

✦ THE MAGNOLIA DUET ✦

# MADAM TEMPTRESS



MEGHAN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MARCH

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# MADAM TEMPTRESS

Book Two of the Magnolia Duet

Meghan March

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## ABOUT MADAM TEMPTRESS

I didn't choose this path. No one would.  
I played the cards I was dealt.  
This life made me. This city made me.  
I won't apologize for who I've become.  
Moses wouldn't have me any other way.  
He says he wants forever, and I'm starting to believe him.  
But I can't outrun my past, and my sins are catching up with me.  
If it's time to atone, I'll gladly pay my penance.  
We might be getting our second chance, but we have to make it out alive  
first.

*Madam Temptress* is the second book in the Magnolia Duet and should be read after [\*Creole Kingpin\*](#).

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# ONE

## MAGNOLIA

*Fifteen years ago*

**C**old showers in the dark are a giant pain in the ass, I thought as I shut the tap off as quickly as I could, but it wasn't quick enough to stop the chill from rippling across my skin as I reached for the towel hanging over the rod.

A thump came from somewhere downstairs, and I froze.

Since all the other girls left last night before the hurricane hit—when they realized we'd be out of business for at least a few days, if not longer—I'd been hearing noises I'd never heard in the house before. Probably because it got its bones rattled good with those terrifying howling winds.

*You should've left with them*, Ho-It-All whispered, but I brushed off the voice in my head that wouldn't shut up. This was *my house* now, and I wouldn't let anything happen to it, hurricane or no. We made it through, but I knew what looters could do to a place, and it wasn't pretty.

I listened for another sound, but there was nothing but silence.

*See? Just my imagination.*

I dried off with record speed, wondering why I'd waited until dark to shower anyway. Oh, wait. It was because without power and A/C, it was hot as balls, and I'd sweated my ass off all day until even I didn't want to smell

myself anymore. Still, *note to self*, I'd shower during daylight tomorrow.

I left the bathroom with the towel wrapped around me and the candle in my hand, only making it a few steps before I saw dark, shadowy forms coming up the stairs.

“What the hell are you doing in here? Get the fuck out of my house!” I screamed as I made a break for the bedroom—where I'd left my sawed-off shotgun.

“Fuck! Get her!”

Reaching the bedroom door, I tried to slam it behind me, but it bounced off someone or something before flinging open again and whacking the wall.

*Five more steps. Three more.*

I reached for the shotgun but someone tackled me from behind, and I landed facedown on the floor beneath the heavy weight of a man. My fight-or-flight reflex kicked in and I went fucking crazy, throwing elbows and trying to kick him off.

I'd been in this world long enough to understand nothing good was going to happen if I didn't get him off me and get to my gun. Men took a woman a lot more fucking seriously with a double-barrel pointed at their chest.

My heart hammered as my elbow connected, and he grunted.

“Fucking bitch! Gonna make you pay for that.”

The stench of stale cigarettes and rot-gut whiskey assaulted my nose.

*Oh fuck. Oh fuck. Stay calm and fight like hell. Ain't nobody making me pay. Especially not some looter.*

I kept fighting, swinging and flailing, praying I'd land a blow somewhere vital, but he grabbed my hair and yanked my head up before smashing my face against the wood floor.

Sparks flashed in my vision, and my cheekbone throbbed like I'd just been hit with a brick.

*Fucking hell.*

“Let me go! Help!” I started screaming, because what the fuck else was I

going to do with what felt like a three-hundred-pound gorilla on my back?

“Shut the fuck up.” He grabbed the wet hair at the back of my head again, smashing me repeatedly against the floor until I tasted the metallic bitterness of blood.

*Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

Screaming failed, and words wouldn't come out. My brain and my body were disconnecting like the out-of-service phone lines after the hurricane.

*Stay. Conscious. Stay. Alive.*

I couldn't pass out. Unconscious meant defenseless, and I was anything but. I was a fighter. I was a warrior. And I was no one's victim.

My head lolled as he flipped me over, and my towel fell away, exposing my naked body to the thick, humid air. In the pitch dark, I couldn't see his face, but I could feel him . . . *everywhere*.

“Get off me!” My screams weren't as loud this time, but I was trying.

“Shut the fucking cunt up. Jesus Christ. Everyone within six blocks had to hear her scream.”

It was the other man, his form barely visible in the hallway. Of course, there was hot blood in my eyes, so seeing anything in the darkness was nearly impossible.

A nasty, rough hand covered my mouth, and I did what any smart woman would do—I bit the fuck out of him.

He yanked his hand back immediately. “Jesus Christ! The bitch bit me!”

His other fist came crashing down, connecting with my cheekbone that was already battered from the floor. Another shower of sparks exploded, and my consciousness was waning.

*Stay awake. Stay alive.*

While I fought the battle with myself, the thug jumped to his feet, and pain burst through my ribs when he landed a hard boot to my bare side. My lungs collapsed as the air was forced from them, and pain from every corner of my body began to mesh into one massive throb.

“See how you fucking like that, you whore.”

As I scrambled back on my elbows from where he stood, a sick realization crept through me. *I can't get away.*

He came toward my beaten body, his hands reaching out like ghostly specters in the darkness. “I’m gonna have some fun with you before we go.”

My ears rang with the pounding pulse of agony.

“Hurry up. We ain’t got all fucking night.” The other one complained, as if he had better things to do than rape and murder me.

“Shