why do you care what I think? Just do what I tell you. We don’t need to be best friends. When this is done, we’ll never see each other again. I’m not the judge and jury for you.”

“I’m trying to make you understand that showing up here, saying you can do something about this. I’m all in. I just want to make sure there is no backlash on my family.”

Mick pulled out his small notebook and pen and slid it over to Harry. “Start writing addresses. Draw maps of the buildings. Tell me about the training you get in security. The tactics we can expect when we storm these places. Tell me about the basements. The drugs. The punishments. All of it. I’ll order some coffee. We’re not going anywhere for a while.”

“I’m supposed to be back a work in an hour,” Harry said, checking his watch.

“Tell them you’re sick. You’re not going to make it back today. Some bad eggs at the diner.”

“No,” Harry replied urgently enough to make Mick worry. “Alphonso is there today. He’s a piece of shit. Loves to hurt people. If I’m not there to keep him in line, he’s the worst of them. Sick. I have to be back. I won’t leave them alone with him.”

Mick was silent for a long moment. Maybe he was being played. Harry could easily go back to his buddies, tell them what he knew and blow the entire operation. It was an enormous risk. But at the same time, it wasn’t. Because looking at Harry’s expression, it was obvious. The fear in his eyes that he might not be able to protect those women today was unmistakable.

“Fine,” Mick said with a sigh and the wave of his hand. “Write what you can. Make it helpful and then go back to work.”

Relief washed over him. “Thank you.”

Mick ordered coffee and watched closely as Harry jotted everything down frantically. This might work. This might actually be enough. Hope filled Mick and he shoved it quickly aside. Hope was distracting. There was no time for distractions.

CHAPTER 21



Charlize sat across from Brenda in the small, tidy office, her heart pounding with anticipation. She had just shared what she considered a game-changing discovery—the ideal grant for Angels of a New Day, a grant worth a staggering twenty-two million dollars. She explained to Brenda that she’d meticulously researched the grant’s criteria, and their charity ticked all the right boxes, making them prime candidates. The prospect of such a significant windfall had left Brenda practically giddy with excitement.

The truth was, this was a grant Carmen had created and made look incredibly official. It was the perfect grant because it was not real.

“That’s incredible, Charlize,” Brenda exclaimed, her eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. “Just imagine what we could do with that kind of funding. The impact we could make.”

Charlize nodded, her mind racing with the possibilities. “Absolutely, Brenda.” Charlize needed to keep planting important seeds. “That’s a lot of money. Can you imagine getting our hands on that?” She winked, subtly trying to let Brenda know she was interested in lining her own pockets.

Brenda smiled back devilishly as Charlize explained more.

“But there’s one crucial element we need to secure this grant. I’ve got to nail the powerful testimonials from the women we’ve helped in the past. Personal stories that will resonate with the grant committee.”

Brenda's initial enthusiasm waned slightly as she considered Charlize's request. "Can't we use the ones we already have on our website? They were curated by our marketing team, and they're quite compelling."

Charlize had prepared for this argument. "Using the existing testimonials won't be enough. They need to be authentic, in-depth conversations with the women themselves to provide a more profound insight into their experiences. Those testimonials on the website are excellent, Brenda, but we need to take it a step further. We need to connect with these women on a deeper level, to truly understand the impact the organization has had on their lives. I made such a great connection with Rose the other day."

Brenda hesitated, her brow furrowing. "I understand your point. It's tough though. Healing is not linear. Some of these women are never truly done with the work."

The irony in that statement was tough to swallow, but Charlize let Brenda continue.

"Rose, for instance, hasn't been feeling well lately. It might not be the best time to approach her."

Charlize knew that Rose was ready to talk. She was at a breaking point and with another long conversation, maybe she could get her to go on record with what was really going on. She couldn't afford to wait. "The grant application deadline is rapidly approaching. Urgency is paramount. Rose doesn't need to be perfect, but I do think she's vital. She must be someone special as you had her featured at your last fundraising gala. We're talking about twenty-two million dollars. I appreciate your concern for Rose," Charlize replied, her voice firm. "But we don't have the luxury of time. We need to act swiftly."

Brenda still appeared reluctant, torn between the fear of being caught in her web of lies and crimes versus the allure of twenty-two million dollars. Charlize sensed that greed was beginning to overshadow Brenda's initial fear.

"Maybe next week she could—"

“The opportunity would have passed by then. This grant is tailor-made for Angels of a New Day. Another like this won’t come along for at least another calendar year. There are only nineteen other organizations that have applied. You have a one in nineteen chance of being granted millions of dollars. And with me spearheading the endeavor, your odds are even better. Why are you hesitating to let me speak with Rose, is there something else I should know?” This was a daring move. If she spooked Brenda, there was a chance the whole thing was scrapped. Inquiring about something being wrong could have been enough to send Brenda running for the hills.

“It’s not that at all. Rose just might—”

“I don’t mean it has to be Rose necessarily, but it has to be someone, and it has to be immediate.” Charlize was channeling the boss-babe power of her tailored suit and glamorous jewelry. She was not going to back down and she looked the part of a corporate powerhouse so she might as well act like one.

Brenda sighed, realizing she might not win this argument. “I’ll make a phone call,” she conceded, reaching for her cell phone. “I’ll see if we can arrange for Rose to come in today. If not her, then someone else.”

Charlize’s heart soared with relief. She knew she had pushed Brenda to the edge, but it was a necessary gamble. Time was of the essence. Now, all she needed was a way to get Rose alone, away from Brenda’s watchful eyes, so they could have the candid conversation. Shaking Brenda would not likely be easy, but hard things always paid off.

It was nearly an hour of waiting in her office, pacing around and texting Mick before Brenda came back in. Rose was standing timidly behind her and trying to look cheerful.

“It’s good to see you again Rose, please come sit down. I’m sorry to have pulled you away from whatever you were doing. Hopefully Brenda let you know how important this is.”

“She did,” Rose replied, keeping her back arrow straight. “Just let me know how I can help.”

“As I said,” Brenda explained, gesturing to one of the chairs in the room, “Charlize will ask you some questions and you’ll share with us your experiences. That will help us possibly secure more funding from a very important grant.”

Us. That part was going to be tough. I meant that Brenda intended to stay for the conversation. She settled into a chair and looked tight and uncomfortable in her own skin.

Charlize sent the message she’d typed into her phone for nearly thirty minutes. The plan would need to be put into motion now that Brenda was here. All she could hope was that Carmen was able to make it work.

“Rose, you and I chatted a bit at the gala,” Charlize began, her mind still wandering a bit to what else needed to happen. “I’m wondering if you can sum up for me how Angels of a New Day has impacted your life?”

Rose, aware of the high stakes of this conversation, plastered a forced smile on her face. She knew she had to play her part well and Charlize was relieved she seemed to be holding it together.

“Angels of a New Day has been an absolute lifeline for me. I don’t know where I’d be without their support. Actually that’s not true . . .”

Brenda tensed up and her lips pursed as Rose explained.

“I do know where I would be. I was heading down a terrible path. I’d likely be dead. I couldn’t get myself together. Everything kept crashing down on me until they came around and finally gave me hope.”

Brenda watched Rose intently, her expression veiled but she had a ready-to-pounce posture.

Charlize continued, as she typed out some notes. She was trying hard to not look too interested. It was important work but if she came on too strong, Brenda might assume something was up. “That’s great to hear,” Charlize replied, her voice laden with false enthusiasm. “Could you share some specific ways they’ve helped you?”

Rose was an artist. The way she was crafting her answers made it clear why she'd been brought to the gala to be a shining example of success. She was quick. Confident. And she gave her answers without ever hinting at the dark truth. "Well, their unbelievable team provided me with a safe place to stay, away from a toxic environment. They've given me resources, therapy, and, most importantly, a sense of community and belonging. I can't thank Angels of a New Day enough for what they've done for me and my child."

Brenda nodded approvingly, seemingly content with Rose's responses. Her phone, placed face down on the table, vibrated with urgency, but she chose to ignore it for the moment. Charlize kept up the façade, asking a few more generic questions to maintain the appearance of a genuine conversation.

Then, as if on cue, Brenda's phone rang once more and she didn't seem able to ignore it this time. Lifting it with an annoyed sigh, Brenda glanced at her phone, her brow furrowing in frustration.

"I'm so sorry," Brenda said, looking torn between the conversation and the pressing matter on her phone. "I have to take this call. It's something important."

Charlize maintained her composure. "Of course, Brenda. We'll wait here for you. We won't be much longer."

Brenda nodded, hastily rising from her chair. "Thank you, Charlize. Please, continue."

As Brenda rushed out of the room, Charlize seized the opportunity. She leaned toward Rose, her voice low and urgent. "Rose, we're making incredible progress. Proof is building. Our case is getting stronger by the minute. But you know what we really need."

Rose's eyes widened in alarm. "What do you mean? Brenda might be right back. We shouldn't—"

Charlize glanced at the door to ensure they were truly alone. "The truth is, I orchestrated that call to Brenda. My people will have her distracted for a while with something

urgent. I needed the time alone with you. We talked briefly at the gala, and you admitted that the organization is dangerous and cruel. I need you to go on the record, Rose. To speak to investigators and, if necessary, testify against Angels of a New Day. I understand I'm asking a lot of you, but it's crucial."

Rose's eyes darted away and she snapped her head around to make sure Brenda was still gone. "Testify? Are you crazy? They have my child. They'll hurt him if I say anything."

Charlize leaned in closer, her voice laced with urgency. "Rose, we can protect you and your child. We're gathering evidence against them. If you testify, if you speak out, we can make sure they pay for what they've done. We can save everyone. All the children."

Tears welled up in Rose's eyes but she wiped them away. She couldn't be caught crying in here if Brenda returned. "I want to believe you, but I'm scared. I've seen what they're capable of."

Charlize reached into her bag and retrieved a small recorder. She placed it on the table, her determination unwavering. "We have evidence, Rose. We're going to take them down, but we need your testimony. You can help ensure they never hurt anyone else."

Rose hesitated. "What do you want me to say?"

Charlize nodded, her voice steady. "Tell the truth, Rose. Explain everything you've seen and experienced. That's all I need for now. Enough to get the right people to do the right thing."

Rose finally nodded in agreement, her eyes falling on the recording device. "Okay I'll tell them everything but I am only one person. That won't be enough."

"I got word today we've got a guard willing to go on record too. He's seen it all. Wants it to stop. You won't be the only one."

“Harry?” Rose asked, her shoulders lifting as she leaned in urgently. “Is the guard Harry? Is that who you are talking with?”

“Yes.” Charlize would have normally been tighter lipped about the overall investigation, but she saw it as a good sign that even amongst the women involved, they found Harry to be a good choice for a witness.

“He’s lovely. He tries everything he can to make things easier for us. It doesn’t always work but he tries.”

“So you think we can trust him?” Charlize held her breath.

“I trust him.” Rose bit her lip and looked again at the recording device.

Charlize pressed the record button on the device and listened as the details spilled out of Rose. She couldn’t believe she was capturing every word of Rose’s harrowing account. She described the horrors inflicted upon the women within the organization, the control they exerted, and the use of basements in some of the buildings for punishment and torture. The tactics were cruel but effective. The women were so beaten down emotionally that they would do whatever they were told.

Rose stopped to take a breath. They were making progress, but time was of the essence. Charlize knew they had to wrap up the conversation before Brenda returned. There was the sound of high heels on marble tile heading their way. She swiftly changed the topic of conversation, steering it back toward lighthearted jokes and small talk.

Moments later, Brenda reentered the room, looking frazzled and disoriented. She glanced at Rose and Charlize, seemingly torn between her phone call and the ongoing conversation.

“I’m so sorry for the interruption,” Brenda said, her voice strained. “Apparently there was a small fire at one of our apartment buildings. But it was nothing. All the women and children are perfectly safe. Just some smoke alarms going off after a burnt lunch on the stove. That gave me a scare but

turned out okay.” She had her hand on her heart as if she cared if anyone was hurt.

Charlize smiled politely. “Not a problem, Brenda. We were just finishing up. Rose is there anyone else you think we should talk to? I’d love to get another testimonial or two. Who else would be good for this?”

Rose stood and then paused, statue stiff. “I would say whoever Brenda thinks. I don’t really know.”

“You’re probably closer to any of the women. I’d really value your opinion.” Charlize felt terrible for the pressure she was putting on Rose. She was being squeezed in a vise right now and unfortunately Charlize was the one spinning it closed.

“Yes, Rose,” Brenda said gently, “who else do you think Charlize should speak with?”

“Maybe Sophia? She’s doing so well in her new job at the coffee shop. She talks all the time about how lucky she feels to have a place to live and stay healthy.”

“She does?” Brenda asked, trying to sound upbeat. “Then we’ll bring her in next. Thank you, Rose. Will you go down and wait in my office? Your ride should be here shortly.”

Rose walked out without another word and Brenda stood staring at Charlize. The air turned cold in the room. There was something shifting. Brenda wasn’t doing anything all that different, but Charlize could feel a change.

“Did you get what you wanted?” Brenda asked coolly.

The word wanted hung in the air. It felt loaded.

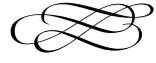
“I think we’re on the right track. We could be celebrating millions rolling in here soon. Can you even imagine?”

“Send me the link to the grant opportunity,” Brenda said as she turned away. “I’d like to review it myself.”

“I’ll email it now.” Charlize wasn’t worried. Carmen’s team was diligent. If they created this fake grant opportunity they’d have done enough to make sure it couldn’t be spotted as a fake. That wasn’t worrying, but the fact that Brenda suddenly wanted to see it was.

She could hear the ticking clock in the corner of her office as the room fell otherwise silent. It was a reminder. Like a bomb counting down. Things could blow at any moment.

CHAPTER 22



CHARLIZE

Charlize paced back and forth across the living room, her heart pounding in her chest like a jackhammer. Mick was late. Only by a few minutes but he said he'd be there by now. She needed to talk to him. Not on the phone but in person. If she was going to tell him she'd screwed up, she wanted to look him in the eye.

She had done it again—rushed in without thinking, putting everything on the line. She knew the risks, but the pressure had been unbearable, and she had acted on instinct. Pulling Rose in on such short notice, pressing for another woman to come in and talk to her. It was too much too soon. Now, she couldn't shake the feeling that she had blown their cover. Brenda knew something was up.

Mick strolled in looking excited. It was as if he didn't know the world might come crashing down on them any moment. She wanted to take his shoulders and shake them wildly. This was no time to be at ease.

But she didn't need to shake him, he spotted something was wrong immediately upon seeing her. "What happened?" Mick asked gently, trying to break through the storm of anxiety swirling around her.

She stopped her pacing and turned to him, her eyes wide with panic. "Mick, I messed up. I pushed too hard with Brenda. She seemed suspicious, like she was onto something. What if she figures out we're not who we say we are?"

Mick sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I know you’re prone to moments of self-doubt, but I also know how incredibly resourceful and determined you are. I am sure you played your part perfectly today. And even if Brenda is suspicious, it doesn’t mean the whole operation is compromised. Carmen always has us covered. And we have each other.”

Charlize continued to pace, her mind racing with worst-case scenarios. “What if Rose and her child are in danger now? What if I just made things worse for them?”

Mick rounded the couch and intercepted her like a catcher wrangling a wild pitch from behind the plate. He gently took Charlize’s hands, forcing her to look into his eyes. “We’re doing everything we can to protect them, Charlize. But we can’t control every outcome. We have to trust that Harry and Rose will do their part while we do ours.”

“I’m the one who pushed Rose into giving a statement today.”

“She’s on the record?”

“I already made copies and sent digital files to Carmen.” At least that was something she could feel good about.

“Henry gave me everything he could as well. We only had an hour but we’re going to meet again tomorrow. This is good news. We’re finally getting somewhere. You know the heat gets turned up a little when we get close.”

She nodded, her anxiety still simmering beneath the surface. “You’re right. But I won’t be able to forgive myself if anything happens to Rose.”

Mick squeezed her hands reassuringly. “We had a full day. We got a lot of shit accomplished. There’s nothing else we can do tonight.”

Charlize took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. She knew Mick was right, and panicking wouldn’t help their cause. “Why were you late tonight? I was freaking out here and you were twenty minutes past when you said you’d be home.” She narrowed her eyes at him.

Mick smiled and then glanced toward the door. “Actually, I have something to show you. Come with me.”

Confused but intrigued, Charlize trailed behind Mick as he led her to the hallway stairs. She followed as he climbed up to the roof, her curiosity growing with each step. When they reached the rooftop, she gasped in surprise.

Mick had set up a cozy little area with piles of pillows and blankets, a small TV, and containers of takeout Chinese food. The night sky stretched out above them, filled with stars, and the city lights twinkled in the distance.

“What’s all this?” Charlize asked, her worries momentarily forgotten.

Mick grinned and gestured to the makeshift movie night setup. “I thought we could use a break from all the stress and uncertainty. We are always moving forward. Always on to the next thing. Sometimes we need to celebrate. Today you and I got two very important witnesses to tell their story. We deserve a minute to just be still.”

“We’re watching a movie?” her voice was a whisper though she hadn’t meant it to be.

“I remembered that movie you mentioned once, the old classic. Children of the Bold Sea. I thought we could watch it together. I had to really bust my ass to find a VCR, but the only copy of the movie I could find was in that format. I’ve got it all working now.”

Charlize’s eyes welled up with tears of gratitude. She couldn’t believe Mick had remembered such a small detail from a casual conversation.

“How did you . . .?” she started to ask, her voice choked with emotion.

Mick chuckled and shrugged. “I have a good memory, and I pay attention when it matters. We were out driving one day and you saw the movie on the sign outside a theater. It was the fiftieth anniversary of its release. The look on your face was so nostalgic and happy. We were in the middle of a job. I couldn’t

take you that day but I knew when we had something good to celebrate we'd watch this movie.”

Charlize stepped closer and wrapped her arms around him, hugging him tightly. “I really never pictured you as a romantic. Half the time you barely seem like you're paying attention.”

“I'm very good at looking stupid.”

“Yes! Expert-level actor. I thought for sure you tuned out most of what I say.”

“No. Not most of what you say. Maybe twenty-five percent of what you say. It's pretty much anytime you're complaining about my driving. Or when you make fun of my clothes. I definitely tune out when you try to tell me about the reality TV show you're watching. OK, maybe it's more like fifty percent of what you say.”

He held her close, and she felt the rumble in his chest as he chuckled at his own joke. A habit she hated but somehow also made him endearing.

“Let's forget about the world for a little while and enjoy the movie,” he said softly.

As they settled onto the blankets, Charlize couldn't help but feel a sense of comfort wash over her. Despite the chaos and danger that surrounded them, they had this moment of respite. The opening credits of her favorite movie were like a familiar lullaby. A song she knew by heart. And she was starting to realize Mick knew her by heart as well.

CHAPTER 23



MICK

Mick met Harry at the same diner, the tense atmosphere palpable as they took a seat. Harry looked exhausted; his face etched with worry lines that hadn't been there the last time they'd met. It was clear something had gone terribly wrong.

“What happened, Harry?” Mick asked, his voice low and steady. He could sense the panic emanating from the guard and it was tying his own stomach in knots.

Harry leaned in closer, his eyes darting around to make sure no one was eavesdropping. “Rose didn't come back last night. She was supposed to return after her meeting with Charlize, but she never showed up. I have no idea where she is or what they've done with her.”

Mick's heart sank. Rose's disappearance was a serious complication they couldn't afford. Anything could be happening to her right now, and Charlize would never recover from the guilt of getting Rose caught.

“Tell me everything, Harry. What do you know?”

Harry swallowed hard, his voice trembling. “I got orders this morning. Bad ones. I was supposed to drive her son to a different apartment building this morning. The one where kids go before they . . . disappear.”

“What do you mean, disappear?” There was still so much they didn't know about this organization. Trafficking was a heinous crime that took on all forms. He almost didn't want to know what happened to the children who disappeared. But he couldn't help if he didn't get those answers.

“Sometimes when the mother screws up bad, they’re permanently separated from their children. I’ve only seen it happen twice and I don’t know what happened to the mothers, but I do know the children were sent away. From what I understand, if the children are very young, they are likely adopted out on the black market worldwide. If they are older, they run the risk of being forced into some form of trafficking themselves. All of that happens out of this one building. They call it the dead end building and not because it’s located on a dead end.”

“The boy is with you now?” Mick asked urgently.

Harry nodded, and looked out the window at his car. “I couldn’t bring myself to take him there. I care about Rose, Mick. She’s someone special to me. Our circumstances are all messed up and the situation is horrible, but there is something between us. Something we never have the opportunity to explore because of all the dark shit around us all the time. I need to find her and I need to protect her son.”

Damn. Feelings were involved here. That always complicated things. Mick knew firsthand that when you love someone, it actually became harder to protect them, not easier. You couldn’t be objective if all you thought about was keeping them alive. What it would feel like if you lost them. It was like trying to drive through fog, not impossible but certainly harder than a bright sunny day.

“The boy is still with you? He’s in your car?”

“Yes, I couldn’t drop him off. I think something happened yesterday after her meeting, and she’s been caught or is being punished. I can’t risk this boy’s life by taking him to that place.”

Mick’s mind raced. They couldn’t afford to wait. If Harry didn’t show up at the location soon, it would raise suspicions, and everyone involved would be in grave danger. Mick needed to act quickly.

“Where do you think Rose might be kept if she’s being punished?” Mick asked, trying to formulate a plan.

Harry hesitated for a moment, thinking. “There are three apartment buildings with basements. I don’t know which one she might be in. I thought maybe they decided to keep her separated from her son as punishment for something small. But once I got the orders this morning, I knew it was much worse. They’re trying to permanently separate them. And that means they don’t plan to keep Rose around anymore. They’re giving away their power over her if they sever her relationship completely with her son. There would be nothing left to lord over her and keep her quiet. Which means a more permanent solution to silencing her.”

Mick knew they didn’t have time to search all three apartments. They also hadn’t secured any tactical force or bureau that was willing to get search warrants or participate in this yet. It wasn’t time to try to take these people down. He needed to get Rose and her son out of the equation so they could buy more time to get what they needed. But if Brenda was suspicious enough about Rose to punish her in this horrific way Charlize could be in danger too.

He pulled out his phone and sent a text to Charlize, knowing she was at the office. He couldn’t explain everything but hoped she’d get the message to at least watch her back.

“Harry, we’re going for a ride,” Mick said, his tone firm. “But it has to be somewhere with security cameras, and in public. We need to protect the boy and not blow your cover.”

Harry nodded, his face pale. “I’ll do whatever it takes. Just please help them, Mick.”

He and Mick hurried to the car. Mick glanced at the boy in the backseat, who was hiding and cowering, trying to make himself as small as possible.

“It’s going to be okay,” Mick promised, the plan still coming together in his mind. “A fast food place. That’s where we need to go.”

“You’re hungry or something?” Harry asked sounding annoyed.

“Just trust me. We need this to work.”

CHAPTER 24



CHARLIZE

The office was buzzing with nervous energy as Charlize stared at her phone screen. The ominous and cryptic text from Mick left her with a sinking feeling in her gut. She hadn't seen Brenda that morning, and everyone seemed to be skittering around, talking about an impromptu board meeting. Panic started to bubble up within her as she tried to text Mick back, but there was no response.

Finally, Brenda appeared at her office door, her usually confident demeanor replaced by an air of unease. "Charlize, there's a board meeting. We'd like you to sit in on it. I think it's important for you to be there."

Charlize considered pretending to be sick, but the idea of accessing a board meeting was too valuable. She needed to look these people in the eye and find out for herself who knew what was truly going on. Her gut told her it was all of them but she wanted to see for herself.

With a nod, she followed Brenda to the meeting room, her heart pounding against her ribs. Would this be some kind of ambush? Had they been able to crack her fake background or maybe even discover the fact that the grant proposal she was applying for was not real? Charlize couldn't know for sure what this was about but she had confidence she could talk her way out of any of it. Even if the board was full of heinous criminals, they certainly wouldn't do anything to her in the middle of a corporate office.

As she entered the large board room, she tried to take in everyone's face. It was laughable. It wasn't as if she'd have to

point them out in the lineup someday. These were public figures who, if they were caught, would be easy to identify. But still she raked over their faces, their diamond necklaces, and their expensive cufflinks. How many of them knew about the trafficking and the drugs?

Before she could get that answer, Brenda was directing her to look over at the far wall. The presentation displayed on the screen was regarding the grant Charlize had been working on. The atmosphere was unexpectedly positive, and Charlize couldn't help but wonder if she had misinterpreted Mick's text message. Perhaps her panic had been for nothing, and everything was still on track.

Brenda addressed the whole room, detailing all the positive things about the potential grant funding that might be coming their way. She spoke incredibly highly of Charlize and her expertise. Everyone in the room looked excited and engaged. Whatever concern Charlize had about their interaction yesterday was subsiding.

As the board meeting concluded and people started filing out of the room, Charlize prepared to leave. However, Brenda, along with a man named Stephen and a woman named Fiona, motioned for her to sit back down. Her anxiety surged as they exchanged uneasy glances before finally addressing her.

"Charlize," Brenda began, her voice gravely serious, "this is a difficult conversation. We debated even having it with you but I'm worried what will happen if we don't. You are proving to be an integral part of our team and our best shot at growing what we have here. Obviously, you can tell from the reaction of our board members everyone is excited for the work that you're doing and the contributions we think you'll be able to make. Even if this grant doesn't come through, we have a high-level of confidence that you will increase our funding tremendously."

Charlize heard the words, but the expressions of the three people did not match the positive message. She stayed silent while Stephen began explaining further.

“Brenda, Fiona, and I have been incredibly focused on taking Angels of a New Day to the next level. That’s always been our goal. We started with a very bare-bones idea and have had to be creative in order to ensure the work could continue, no matter how well fundraising was going. There are some very deserving nonprofits that never get the opportunity to succeed because the funding isn’t there. We never wanted that to happen here.”

“I completely understand,” Charlize chimed in. “That’s a big reason I do what I do.”

Brenda looked at the two others and then back at Charlize. “I feel as though you’ve gotten a real look at the place in your time here so far. We’ve granted you access and information that no one outside of the three of us really gets. I’m worried that perhaps you’ve seen or heard things that might give you pause. Some of our funding comes from . . . well, to be frank, traditionally frowned upon practices. We’ve had to do some unconventional things to ensure we have the capital required to truly help people in need.”

Charlize only nodded, wanting them to incriminate themselves as much as possible and afraid if she spoke she might derail them.

Brenda went on. “The time you spent with Rose yesterday, maybe she said something to you that would raise alarms too. I don’t think she was in the right state of mind yesterday. We just want to make sure if you have concerns . . .”

The three board members exchanged nervous glances; their anxiety palpable. Brenda leaned in. “Charlize, we’re a very tight circle here. We’ve been reluctant to invite anyone into it for a long time. We recognize that you bring a skillset we need. But if you think you’ll have trouble reconciling your feelings with some of the less conventional strategies of our organization, I completely understand.”

Charlize let out a boisterous laugh, though her internal turmoil was anything but amusing.

“If you all could see how other nonprofits and corporations I’ve worked for operate, you would not feel the need to have

this conversation. My role here isn't to judge what you do or how you do it, it's to get you the money to keep doing it. Yes, I've peeked behind the curtains and maybe some of the math didn't add up perfectly but I don't need it to. And truly Rose spoke highly of you all. She had nothing but praises all around. What gave you the impression it was anything but that?"

"She looked upset when I came back in. I thought maybe she'd gotten your ear and was complaining about something she didn't agree with or was frustrated with. I was reluctant to bring her in to talk with you and I should have trusted my gut." Brenda shook her head, still scolding herself for the misstep.

"She was lovely and complimentary." Charlize tried to keep her expression neutral.

"It doesn't matter now," Brenda said with a huff. "We've dealt with Rose."

Before Charlize could inquire further, they pushed the conversation forward.

Fiona cleared her throat and took a small step forward. "Charlize, are you comfortable securing more funding, regardless of some decisions we've had to make to keep things afloat in the past? We want you to know that the more profitable we become, the more compensated you will be. Our victories are your financial gains."

Charlize was ready to play ball. "I like the sound of that. Let me put you at ease. I've been in this position for many years. This is how business has to work. That's the way of the world. A bit of ill-gotten gain in the name of helping people isn't enough to scare me off."

She maintained her composure on the surface, but beneath it all, her thoughts were consumed by Rose. The board members appeared to suspect that Rose might have divulged the charity's dark secrets, possibly leading to dire consequences. Even if she was saying otherwise now, it might be too late for Rose.

Relief seemed to fill the three board members as terror consumed her. They all parted ways with jovial smiles and a promise to have lunch later that day. Charlize left the meeting fighting the shake that was roiling through her body. She had to hear from Mick. She had to know if Rose was okay.

CHAPTER 25



MICK

He silenced his cell phone and reluctantly ignored the text messages coming in from Charlize.

Mick kept his hood up, obscuring his face as he sat in the nondescript fast-food restaurant, anxiously spotting and avoiding the surveillance cameras. He had a plan, one that needed to go off without a hitch. A few tables away from him, Nathaniel, Rose's son, sat in a back booth. Harry had gone into the restroom as part of the orchestrated plan.

Leaning in close, Mick whispered to Nathaniel, "Remember, stay in plain view of those cameras. Look up at them a couple of times. This is really important." The boy nodded, wide-eyed and trembling. He clutched the small backpack that contained the few belongings he had with him.

Mick hated to be part of the source of this boy's fear. This was probably so confusing to the kid. But they were running out of time and this was the best Mick could come up with.

Before Harry reappeared from the bathroom, Mick swiftly rose from his seat, making his way over to Nathaniel, who looked up at him with a mask of worry etched onto his face. He knew what had to happen next.

"Come with me, Nathaniel," Mick said, using a firm but gentle tone. He extended a hand, which the boy hesitantly took. He tugged him along a little roughly, but only for show. Mick worried that someone might stop them. Might take notice of what was going on. But people had their faces buried in either their cheeseburgers or their cell phones. Some both.

Together, they exited the restaurant, Mick leading Nathaniel through a maze of alleyways and hidden corners. He couldn't afford to be seen, not with the task he was about to carry out.

About five minutes later, Harry met them in a car parked in a very narrow, deserted alley, his expression one of exhaustion.

"I'm calling now," he explained, gesturing for Nathaniel to stay silent. He picked up his phone and dialed his boss's number, speaking in a hurried and anxious voice.

"Boss, something's gone wrong. I stopped to use the head and took the kid in to the burger place. I figured he'd just sit there for a minute. When I came out he was gone. I asked a couple people and they said some guy came and snatched him. It's like he disappeared into thin air. I looked everywhere. Should I call the police?"

There was a pause on the other end of the line before the boss's stern voice came through, "No. You can't call the cops. We don't need that kind of heat on us. Instead, get the video footage from that restaurant. By any means necessary. Lie, threaten, bribe, do whatever it takes to get them to hand it over."

Harry hesitated for a moment, glancing at Nathaniel, who was now safely hidden in the backseat of the car. Mick could feel the growing tension crushing them all. Mick was silently willing him with his eyes to keep his voice level and cool.

"Okay, boss. I'll get the footage. But what do we do next?"

The boss's voice was chillingly calm as he replied, "Maybe that stranger just solved our problem for us. Nathaniel was going to be sold off or adopted out to someone else since Rose won't be around much longer. Whatever happens to him is not our problem now. Bring me that video footage, and meet me at the basement of the building on Lancaster Avenue."

"Lancaster?" Harry asked, furrowing his brows and shooting Mick a look. "Why there?"

"I want Rose to see that she screwed up and now her kid is gone for good. Let her live with that, for as long as she has left

to live.”

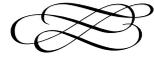
With that, the call ended, and Mick knew they had no choice but to do what the man had asked of them. Anything else would raise too many alarms.

“We’ve got to get her out of there,” Harry said, obviously trying to keep his voice steady as not to scare the boy. “What are we going to do? Are your people ready to help?”

“I’m going to make a few phone calls,” Mick replied calmly though he was anything but. This was not how good missions were supposed to go. You acted only when you were ready and all the pieces were perfectly in place not when someone’s life was on the line and you would need to rush things in order to save them. That’s when things got sloppy. That’s when people got killed. He knew that, and Carmen knew it too. There was a chance she would tell him there was nothing they could do for Rose. Mick would have to look at the little boy in the backseat and admit he wasn’t able to save his mother.

But the problem wasn’t just Nathaniel. Mick knew damn well Harry wasn’t going to take no for an answer either. This was going to happen. Mick would need to make sure it happened as safely as possible.

CHAPTER 26



MICK

Mick pulled over to the side of the road, his hands trembling slightly as he reached for his phone. Charlize's urgent text messages were a stark reminder of just how many moving parts there were to this game. Everyone was running in different directions at full speed. He needed to take a beat, read her messages, process the information, and respond quickly.

The first message popped up on his screen: "Mick, I've got them. Three of the board members offering bribes, discussing their ill-gotten gains. Lunch with them later will be a gold mine. Recording everything."

Mick's fingers flew across the touchscreen keyboard as he replied, "We might need to move faster than that. Calling Carmen now. Jump on the call with us."

The tension in the car was palpable as Mick dialed Carmen's number, and he couldn't help but glance at Nathaniel, who sat quietly in the backseat, unaware of the life-altering events unfolding around him.

"Take him over to the park," Mick said, urging Harry to do so quickly. He could see them both from there, it was only fifty feet away, but he didn't really want either of them to hear this conversation. Mick could predict how it would go.

Carmen picked up after the first ring, her voice hurried and concerned. "Mick, what's happening?"

Charlize joined the call a moment later and asked a nearly identical question.

Mick wasted no time, his words coming out in a rush. “We’ve got Nathaniel safe, but Rose is in imminent danger. Harry’s boss is expecting him to go to her location soon. We need to act fast.”

Carmen’s response was swift and resolute. “I understand, Mick. But we’re not far enough down the path of gathering evidence and locating all their operations. If we move now, we risk other lives, and the higher-ups will slither out of accountability. I’m not going to leave Rose to die, but we can’t rush in, guns blazing, announcing our intentions to take the whole organization down.”

Charlize chimed in. She sounded reluctant, which meant she was siding with Carmen. “I’m close to getting hard evidence against three of the board members who seem to be the ringleaders. They’ve promised me more access, a spot at the table, and a cut of the money if I secure more funding. I’m going to record our lunch meeting but I think they trust me enough at this point to tell me what’s really going on. Or they might not trust me, but they trust I can get them access to millions and so they’re willing to take that risk. We can’t move on Rose yet.”

Harry, who had just returned from pushing Nathaniel on the swings couldn’t accept the decision made by the others. His voice trembled with frustration and desperation. “I get it, but I can’t leave Rose there. I won’t sacrifice her for a bigger case. If you won’t go in for her, I’ll do it myself. I’ll make it look like we’ve fallen in love, and I’m pulling her out. They won’t know something bigger is going on behind the scenes.”

Mick knew the stakes were high, and he had to make Harry understand. He’d pulled the man into this and he was his responsibility now. “Harry, even if you save Rose, the organization might still assume that you or Rose will go to the authorities. They’ll close ranks, quiet witnesses. It’s a lose-lose situation. Other people will be hurt or killed.”

There was a heavy silence on the call as the gravity of their predicament sank in. Carmen finally broke it, her voice steady as she outlined her solution.

“I need some time to set this up, at least an hour. Then I’ll give you the plan. Harry, you’ll have to do this alone. No backup, no one who might give away the fact that others are involved. The only thing I can offer is an exit strategy that gets Rose and Nathaniel out safely without raising any suspicions. That will keep our case intact and able to move forward.”

Harry agreed to Carmen’s terms, a sense of grim determination in his voice. “I’m fine with that. I don’t need backup. I just need a shot at getting her out of there, and I’ll make it happen. What about Nathaniel. Where can he go?”

“I’ll get a safe house and a guardian set up for him in the next fifteen minutes.” Carmen sounded half distracted and Mick knew she was already sending messages and making things happen.

“Fifteen minutes?” Harry asked, looking instantly skeptical. “How are you going to . . .”

“We’re everywhere,” Carmen replied. “There are good people with big hearts and fierce loyalty all over the world. We depend on them in moments like this and they come through.”

“That quickly? It’s a lot to ask of someone.” He still seemed unconvinced. It was clear he cared about the boy and didn’t want him to end up anywhere again that was unsafe.

“Most of our folks understand that time is the enemy in these cases. Lives are on the line. They know what that feels like because many of them have been on the other side of it. Or they love someone who has needed similar help at some point.” Carmen was working quickly but kindly trying to take the time to explain. “Mick filled me in on you. He said you signed up for the job you have because you thought you’d be doing some good. You stayed to protect whoever you could. That’s the kind of people we work with. That’s the kind of thing we look for in people. That resolve. That selflessness.”

Harry laughed humorlessly. “Well if I’m not dead in an hour, I will be out of a job, so keep me in mind. I’ll send my résumé.”

“Good luck,” Carmen said. “She’s lucky to have you fighting for her.”

“I’m going to go get Nathaniel off the swings. Thank you for the help.” Harry stepped away and Mick couldn’t tell if the man felt better or worse.

Charlize dropped off the call, her crucial lunch appointment approaching. Harry returned to the swings. Now only Mick and Carmen remained on the phone.

He had to press for more details. He couldn’t come up with a solution where Harry could save Rose and not become a liability for the case. “Carmen, how exactly do you plan to make Harry’s saving of Rose look innocuous to the organization? They are going to assume Harry and Rose will go to the police. They are going to think they are busted and start covering their tracks and silencing witnesses.”

Carmen’s response was methodical, each word carefully chosen. “We’ll make it absolutely obvious that Rose and Harry are neutralized. They won’t be going to the authorities because they won’t be going anywhere.”

It struck Mick like lightning. Painful and all consuming. “They won’t be going anywhere because they’ll be dead.”

CHAPTER 27



MICK

Mick's car pulled up to a picturesque suburban house, nestled among lush trees and well-kept gardens. It was the safe house, carefully chosen for its warm and inviting appearance. Mick parked the car, and he and Harry both turned to look at Nathaniel, who sat quietly in the backseat, his eyes wide with anticipation. He barely talked and Mick wondered if that was always his nature or if maybe he was in shock. A sense of unease hung in the air, but it was offset by the friendly atmosphere of the neighborhood.

The front door swung open, and a warm, welcoming family stood on the threshold. A man and a woman, both in their mid-thirties, greeted them with friendly smiles. Two young girls, presumably their daughters, appeared beside their parents, curious and eager.

"Hello there!" the man exclaimed cheerfully, extending his hand. "You must be Nathaniel. We're excited to have you over." He seemed to choose his words carefully, making this all sound like just a pleasant visit.

Nathaniel hesitated for a moment, then took the man's hand with a shy smile. "Hi. I like your tree," he said softly pointing at the very climbable oak in the front yard. The boy was missing his front teeth, one of them just beginning to grow back in. It gave every word he said a little whistle to go along with it.

The woman crouched down to Nathaniel's eye level and offered a warm smile. "We're so glad you're here, Nathaniel. I'm Lisa, and this is my husband, Mark. These are our

daughters, Emily and Sarah. I really like the truck on your shirt. Do you like trucks?"

"Vroom," Nathaniel answered with a waved of his hand.

The two girls beamed at Nathaniel, making him feel more at ease. Emily bent down to pet a small, friendly dog that had scampered over to them. The dog wagged its tail furiously, clearly delighted by Nathaniel's presence.

Nathaniel's eyes lit up as he petted the dog gently. "What's his name?"

Mark chuckled, ruffling Nathaniel's hair. "Wow, Rufus really likes you. You must be a pretty special kid. He never runs up that excited to greet people."

As the family welcomed Nathaniel into their home, they turned to Harry, who had a pained expression on his face. Harry's emotions were a storm inside him, torn between relief for Nathaniel and anxiety about what lay ahead.

Lisa glanced at Harry and assumed, "You must be Nathaniel's father. It's nice to meet you. It must be hard to part with him like this. Please know that while he's with us, he'll be like family. We'll make sure he's safe and has plenty to do."

Harry hesitated, his voice wavering. "I'm not his dad. I'm just a friend. Someone who's glad to see him somewhere safe finally."

Nathaniel piped up enthusiastically, slipping his hand into Harry's. "He's my mom's friend too. Harry's a hero. He's going to save my mom right now so we can be back together again."

The family exchanged glances, their understanding deepening. They could see the bond between Nathaniel and Harry, and clearly recognizing something was still unfolding. But it was obvious Harry had become a protector, a pillar of support for the young boy.

Mick, who had been observing silently, stepped forward and extended his hand to Mark. "I'm Mick. We really appreciate you being available on such short notice."

Mark shook Mick's hand firmly. "You can't imagine how our family was helped years ago. We're always anxious to be able to pay it forward." He lowered his voice as they stepped away. "Is there any risk we should know? Anything imminent?"

"Everything is being handled quickly here. It's a bit volatile, but we don't expect anyone will be specifically seeking out Nathaniel."

Mick and Harry exchanged a meaningful look, understanding that their paths had diverged for now. Harry was off to rescue Rose, and Nathaniel was safe with a family that would care for him.

"You good from here?" Mick asked, tossing the keys over to Harry. "I'll be catching a ride. You'll be on your own."

"I won't be on my own long, because I'm going to have Rose with me soon. I'm going to get her out of there. You sure your people know what they're doing on the back end? The plan in place?"

"Carmen gets shit done. Just watch your back and keep an eye for next steps as the plan comes together. You need to be nimble. Think on your feet. You're armed right?"

"I am."

"I'm sorry I can't be there. There are so many moving parts, and while I think Carmen is right, I still feel shitty not backing you up."

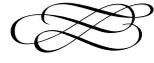
"Just fry these guys when you get the chance. All of them. And if by some chance Rose and I don't—"

"Nathaniel will always be in good hands. Keep your head in the game. It's all going to work out."

"How do you know?"

"Because those guys only care about money. You've got something real you're fighting for. That matters more than you can imagine."

CHAPTER 28



CHARLIZE

Charlize sat at an opulent table in an exclusive private club, surrounded by extravagance and luxury. The club's lavish decor, impeccable service, and the finest cuisine were all part of the package, but her companions truly captured her attention. There was nothing *nonprofit* about this place. These were three extremely wealthy people, hiding out in an exclusive restaurant, pretending they were worth every penny.

Maybe the lure of greed couldn't be ignored. They were certainly trying to test her will. Treating her like royalty and showing her how much they could gain by crushing the people around them. Brenda, Stephen, and Fiona exuded an air of sophistication and power that was hard to ignore. They were dressed impeccably, their smiles as polished as their shoes, and the service staff was falling all over each other to meet their every need. If Charlize didn't know how these assholes made all their money, she might actually be impressed.

Brenda, in particular, seemed to have an uncanny ability to try to woo Charlize. She seemed motivated to try to get her warmed up.

"You know, this wine pairs perfectly with the steak. Make sure you get the filet. It cuts like butter."

"This is quite the lunch. You guys know how to live." Charlize laughed and raised her wine glass in gratitude.

Stephen slid his napkin off his plate and onto his lap. "What's the point of life if you aren't enjoying yourself? These

are long days. Difficult decisions. It's nice to be able to come here and enjoy the finer things."

Brenda nodded at the waitress to show her agreement that they'd take another bottle of wine. "Charlize, it's very interesting. You and I have quite a few mutual acquaintances," she mentioned casually, taking another sip her fine wine. "People who have worked with you in the past. They say you're solid, trustworthy, and that you certainly know how to game the system."

Charlize arched an eyebrow, feigning surprise. "Gaming the system? I like to think I find a way to maximize everything available so that my clients are happy with my services." She offered a devilish smile. "But I can't deny that my reputation has some truth to it."

Stephen leaned in, his voice low and conspiratorial. "That's exactly what we need, Charlize. People who can get things done. You see, the three of us are risk takers. That's how we've made it to where we are today. The risks are calculated, but they do require a lot of discretion. People we can trust."

"So what are we talking about here exactly?" Charlize asked, playing dumb. "Is this insider trading? Are you funneling some of the fundraiser money for personal use?"

Fiona chimed in, her eyes gleaming with ambition and pride. "We've found an almost endless supply of resources. It became obvious pretty early on that the women we support are the best workforce imaginable."

"Workforce?" Charlize asked, checking her body language. She couldn't look concerned, but needed to instead seem intrigued. "You find them employment, right?"

"Yes, they have day jobs," Stephen snickered. "But that's barely enough for them to live on. We utilize their hours at night to make the real money."

"Interesting," Charlize said, leaning back in her chair and smiling. "They are truly in debt to your help so they're willing to take on more work?"

“It’s better than that,” Brenda sang, seeming unbothered by how horrific her words were. “These women are highly motivated, resourceful, and they have an unbreakable loyalty to their children. It’s a visceral bond, Charlize, one that drives them to excel in whatever they do. They want very few things. Food for their children, a roof over their heads, and time to be with them. If they have that, they are incredibly”—she seemed to think on the word for a long moment—“compliant.”

Charlize’s curiosity deepened as she listened intently. They were very boldly revealing their hidden world. Unbeknownst to them, she was recording it all. There were usually only two things that would make people act this recklessly. Love and money. They’d all heard the chance for twenty-two million dollars and decided that was enough of an opportunity to take the leap and trust Charlize.

“I’m intrigued,” she admitted. “But what exactly do you have them doing that’s so profitable? If we’re talking entertaining men, I’ll be honest I—”

“Absolutely not,” Brenda cut in. “There’s too much risk there. Too many problems with that. We’re talking distribution of some products. We started small, but it became very clear that the demand for drugs was at an all-time high and if we could find a way to meet that need, we’d do very well.”

“And it’s not hard to make the women cooperate? They’re willing to take the risk of selling out on the streets? I’d be concerned that they’d get arrested and then turn over incriminating evidence. That’s a lot of risk.”

Brenda leaned back in her chair, her gaze steady. “A mother will do anything it takes to have her child with her. We regulate their time together to make sure they’re highly motivated to stick with what we expect. It turned out to be the perfect formula. We are making more money than we imagined, and we have complete compliance from all the women involved.”

“Is everyone in the program?” Charlize took a piece of the thin bread and buttered it as if they had only half her attention.

“In one form or another, yes,” Brenda explained. “There are different arrangements depending on how valuable they are. But we have control of all of them.”

“How do you decide who gets what arrangement?”

Stephen was smug as he replied. “The women with drug problems in their past that would have otherwise lost their children. Or women coming out of domestic abuse situations. Really the ones who are the worst off are willing to do anything. It sounds harsh but they’d likely be out there selling drugs and doing god knows what else. At least this way we give them a shot at still having a relationship with their children. It’s actually symbiotic.”

Charlize wanted to flip the table over, dumping the contents in their laps. This was not some mutually beneficial arrangement they had. They were blackmailing and extorting the women for their own gain. She’d had to play along with a lot of things in her life, but this was making her stomach churn.

As the conversation continued, they shared their vision of growing their charity’s reach and influence. They spoke of acquiring more funding and expanding their workforce. How they could turn any money Charlize helped bring in into even more.

Charlize would never be drawn in by their charm and the allure of being part of something this sinister, but they needed to believe she was.

“There is real evil genius energy at this table,” she joked. “Heavy on the genius though. I’ve got my concerns about scaling this up without opening up to a lot of liability. All it takes is one woman who goes to the authorities and we’d all be screwed. I think there might be a chance you’re minimizing the risk.”

“We have people in place to make sure that all goes well,” Stephen explained, this time sounding much dodgier. “They are persuasive people who know how to keep everything locked down.”

Charlize frowned and looked at Brenda for assurance. A large smile skittered across her face.

“This part you’ll just have to trust us on. The women aren’t reporting anything to anyone. We won’t have to worry about that.” Brenda winked and Charlize felt her body boil with rage.

“She doesn’t look like she trusts us,” Stephen chuckled. “Maybe we’ll just have to show her. No one is going to turn on us. Even if they try, we’ve got people in all the right places to make sure everything keeps moving along. Judges. Cops. Nearly all the local leadership of child protective services. One phone call and we pull the strings.” Their smug expressions were so tempting to smack away. But Charlize needed to be glad they were willing to trust her enough to incriminate themselves so badly. She’d sit on her hands if she had to, anything to keep from slugging them all.

CHAPTER 29



HARRY

Harry's palms were slick with sweat as he stood in the damp smelling basement of the apartment building, clutching a small videotape in his hand. His boss, Marvin, a man with a sinister glint in his eyes, waited expectantly by his side. Harry was nearly choking on the reality of the cruel purpose behind their presence in this dingy, foreboding room.

Rose sat on a shabby cot, her wrists duct-taped together, fear etched across her face. She had been torn from her son, Nathaniel, and Harry knew the torment she must be feeling.

Marvin was obviously getting a sadistic pleasure from terrorizing her, and it sickened Harry to the core. This had been why he'd stayed in this job, even after he knew what was going on. Someone had to stand between the women like Rose and the monsters like Marvin.

Two of the other men in the basement had gone on their rounds, leaving Harry and Marvin alone for the moment. Harry had been given a simple task: hand over the videotape from the fast-food restaurant, the one that showed Nathaniel being taken. They planned to show it to Rose, to further torment her before she would be taken to some other location, to be "dealt with." Harry also knew these men wanted proof that his story was true.

Harry reluctantly handed over the tape, his mind racing, trying to formulate a plan to get Rose out of this nightmare. The basement's gloomy atmosphere was oppressive, the air heavy with tension and despair. The room had been haphazardly sound-proofed, adding to the claustrophobia.

Marvin gloated as he held the videotape, relishing in Rose's anguish. "This will break you," he snickered at her. "Some creep snagged your kid. He's gone and no one is going to be looking for him. No one is going to be looking for you either."

Rose whimpered and closed her eyes. Harry was supposed to wait for the perfect moment. To have the upper hand and make sure he had control of the situation. But as pain crumpled Rose's face, he couldn't take anymore.

Harry's grip tightened on his weapon hidden beneath his jacket. He had to be quick and precise; there was no room for error.

"We're going to walk out of here." Harry's voice caught in his throat. "I love her," he said firmly. "I'm taking her and you're going to let us go." He leveled his gun at Marvin and gestured for him to drop his weapon.

"Are you stupid?" Marvin looked around the room as though he was being punked or something. "You're not leaving with her."

"Toss your weapon over here and your phone. We won't cause any problems for the people in charge here; we're disappearing. I don't give a shit what else happens, but Rose and I are leaving."

Marvin burst into mocking laughter, the sound echoing ominously in the confined space. "You're crazy, Harry. You think you can just walk out of here and live a quiet life? They'll track you down and kill you both. No one gets out of here. None of them, and none of us."

That was the part that was rarely talked about. This wasn't the kind of job you could just walk away from, even if you wanted to. Your hands were too dirty to really be clean again.

"This shit is screwed up," Harry barked. "The entire charity is a scam. This is a prison. This is trafficking, and the children are collateral damage. How in the hell are you okay with that?"

Harry knew Marvin loved this job. He was one of the men who slept perfectly fine, no matter what had happened at work that day. No matter how dark it got. That didn't matter. Something inside of him was broken and fed on the chaos. He hated women. What better place to work for a man like that?

"These women would be in the gutter either way. At least here we can put them to work for a while. It's all they're good for. Are you seriously stupid enough to die, trying to get this piece of garbage out of here?"

Harry wanted to hit him, but instead he snatched up the cell phone and the weapon and made his way over to Rose. The stakes were high, but he couldn't allow Rose to suffer any longer.

"You're not in control here," Harry said, his voice steady. "You don't call the shots anymore. We're leaving, and you won't follow us."

In the tense standoff, Harry knew he couldn't give Marvin a moment to try to get the upper hand. As much as he wanted to turn all his attention to Rose, he couldn't. There would be time to comfort her later. Time to explain everything. The most important thing was getting her out of there and execute the plan flawlessly or they'd never really be free.

With a swift slice, Harry cut the duct tape binding Rose's wrists and pulled her to her feet. Her legs were clearly weak, and her body was trembling against his grip.

"You're a dead man," Marvin hissed as Harry locked him inside the small room. An act Marvin always reveled in when a woman was under his control on the other side of the door. Now he was the one who was trapped.

While he supported Rose's weight, he led her quickly up the stairs. They moved in silence, the urgency of their escape palpable. Outside, a waiting car stood ready, an integral part of Carmen's plan.

As they sped away, following the route Carmen had meticulously mapped out for them, Rose's breath became frantic.

“Nathaniel,” she cried. “Someone took him? Who took him?” She clung to Harry’s bicep, begging for some kind of answers.

“He’s safe. No one took him. We’ll get to him as soon as we can, but I promise he’s all right.” He covered her hand with his as they drove quickly out of town.

“I never should have said anything to these people. They couldn’t be trusted. I jeopardized everyone I care about. They could have killed Nathaniel.”

“He’s safe,” Harry repeated. “And what you did mattered. It will be what helps take them down. You’re going to be one of the reasons every other woman in these places gets their freedom.”

“No,” she bit back, the tears streaming down her cheeks. “Marvin was right. They won’t stop until they kill us. They won’t.”

Harry’s voice broke through her turmoil, soothing her with promises of hope. “It’ll all be over soon, Rose. You have to trust me.”

They drove for about forty minutes, leaving the city behind and venturing into a remote, wooded area. Rose grew increasingly anxious with every mile.

“Where are we going? Did you get rid of your phone and Marvin’s phone? They’ll track us. They’ll find us if we don’t ditch them.” She was trying to think ahead to stay alive.

“I hope they’re tracking us. That’s exactly what we need.”

“Why? You can’t mess with them. You haven’t been around that long. You don’t know what they’ll do.”

“I know exactly what they do. I’ve had a front row seat to it. But I’m telling you, we’re doing the right thing. Let them follow us. It’s the only way we’ll actually be free of them.” He squeezed her leg and tried his best to reassure her.

Finally, they arrived at a tiny, secluded cabin. Rose hesitated; her breath still ragged as her nerves. “Nathaniel isn’t

here? With your phone here, they'll be right behind us. I don't want Nathaniel—”

“He's not here. No one is. The cabin is deserted.”

The rumble of a car engine pulled in behind them on the long dirt driveway.

“They're here,” Rose cried, slumping down in the seat. “Drive. We need to go.”

“No,” Harry whispered. “That's Mick. He's with us. We need to get out of the car. I want you to go to his vehicle and get in. I'll be right behind you.”

“Don't leave me. I don't know who that is.”

“He's a friend. Someone we can trust.”

“Where will you go? What if you don't come back? Nathaniel . . .”

“Mick knows where Nathaniel is. He is here to keep you safe. But I've got to do what they asked me to, in order to keep you and Nathaniel safe in the future.” He leaned in and brushed a tear from her cheek. “I should have done more, and I should have done it sooner. But I'm making it right now. Then we'll be able to help everyone else too.”

It pained him to see how panic gripped her, but he leaned across her and opened her car door. Without another word Harry stepped out, wasting no time. He did as he had been told, setting up several small devices around the cabin. The location of each mattered. It had to look convincing. He tossed his and Marvin's phones down as well as a bag he'd packed full of clothes.

Once he was sure he'd done it all correctly, Harry retreated quickly to Mick's car where Rose was sitting in stunned silence, nibbling at her already damaged thumbnail. He hopped into the backseat next to her.

“This part is going to look scary,” he explained, pulling her in closer.

Moments later, an explosion shattered the silence, and flames engulfed the tiny cabin. Rose shrieked and clung

tightly to him.

“They’ll think we’re dead. That’s what needed to happen. They’ll trace my phone to this location, see it burned to the ground and believe that we didn’t make it. It’ll buy just enough time for Mick and Charlize to finish what they started.”

“How can you be sure this will work? What if it doesn’t keep Nathaniel and me safe?”

“Then I will.” Harry said flatly. “For as long as it takes.”

Rose shook her head, still unconvinced. “My friends and their children are in serious danger. We will have started something today that might cost them everything. You should have saved Nathaniel and left me where I was. That would have kept more people safe.”

“I couldn’t leave you down in that basement,” Harry argued. “Nathaniel needs you.”

“Right,” Rose choked out. “I’m the one who couldn’t get away from his monster of a father on my own. Then I walked us right into a deadly situation with a bunch of people who were pretending to care about us. I can’t make decisions that keep him safe. I don’t deserve him.”

Mick, who’d been silent this entire time, chimed in, “Your kid needs you. You’re going to be the reason he gets a life he deserves. And all the other kids in there get a shot at that too. Your bravery is what we needed to finally get this started. And if you stay the course, it’ll be the reason it ends.”

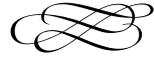
“Who are you?” Rose asked, peering nervously at Mick. “You and that woman, why are you so sure you can help? You’re not worried that you’re going to get a bunch of people hurt?”

Mick didn’t answer. It was obvious he was painfully aware of the risks. Harry had to assume this was not the first time he was in this kind of position.

“They’re going to help,” Harry answered. “We’re going to be okay. All of us.”

There was a billowing chimney of smoke in the rearview mirror as they sped off. Only the soft sobs of Rose bubbled up between the long silence. Harry was sure he'd done the right thing. The only thing. Saving Rose and Nathaniel would not be enough to clean his conscience for all he'd seen, but it was a start. If Mick wasn't in the car, there would be a thousand things he'd say to her. But if they all survived this, they'd have their moment. He'd make sure of it.

CHAPTER 30



CHARLIZE

The town car glided smoothly through the bustling city streets as Charlize and Brenda sat in the back, chattering about their lunch. The conversation during the meal had been enlightening, revealing a dark underbelly of the charity organization Charlize was relieved to have recorded. They'd blatantly incriminated themselves, trusted that the made-up reputation carefully curated about Charlize was true. It never ceased to amaze her how greed could make people act so recklessly, but today it had worked in her favor.

The mood in the car shifted abruptly when Brenda's phone rang, shattering the buzz of excitement they had maintained since finishing the wine at the table. Brenda's expression turned from haughty confidence to one of shock and anger. She barked orders at the driver to turn the car around and provided a new address, directing him toward one of their apartment buildings.

Charlize had been fighting the anxiety creeping up in her chest, not knowing how Harry had done. Not hearing from Mick was setting her on edge. Now this call was enough to send her heart into her throat.

As they pulled up to the apartment building, Charlize noticed a man, one of the guards, standing outside, looking disheveled and fearful. Brenda wasted no time. She stormed out of the car, and Charlize hurried to follow, unease coiling within her.

With a fierce determination, Brenda shoved the man she called Marvin inside the building, demanding answers with a

tone that allowed no argument.

“How the hell did you screw this up so badly? You know what is on the line and you let her go? What do I pay you for if you can’t do the basic function of your job?” She wanted to know how Rose had managed to escape, how they hadn’t seen Harry’s betrayal coming, and most importantly, where they were now.

Marvin, trembling under Brenda’s wrath, reported, “They were traced via their cell phones to a remote cabin in the woods.

“Then go get them. We can’t have them out there running their mouth to people.”

“We already sent a crew up there. By the time our guys showed up there was nothing to see. There was an explosion. The cabin was old, not well-maintained. It looks like they tried to light a fire and there was some kind of gas leak. We’re confirming it now, but it seems both Rose and Harry were killed in the fire.”

Brenda’s face contorted with rage, and she unleashed her fury on the guards, threatening them with dire consequences. “I don’t want any of our guys up there when the cops and fire department are poking around. Just get our guys back here and lock everything down. No one goes out tonight. I don’t want the girls working, but keep the kids away from them. They need to know what happens when one of them steps out of line. Don’t tell them exactly what happened, just that Rose paid the price for her bad decisions.”

Charlize stood silently, observing the chaos unfolding before her. Brenda had shed all the polish of fluttering around a corporate office and seemed perfectly at ease ordering around thugs and locking down women she was already keeping captive. Her bobbed hair shook back and forth as she jutted her finger out and gave commands. She was obviously driven by more than greed, and Charlize needed to know what else it was. Power?

Once Brenda had vented her wrath, she dismissed the guards, sending them scurrying away, tails between their legs.

She turned her attention to Charlize, her gaze sharp and calculating. “Is this all too much for you, Charlize?” Brenda inquired, challenging her to say something weak. To show her hand and prove she wasn’t worthy of this level of knowledge about what was happening.

Charlize’s eyes drifted around the rundown apartment building, a stark symbol of the organization’s control. Brenda’s words echoed in her mind, a chilling reminder of how these women were manipulated and silenced.

“You need more,” Charlize said, keeping her chin tipped up slightly. “This isn’t sustainable if you plan to grow. Those men are clearly all muscle and no brain. That’s what will sink us. You need professionals. People who can truly lock a situation down. Instill more than fear in the women, but unmistakable consequences that will alter their behavior without question.”

“You sound like you know who those people would be.” Brenda raised a brow curiously at her. “Is there more to you than meets the eye?”

“I’ve solved people’s problems for years. There is always a solution. But you have to know what will actually get the job done. I have contacts that might be able to clean up after these guys and implement something you’ll be able to rely on.”

Brenda didn’t seem to like that. “We had a slip-up today, but it’s been handled, and it will only be used as an example for the others to not try the same thing. Things are under control here. Nothing is going to slow down our progress.”

“Is this really all about the money?” Charlize took a step back. “It seems like a lot of risk for only financial gain.”

“The work we are funding still matters. There are deserving women who we work diligently to support. But these women,” she said, gesturing around the space, “were already going to end up here or worse. I’ve known plenty of them over the years, my own mother included. Why do you think it’s so easy to get judges and police leadership on our side? They want these women under control. They want filth off the street and out of the gutters. Child protective services

can't deal with the kids they have. If we can keep more of them out of the system, they don't ask questions. So, no it's not only about the money. It's about keeping people who don't deserve better where they belong.

Charlize had been waiting for this moment. The why. There was always one. Sometimes more than one. In this case greed alone could not fuel this type of vitriol. It had to have some personal vengeance involved.

Soon it wouldn't matter though. Brenda would pay for her crimes. The women she found undeserving would be free to restart their lives and be with their children. The corrupt organization would topple. They would set it all right. And then . . .

For the first time in a long time she couldn't answer that. She never really knew where she would be going next, but she knew she'd have someone else to help. Some other assignment to challenge her. Now she saw a blank page in her mind. Not one that inspired new adventures, but one that elicited dread. How could you want something to be over so badly and wish it could never end at the same time?

"But maybe you're right," Brenda sighed. "These oafs might be the ones who ruin everything if they can't do what they're told. I'd be open to whatever you're proposing. You don't seem squeamish about this. I like that."

"Nothing rattles me," Charlize said, shoving down the dread she was feeling. "I love a challenge."

CHAPTER 31



CHARLIZE

Charlize's return to the office after the tumultuous events of the day left her feeling drained and antsy. The adrenaline coursing through her veins during her lunch with the board members and the subsequent revelations had now dissipated, leaving her with a sinking sense of dread. But skill overrode emotions, and she knew there was no time to waste. She had information that would be enough to nail Brenda and the others. She wanted an update on Mick, Harry, and Rose. She wanted to know where the whole operation stood.

That would have to wait. Everyone had a job to do. Everyone had to be focused on their role and do their part. If not, there was no hope for success.

Sitting at her desk, Charlize meticulously compiled the digital files containing the recordings of the board members' admissions of guilt and their involvement in the illicit activities. She couldn't risk having physical evidence, and utilizing company internet to send them was dangerous. But Carmen would act quickly. She'd action this and do what she did best. So while the risk was great, she had faith in her team.

As she began the process of securely sending the files to Carmen, her heart raced.

The office felt like a battleground. Charlize's desk was strewn with scattered papers, legal documents, and her laptop displaying the incriminating recordings. Outside her window, the city buzzed with life, unaware of the storm gathering within these corporate walls. It was so easy to ignore what was happening all around. There were statistics and the occasional

sad story that would break on the news, but people mostly kept their heads buried in the sand, pretending there was more good in the world than bad. She missed the time in her life when she could believe that.

Just as the files were uploading, Charlize's phone rang, startling her. She quickly answered, recognizing Carmen's number. Her voice was hurried and anxious as she explained, "Carmen, I've sent you the files. It'll be everything you need." She wanted to ask about Mick. To know he was okay. But that was not her job right now. "What's the plan?"

Carmen's voice on the other end of the line held a note of urgency but also excitement. Something must have gone well. "Charlize, I've got good news. We've secured an agency willing to move on all the locations simultaneously. I've infiltrated the files of the real estate agent you tipped me off about. I was able to find all the shell corporations used by the nonprofit and get a list of the properties they own. I'm confident we've pieced together every location that needs to be hit at once."

"Who's going to do the raids? The local police? I'm worried now about who they might have on the payroll here and if they'll get tipped off early." Charlize was always good at plotting out the worst case scenario. A skill that came in handy on a job like this.

"We planned for that. You did a great job getting that donor list and all the names associated with the charity. I was able to narrow our best option down to the DEA. They have a vested interest in the drugs being moved from these locations. They've been trying to track the influx of pills into the area, and I provided them with enough evidence to warrant a raid on this group. They've assembled teams and are ready to move in as little as four hours after they receive the digital recordings incriminating the leadership of the nonprofit. That will give them the power to hit their offices as well. It should bring everything and everyone down at once."

Charlize's pulse quickened. The wheels of justice were finally turning, and there was hope on the horizon. However, she couldn't shake her concerns for the women and children

involved. “Is the DEA aware that the women are not drug dealers but victims of trafficking? They should be liberated and offered support, not arrested and charged.”

Carmen’s response came with a reassuring tone. “That was established first and foremost. While they’ll need to sift through the evidence, the DEA is approaching this situation with the understanding that the women are victims and prisoners, not criminals. We’ve ensured that other agencies will not be involved. We let them know that child protective services in the area has been compromised and they are willing to take the children into federal custody while it’s all sorted out.”

Before Charlize could ask more questions or express her relief, her office door swung open abruptly. Two unfamiliar men, their faces hard and expressions menacing, stood in the doorway. Charlize’s heart plummeted, and she felt the blood drain from her face.

“I’ll call you back, Mick. I forgot I had an appointment. How about we catch up after dinner?” Charlize muttered hurriedly into the phone. “Don’t forget we have that appointment tomorrow with Dr. Shanson.”

That was a code. A word that would alert Carmen to her distress.

As she lowered her phone, Carmen’s voice came through, tense with concern. “I’ve got it. I’m turning your tracking device in the seam of your shirt on. I’ll get a team to you.”

Before she could finish her sentence, one of the men seized Charlize’s phone, ending the call without hesitation. Panic welled up within her as she realized something had gone terribly wrong. Worst case scenario she’d been found out and the ripple effects to the women and children would be catastrophic. The DEA wouldn’t have a chance to move in and hold people accountable and save those who needed it. Charlize knew now she had to buy them four hours. Had to lie and hold out, and be convincing for at least that long. No matter what they did to try to make her talk.

Her mind raced with what she might have done. How she might have blown her cover. Brenda didn't seem like that good of an actress. She wasn't on to her at all as far as Charlize could see.

The men pulled her to her feet. An hour ago she couldn't help but dread what her personal future held, and a chilling thought lingered in the back of her mind—maybe she wouldn't have a future at all.

The room felt oppressively small as Charlize stood between the two imposing men. She tried to mask her fear, but her racing heart and shallow breaths betrayed her inner turmoil.

“What’s going on here?” Charlize demanded. “Don’t put your hands on me.” Acting stunned and filled with righteous indignation was her best play.

The larger of the two men, with a grizzled face and a cold, calculating gaze, spoke in a low, menacing tone. “You’ve been quite the little go-getter, haven’t you?”

Charlize steadied herself, her voice unwavering despite her fear. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Where is Brenda, does she know you’re here? Let me go, or I’ll scream.”

The second man, younger but no less intimidating, smirked. “Don’t play dumb. We’ve been watching you for a while. You’ve been poking your nose where it doesn’t belong.”

Charlize’s mind raced, searching for a way out of this nightmare. She needed to stall them, keep them talking, and buy herself time. “Who are you? What do you want?”

The larger man leaned in closer, his breath reeking of stale cigarettes. “We’re the ones who clean up messes. And you’ve created quite a mess.”

As Charlize ran through all of her options, she noticed a glint of silver beneath the man’s jacket—a holstered gun. Her mind raced, weighing her options. She had no doubt these men were capable of unspeakable violence.

Carmen's voice echoed in her mind, reminding her of the lifeline she still held. She had Carmen on her side, orchestrating a rescue operation. Charlize had to believe that help was on its way. All she had to do was stall.

The younger man interrupted her thoughts, his tone taking on a sinister edge. "You've really got Brenda on the hook, don't you? We know what you're up to."

"She knows what I'm up to. I've been with her all day. You guys have something screwed up. I'm going to help around here. Get Brenda on the phone."

Charlize's instincts kicked in as she realized she was on her own. There would be a team coming, but it would take time.

"Brenda might think you're someone she can trust, but we don't." That was an important bit of information. These guys had gone rogue. There were fissures in the organization. Some of the mid-level muscle not agreeing with Brenda's leadership decisions.

"You think you're going to drag me out of here and I'm not going to make a scene?" She chuckled, trying to bruise their egos. Angry men made rash mistakes and at the moment she needed them to screw up.

"Save your threats. You'll walk out of here with this gun in your ribs and you won't say a word. If you think I won't shoot you because we're in this fancy building, you're wrong. I'll take out as many people as I need to. You're not going to destroy what we've got going here."

"You don't have anything going," she bit back quickly. "You're just the muscle. They order you around and you do what they say. And you can be replaced by the next bumbling idiots willing to do the job."

"You've already made that perfectly clear," the man hissed. "And you think we're going to let you swoop in and shake everything up. We've been doing the grunt work this whole time. Living in these slums, keeping the girls in line. Dealing with snot-nosed kids and making sure they disappear

if they step out of line. You're going to go looking for someone else to replace us now? Oh hell no."

"That's what this is about?" Charlize asked, shrugging off the idea. "I made a suggestion and Brenda didn't go for it. She has faith in your team. Thinks the screw up today with Rose was a mistake that was quickly rectified and won't happen again. She's got your back."

"But you've got her ear. I'm not waiting around for you to work us out of what we've helped build. None of this happens without us. You think these fancy rich folks would be down in the trenches, tying people to beds? Screaming at kids. Bringing these drugs out to the bars and clubs every night. They don't have the stomach for this shit."

"Of course they don't," Charlize agreed. "That must be why Brenda backed you up today. She knows she wouldn't do what you do."

"But we know she didn't," the other man replied after being quiet for a long while. "She's ready to go your way. To listen to whatever you have to say. She's walking around here talking about you like you're God's gift to the future of this place. So maybe you don't have a future here at all."

A sense of dread settled over Charlize as the men advanced, closing in around her again. The room felt like a pressure cooker, and she desperately needed a way out. Her eyes darted around the office, searching for anything she could use as a weapon or a means of escape.

It didn't come in the form of a projectile or blunt object. All she found was the men's expressions. They were a whirlwind of emotions—rage, exasperation, and, hidden beneath it all, a flicker of desperation. That was what she would have to capitalize on.

"You aren't wrong. I do have power here. And if I play my cards right, I'll have a lot more of it soon. You don't need to shut me down, you need to partner with me. Brenda sees you as fools, but this move right here shows me you have guts. I underestimated you. You and your men aren't in over your heads, you're undervalued."

“We’re supposed to trust you?”

“No more than I trust you. But relationships like this aren’t built on trust. You know that.”

“Then what are they built on?”

“Action,” Charlize answered smugly.

“What kind of action?” She had their attention and she needed to capitalize.

“I’ll prove to you that, as I gain more control here, you will too.” She straightened her back smugly.

“And how are you going to do that?” The man kept his hand on his holstered weapon, looking ready to silence her if he needed to.

“Let me show you. Gather your men. As many as you can spare and have them come to the apartment where Rose was taken from today. I’ll prove to them I’m not like these other people in the office. I’ll get my hands dirty. I’ll make sure every other woman in that place understands what will happen to them if they try the same thing. With blood on my hands, you’ll all know I’m just as deep into this as you, right?”

The men glanced at each other, looking dubious. “I’ll bring the men I can in. But if you want our support, you better be willing to prove yourself. Do what Brenda and these other snobs don’t dare to even attempt.”

Charlize stiffened her back and painted on a devilishly sinister grin. “You better have the stomach to watch.”

CHAPTER 32



HARRY

“I just want my son,” Rose whimpered, covering her face with her hands. “Please take me to Nathaniel.”

Harry sat in the driver’s seat of his car, parked a discreet distance away from the house where Rose’s son, Nathaniel, was staying. He glanced over at Rose and wished he knew how to comfort her.

“You’ll see him soon. I’m waiting for Mick to call and tell me what to do next. They’re going to raid all the buildings soon, Rose,” Harry said, his voice gentle but firm. “The women will be safe, and the children too. No one will be forced to sell drugs anymore, and no one will be tied up or punished. They are so close to finally stopping these monsters.”

Rose’s eyes remained fixed on the house where her son was, and she shook her head slowly. “I want to take Nathaniel and run, Harry. I don’t trust anyone or anything anymore. These people promised me salvation and peace, and instead they imprisoned us. How can I believe the next people who come along and tell me it will all finally be okay? Whatever happens after those raids, I want nothing to do with it.”

Harry understood the depth of Rose’s fear and uncertainty. Her experiences in captivity had left her with scars that would take time to heal, if they ever did. He leaned closer to her, his voice earnest. “Rose, we need you. The other women trust and follow you. If you’re brave enough to testify, others will follow suit. You can make sure those responsible face justice.”

Tears welled up in Rose's eyes as she contemplated Harry's words. "I just want to disappear, Harry. I don't know if I'm strong enough for anything else. And you, what will happen to you? Won't you be in trouble?"

Harry's grip on her hand tightened, wishing they weren't in a car so he could hold her properly. "I don't care what happens to me. I took that job thinking I would be able to do some good. I kept it after I realized nothing was right there. Maybe I should have blown the whistle sooner. Or I should have tried to take out as many of those men as I could before they killed me."

"No," she cried. "You did the right thing. If you'd have left us, we'd have had no one there on the worst nights. You brought us food when there was none. You protected us as often as you could. I saw you take every shift available. I saw you distract and redirect the men looking to cause the most harm. Someone needs to tell the people in charge of these raids that you were not part of the problem; you were part of the solution."

"I think maybe you'd be the best one to tell them that. You were so strong every day. Every night. I watched you protect the other women countless times. You stood up to the worst of the men, shielded the others from harm. You were their leader in there. You can be their leader out here too."

"I was always so scared," she admitted. "And I still am. Even now while I'm out and safe. I can't imagine facing them all."

Harry smiled softly. "I'll be there with you, Rose. I'll make sure you and Nathaniel have a life beyond this."

Rose's shoulders sagged. He couldn't fathom the exhaustion she must be feeling. It seemed selfish to imply she had a responsibility to the other women who had suffered alongside her. But what other choice did they have?

She seemed so unsure. "What do you think will happen to them all? Don't you think these rich powerful people will get away with it? That's how it always seems to happen."

“Until there are rich and powerful people on the other side trying to take them down. That’s what I think is happening. Charlize and Mick are a part of something monumental and secretive. I’ve seen them move mountains already to get things done. They make me believe this might finally come to an end.” Harry leaned over and kissed her forehead.

“I want a real life,” Rose whispered. “I’m so tired of fighting for everything I have and realizing I still have nothing.”

“On the other side of all of this, I’ll make sure you have a life you can finally enjoy.” Harry swore this without an ounce of hesitation.

“You’ll make sure because you’ll be part of it?”

“I don’t know what I’ll face after all of this, but if I’m not locked up or dead, I’ll be around.”

“Just what any girl wants to hear.” She sighed as his phone rang; he held her hand and answered it. This would be their marching orders. The beginning. Maybe it was the end.

CHAPTER 33



MICK

Time was creeping by too slowly. The DEA needed time to set up the execution of their raids, and counting the seconds until it happened was killing him. He could picture an impatient Charlize waiting for the same updates as he was. She might not have been briefed yet on what had transpired in rescuing Rose and how it had unfolded. She never did well, waiting to find out if everyone was alright.

Finally, his phone buzzed, and he hastily answered the call from Carmen, his voice tense with anticipation. “Carmen, what’s the situation? Did you receive all the files from Charlize you needed?”

Carmen had an edge to her voice that tied his stomach instantly into knots. “Something happened with Charlize. She was in her office on the phone with me, sending incriminating audio files to our secure server. She used the code word, the one we established for distress situations. I activated the tracking device that’s hidden in the seam of her clothes. So far, I’ve been able to track her. It looks as though she’s been taken back to the location where Rose was rescued earlier today.”

Mick’s grip on the steering wheel tightened. He knew the situation was dire, but he couldn’t panic. Carmen would do everything she could to keep Charlize safe and the mission on track. He had to have faith in that. “What do we know about what happened? Was her cover blown?”

Carmen’s response was measured. “It doesn’t appear as though anyone in the organization is making sweeping or sudden changes to prepare for a crackdown. They aren’t

moving the women or children. No drug stashes seem as though they're being pulled out of the apartments. If her cover was truly blown, there would be tons of commotion. We've got spotters at various locations and there is no change. If she has been taken, there may be a chance they don't think it runs any deeper than a problem with her."

"That's a big risk to take with her life. We can't leave her with them if she's in some kind of danger. Whatever it is, she needs a way out." Mick started to formulate some options.

Carmen paused. He truly didn't envy her position. The balance between what had to be done and what she wanted to see happen. It must have been an endless struggle. She tried to explain her position. "The DEA is an hour away from being ready to simultaneously raid each location to secure the women and children. They are aware we have someone on the inside who might be in distress. I can preemptively send a team to Charlize, but it would likely undermine the DEA's strategy if we do it before the hour is up."

Mick felt a surge of frustration. It was always about the mission. The greater good. The protocol. He wanted nothing more than to rush in and rescue Charlize, but he knew impulsive action could jeopardize the entire operation. He took a deep breath, trying to gather his thoughts.

"What do you want me to do, Carmen? I can't sit here and do nothing while she's in danger."

Carmen obviously already knew that. There was no scenario where Mick would think sitting and waiting was the right solution. Another reason he wasn't in charge.

She tried to settle his nerves. "I need you to have faith in Charlize's skills. She's resourceful and capable. She's perfectly trained for situations like this. Trust that she can keep herself safe until the DEA is able to make their move. We can't risk compromising the operation by acting prematurely."

Mick knew Carmen was right. He couldn't let his emotions cloud his judgment. He had to trust that Charlize could handle herself, just as she had on their previous missions. But the thought of leaving her in danger gnawed at him. He'd had

these kinds of moral dilemmas before but not like this. And that was the point. Something was different. It shifted in him in the worst way possible.

He knew Carmen wouldn't want to hear this but it needed to be said. "I can't keep doing this. After we get Charlize out of there, assuming we both make it out, I want to be done. No more missions, no more calls. I want a life for both of us. We've done our time trying to help whoever we could. It feels like something has shifted and I have to listen to that voice in my head."

Carmen's response was understanding but he knew this was not what she wanted to hear. "I know the toll this life takes on all of us, Mick. I'll respect your choice, but I don't want you to act rashly right now because you're worried about Charlize. She can handle herself, then we'll get her out of there. After that, we'll talk about the future."

"The way I feel about Charlize and what I'm willing to do to save her is the exact reason I know it's time to stop taking on new missions," Mick said, his voice unwavering. "I want a chance at a different kind of life. One where we're not constantly in danger, where we can be together without the shadow of a mission hanging over us. And as long as I'm in love with her, I won't ever be able to be objective about protocol and mission integrity."

"Love? Last time I checked you two were barely on speaking terms. The idea that I was putting you back on a mission together seemed like the end of the world."

"Now the end of the world, of my world, comes if she's in trouble and I can't get to her."

"You know I can't stop you from trying to get to her. If you go in there, be safe. Just do some recon. Don't walk in there blind. The DEA teams are mobilizing. If you're in there when they raid, I can't guarantee they can keep you from any crossfire."

"I know. In case it goes bad—"

“Boy, you really are ready to retire. You know better than to jinx something like that. Don’t finish that sentence.”

CHAPTER 34



She'd played plenty of roles in her job. She'd had to be naïve, strong, uncaring, and weak at times. This however was proving to be the hardest she'd had to play before. Her façade of cruelty began slipping at the edges as she wrestled with the weight of her charade. It was her job to stop the bad guys, but for now she had to pretend to be one of them.

The men were still unconvinced as they pushed her roughly into the apartment building and grunted for her to climb the stairs. The air was heavy with tension, and now she felt the eyes of six menacing men fixated on her. They all saw her as a threat. The person coming in and proposing changes that could push them all out onto the street. She was a danger they wanted to neutralize. But at least they didn't think she was part of a bigger conspiracy to take them down. If they did, they'd never have brought her here. They'd be trying to move the women. Hide the drugs. Silence witnesses.

Charlize had to admit, their initial confidence had shaken her. They were unbothered by the idea of killing her if they had to. They were sloppy brutes who only saw one way to get things done. She had to convince them she wasn't a barrier but a path forward.

The men exchanged uneasy glances as if second-guessing their decision to give Charlize an opportunity. They had thought they could break her, make her beg for mercy, but instead, she had shown a fearless determination that had left them off-kilter.

“Bring them all in,” she demanded. “Everyone in the house, bring them into this area.”

“We usually keep the kids separate,” one of the men finally argued, hesitating to comply with Charlize’s orders. “Especially when we’re trying to prove a point and maintain control. It’s a punishment to keep the kids from them.”

“You wanted to see just how far I’ll go? How dirty I’ll get my hands?” Charlize’s words were filled with malice, each syllable carrying the possibility of something she would regret terribly. She had to convince them she was one of them; she would do whatever it took to prove her loyalty.

The men, for a moment, seemed unsure of their own leadership structure. Was she in charge? Did they take orders from her?

“The kids stay upstairs,” another man stuttered.

Charlize’s eyes blazed with anger. It wasn’t a big jump from her actual emotion, terror. She was not afraid of what these men would do to her, but what they’d do to everyone else if she didn’t stop them.

“I don’t care what you usually do. The children need to be kept in line too. I want to send a message they can all see and understand that what happened with Rose today will never happen again. What are you afraid of? You think the kids and a bunch of moms are going to gang up and overpower the six of you fully grown armed men? This is the kind of weakness that needs to be reined in.”

Deep down, Charlize hoped feverishly that the DEA’s operation was proceeding as planned. She knew that keeping the women and children together would be safer when the authorities finally moved in. Corralling them into one room would help and that was all she could think to do for now. But eventually her stalling would end and she swallowed hard at the idea of following through on something horrible only to keep the cover alive. It was unbearable.

As the men began to reluctantly gather the women and children into the room, Charlize scanned their faces, searching

for anyone she might recognize. Her eyes locked onto one woman, a face she had seen before. It was the same woman she had encountered on that fateful night when she had broken into this very building to gather evidence about the basement. Marcy had tipped Charlize off about the realtor which had become a vital tip.

Recognition and fear flickered in the woman's eyes as she met Charlize's gaze. They shared a secret now—a silent understanding that neither of them wanted to be here but maybe they could help each other again.

When all the women and children were finally assembled in the room, the men's impatience grew, their demands becoming more insistent. "Do it! Make an example out of one of them!" one of the men snarled, his eyes filled with cruel anticipation.

Charlize took a deep breath, her hands trembling inside her pockets. "Get me a knife. Something sharp." She gestured with her chin toward the kitchen. Shockingly one of the burly men followed her orders. He fumbled through the drawers loudly and returned with something she could use. It was a sharp kitchen knife with a sturdy wood handle.

She knew she couldn't harm any of these women, no matter how convincing her act had to be. Collateral damage was not an option.

Gulping down her own fear, Charlize began explaining what had happened to Rose, her voice wobbling with a blend of sadness and cruelty. "You see, Rose thought she could try to run and actually get away. She tried to take on the organization and get her son out of here. It cost her both their lives."

Sobs erupted among the women and older children, and Charlize fought back tears, wishing she could comfort them. Instead, she had to continue with the charade.

"There will be no mercy for anyone who tries anything remotely threatening to expose what's going on here," Charlize hissed, her voice growing sharper as she weaved a tale of cruelty and ruthlessness. "The punishment will be swift and severe. I don't care if you're three or thirty, if you try to

step out of line you'll join Rose and Nathaniel." She hoped these women and children would be with Rose and Nathaniel soon. That they'd all be free and safe.

The men in the room grew impatient with the talking, as men always do. Their irritation driving them to push Charlize further, to make her prove her loyalty through gruesome actions. She could feel their menacing eyes on her, their collective desire for blood palpable in the room. There was really only one way to ever prove you could be trusted by evil people. To be evil in their presence.

Finally, she seized Marcy by the shoulder, pulling her to her feet. Charlize whispered urgently in her ear, "Help is coming, I promise. I'm so sorry for this." With a trembling hand, she brandished the knife and sliced at the woman's long blonde hair, sending chunks of it cascading to the floor.

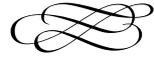
The other women in the room whooped and hollered in fear but the men were dissatisfied, one of them growling, "I thought there would be blood on your hands, not just a pile of hair."

Just as the tension in the room reached its peak, a commotion erupted from the stairs leading up to the apartment. The men turned their attention toward the noise, their expressions shifting from irritation to alarm. Charlize seized the moment, her heart racing as she took a step back, the knife still in her hand, and moved back from Marcy.

"What was that?" The men all reached for their weapons and waited for someone to tell them what to do. Charlize capitalized on the confusion.

"Go see what it is," she barked, as if she had any authority at all. Five of the six men stormed off. She liked her odds against the one man remaining much better. Now she hoped whoever was making that noise could handle the five others.

CHAPTER 35



MICK

He told him he didn't have to come. Harry had done what he set out to do, but when he heard Charlize as in trouble, he insisted on helping. The phone call lasted only a minute before Harry was leaving Rose at the safe house and racing to help Mick.

By the time they were both outside the apartment it was clear nothing would stop them from going in.

"I know the building better," Harry said firmly. "I'll draw the men out and you take the back stairwell up. That's where Charlize's GPS is pinging."

Mick nodded, acknowledging the truth in Harry's words. "Alright. But we move quickly. We find Charlize, secure her and the other women and children, then we get the hell out of here."

They shared a silent moment of agreement before moving swiftly toward the building's entrance. Their senses were heightened, every step filled with purpose. They couldn't afford to make a single mistake.

Once inside, they followed the directions from Charlize's GPS signal, leading them deeper into the heart of the building.

"She's in the second floor apartment," Harry whispered. "It sounds like they are all up there. You need to take those stairs there. I'll draw the men out this way."

Mick nodded his understanding, reluctant to go their separate ways but understanding this was the best chance of

success. As he climbed the stairs, his footsteps as quiet as possible, the sounds of muffled voices reached his ears. Harry had estimated there were still six or eight men in the building, and they needed to take them by surprise. By the sound of the voices upstairs he thought his estimation was likely correct. That wasn't exactly a fair fight, but he knew if he could get to Charlize and arm her, that would help.

Mick pulled his weapon and waited for Harry to do his part. He was on the other side of the building, still a floor below and planning to draw the men out with a diversion.

There was a loud clattering of furniture falling over and a loud shout. With that, a thundering of feet flew in the other direction, going toward Harry and away from Mick.

Taking advantage of the sudden absence of guards, Mick kicked the door open, and burst into the room, gun at the ready. The scene that greeted him was chaotic. Fearful women cowering over their children in the corner. To no surprise, Charlize had already subdued and disarmed the last guard, leaving only stunned expressions in her wake.

Without hesitation or the need to even speak, they worked together to secure the incapacitated man, making sure he couldn't pose a threat. Then they turned their attention to the women and children in the room, guiding them to the back corner and positioning themselves between them and the door, weapons at the ready.

The shooting downstairs had ceased, and the building was eerily quiet. Mick's mind raced with worry for Harry, but he knew they had to stay focused on the task at hand.

He attempted to reach Harry on their communication devices, but there was no response. Anxiety gnawed at his gut as he tried to push aside the fear that was clawing its way into his mind. Harry had been outgunned. Even with the element of surprise he was at a disadvantage.

While trying to keep his eyes focused on the door, Mick sent a quick text message to Carmen, providing an update on their situation. The women and children were secured, but they remained in the dark about Harry's whereabouts.

Carmen's voice came through the coms, her tone reassuring. "The DEA teams are moving on the houses now. They'll be there soon. They know your location and are treading lightly. They are aware shots have been fired."

Mick held his breath and glanced briefly at Charlize, who was trying desperately to get her hands to steady. They waited anxiously for any news about Harry.

Time seemed to crawl by as they guarded the women and children. Mick's mind raced with a whirlwind of emotions, from guilt over not being able to back Harry up to anger at the monsters who'd created this entire system.

Finally, they heard the team breach the doors and begin slowly clearing the rooms. It felt like an eternity before they were stepping in and taking charge. They led the women and children out slowly, giving direct and firm instructions until the room was empty but for Charlize, Mick, and one remaining DEA agent.

"You two okay?" he asked, lowering his weapon and resting his arms by his side.

"Our man was downstairs, the shootout." Mick found it hard to even get the words out. He knew if Harry was safe, he'd have already made his way upstairs.

"I'm sorry, he was pronounced dead on the way to the hospital. He took out five armed men before taking a shot to the stomach. He went down fighting."

Charlize's mouth fell open as she crumpled against Mick. "He's dead?" she asked, clearly already knowing the answer.

"I never should have let him come in here," Mick bit out angrily. "I knew we were out-numbered. I just had to get to you, and now he's . . ."

Harry, who had risked everything to help them, had paid the ultimate price. Grief and guilt weighed heavily on Mick's shoulders as he processed the terrible news. He thought of Rose and Nathaniel. Of the remorse that had driven Harry to want to make things right. Now he'd paid the ultimate price.

Charlize clung to Mick, tears in her eyes, their relief for everyone else's safety overshadowed by the profound sorrow they now shared.

"The rest of the raids?" Charlize asked, just above a whisper. "Is everyone getting out, okay? Are they clearing each apartment building?"

"All reports are positive so far. Tons of drugs seized. All the people held captive are being taken out and secured. The corporate offices are being searched now too. Arrests being made."

It didn't feel right. It didn't feel over. Mick had told Carmen he wanted out after this. He wanted to be living some different life and enjoying a fresh start. It didn't feel as though anything would be fresh or enjoyable after this. A blanket of despair closed in around him as Charlize led him by the hand out of the building and to the car.

"I should have stayed with him," he muttered mostly to himself. "We should have cleared that side of the building together. I was distracted. I thought . . ."

"Don't do this to yourself Mick," Charlize begged. "You'll go crazy thinking about what you could have done differently."

Going crazy seemed like a real possibility as she settled with a thud into the passenger seat. "I need to talk to Carmen," he stuttered out. "I need to tell her I'm done."

Charlize didn't argue. She didn't try to convince him this was just shock. Instead she dialed the phone and nodded at him. "We're both done," she whispered back. "We've done all we can. It's time."

CHAPTER 36



Mick and Charlize sat side by side on the sun-kissed beach, the sound of waves gently lapping at the shore. Their chairs were low, leaning back to where they were nearly sitting on the ground. What they thought would never be their reality suddenly was and it was proving to be more wonderful than either of them had imagined. Long mornings over brunch talking about their intertwined memories and missions. Correcting what the other had misremembered. Laughing about what had gone wrong. Sighing with relief over what had gone right.

There was very little to break them from their peace until there was. Charlize's phone rang, shattering the tranquility of the moment. She let out a frustrated sigh, eyeing the device as if it were an unwelcome intruder. "Whoever this is," she muttered, "better have a good reason for calling. I'm positive I told everyone I know to leave us alone for at least another couple of weeks."

But as she answered the call and listened to the voice on the other end, her face fell. Mick watched her closely, concern etched on his features. He could tell by her expression that something was terribly wrong.

Mick spent a lot of his life waiting for the other shoe to drop. Expecting things to go wrong. Maybe it was a coping mechanism or something broken within in. People would always say, I never thought it could happen here. I never thought it could happen to us. Mick disagreed. He was all too aware that good things didn't last forever. This time on the

beach would surely be interrupted. They'd be pulled back to reality, and now, looking at Charlize, he was sure this was the moment.

Charlize hung up the phone, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "It's the nurse who cares for my mother," she began, her voice trembling. "The diagnosis is bad, Mick. The prognosis... it's not long. I need to go home."

They'd talked about her mother. Never before this trip though. That was the gift the beach had given them. Time and energy to actually connect. To share the painful stories and the harsh realities that had brought them to these places in their lives. He knew Charlize had a complicated relationship with her mother. He also knew there was some fragility to her mother's health. But this new turn was clearly something serious.

"I'm sorry," he offered, reaching across and taking her hand in his. "What can I do to help?"

"There is really nothing to do. I just have to go home." The last word seemed to stick in her throat like a strangling piece of food that just wouldn't go down.

"It's been a while, right?" He squeezed her hand to remind her not to float away into the darkness that was clearly coming over her.

"Yes. I've done some short visits but I haven't really been back there for any amount of time for over a decade. That town is..."

"Small towns always are."

"And my mother and I..."

"Mothers and daughters, it's always the same. Do you want me to come with you? I can help. I can be there in any way you need me to."

"Really?" She asked, turning toward him with a shocked expression. "You'd come back to my shitty little home town and be with me while my mother dies?"

"I'd leave right now. I'd hold your hand the whole time."

“I know you would,” she sighed again, the overwhelm taking over. “But I don’t know exactly what it’s going to be like or how long I’ll be there. I think I need to do this alone.”

The gravity of the situation was setting in on both of them. For Charlize their late night walks on the beach would be replaced by difficult conversations within troubled relationships and the heavy weight of grief.

She managed a weak smile through her tears, appreciating his offer. “Maybe once I get down there and settled in you could come. I just don’t know how my mother and I will be toward each other and I don’t want to have to worry about an audience for that.”

“I’ll come the moment you call. Just say the word.” He pulled her hand toward his mouth and kissed it. “And however long you need to sort this out, it changes nothing for us. I finally have you, a little separation won’t mean anything for us in the long run. Take as much time as you need.”

“It could be months. It could be a while.”

“I get you forever. Months don’t scare me.” He winked at her.

“What are you going to do? Will you stay out here? We still have weeks left paid on this vacation.”

“I can’t be on this beach without you. I’ll stay busy. You just worry about what you need to.” He watched her face go from somber to curious.

“What does staying busy look like for you now?” She leaned in closer to scrutinize his face as he answered.

“Carmen called,” he admitted sheepishly. “Not to go right back to work. No new missions. She knows we’re retired.”

“She wants you to fine paperwork in the office or something?” She scoffed. “Because I’ve seen your tax returns. You can’t organize anything.”

He laughed knowing she was right. He had a very particular skill set and this was going to be a new chapter in his life. One he wasn’t completely sure how to approach.

“Nathaniel and Rose are struggling,” he explained, a hint of concern in his voice. “I thought maybe you and I could both head out to see them once our vacation was over. Rose could use some support, she’s got a long road ahead of her as they work on putting the case together and getting her to testify. She’s not in any danger anymore, that’s handled. But maybe there is more we can do than just be willing to take bullets for people. Maybe we can listen. Maybe we can comfort. Help people find some normalcy.”

“We haven’t even found normalcy yet,” Charlize joked. “But maybe that makes you perfectly qualified to help them. You’re all trying to find some kind of way forward.”

Mick fell silent and he didn’t try to hide the anguish on his face. He was done hiding from Charlize. There was nothing he was feeling that he didn’t want her to know about.

“It’s not your fault,” Charlize insisted firmly. “I’ll tell you that every day for the rest of our lives if I need to. We know the risk in our jobs and we know that not everyone is going to make it. Harry made a choice to come with you that day. If either of us should feel guilty its me.”

“Don’t say that.”

“He came to save my life. I should have been able to get myself out of there. No one should have had to come in after me. You did everything right that day. You can’t blame yourself for Harry’s death.”

He didn’t wholly accept that permission to forgive himself, but he did know he needed Charlize in his life to keep reminding him. “Promises me that our way forward is in the same direction?” he asked, pulling her out of her chair and onto his lap. “I don’t want to try to heal and become all whole and happy without you.”

“Wait for me, and I’ll wait for you.”

They shared a lingering kiss, a promise of their unwavering love no matter the circumstances. Mick had to believe they’d be back here. They’d find their way back to the beach, to the laughs and the joy they’d found here.

“I’ll see you in a few,” she promised, wrapping her arms around his neck.

He kissed her cheek gingerly, breathing in her sweet smell. “In a few and then forever.”

EPILOGUE



HARRY

He was fighting mad. Literally. If there was someone standing in front of him, he'd be swinging right now. Being shot was nothing compared to this hell. It wasn't the accommodations but the isolation that was killing him.

"I'm sorry for this," the man said, his thick Irish accent sounding welcoming even though this situation didn't seem all that friendly. "I promise there is a reason for all of it."

"The doctors cleared me," Harry argued, pretending the pain didn't still shoot through his healing wounds. "I want to see Rose. I need to know she's ok."

"I promise you she is. And if you really want to help her, you'll stay put. I'll explain everything. My name is Kenan. Come down and have dinner with me."

"Where the hell are we?" Harry asked, looking out the window at the unfamiliar scenery.

"Italy."

"I'm in Italy?" Harry scoffed. "No I'm not. I don't even have a passport."

Kenan laughed. "I know that was a pain in the ass. But I promise you're in Italy. How much were you told about the Kinross family?"

"They're billionaires who get shit done."

"That's actually perfectly put. They'd like that description. You talked to Carmen?"

“Briefly.” Harry ran his hand over his hair. His head was spinning. “She liked you. You impressed her. You didn’t have to go in that building with Mick, draw the fire of the men in there. It saved a lot of lives that day.”

“I know you all want me to testify. I already said I would. You don’t have to hold me hostage and try to convince me. I’ll go on the stand and tell everything I know about those bastards and what they’ve done.”

“Its not that simple,” Kenan reported, looking a bit dodgy.

“I know I might not get immunity or whatever. I was there. I did the job. I didn’t report the thing I saw. I have to live with that, and if it means jail time for me then...”

“You can’t testify because you’re dead.”

Harry felt a dagger plunge into his heart. The words were intense and unexpected. “I’m dead?”

“As far as the world is concerned, yes.” Kenan tucked his hands in his pockets. “It doesn’t have to stay that way. We can course correct. We can tell the world you did survive that day. But then you couldn’t do the real work. The thing that really needs to be done.”

“The real work?” Harry asked, cocking up a brow. “What does that mean?”

“Come down stairs, have dinner with me. I’ll explain as much as I can, and then you can decide what you want.”

Before this conversation, Harry thought he knew what he wanted. He would find Rose and Nathaniel and make everything right. He’d protect her. They’d testify. They’d figure out how to start a real life. Or maybe... they wouldn’t. Maybe the adrenaline and trauma of their lives would make that impossible. Rose would have Nathaniel and all the support she needed, and Harry would be a terrible reminder of what came before.

“Is she safe, is she doing, ok?” Harry asked, not having to elaborate on who he meant.

“She’s well protected. They are getting a lot of help. Nathaniel is doing well.”

“Seeing me again, that might...”

“It might.” Kenan agreed. “It’s hard to say.”

Harry only nodded. “You think I’m better off dead than alive?” He chuckled and pinched the bridge of his nose as he tried to process it all.

“I think you’re someone who could be invaluable to the work we do. This place, where you are right now, holds a very special place in Carmen’s heart. It’s where she came when only death waited for her back home. This is Verde Lago. It’s a safe haven when there is nowhere else for people to turn. It’s under attack. Or it will be. Carmen needs you to help protect it.”

“What about Mick and Charlize, or any of the other people who work for you guys. Why me?” Harry cleared his throat nervously.

“This place is like a whisper. A secret. The only way to really keep it safe is with a ghost. Someone who doesn’t exist. This job needs—”

“A dead guy.”

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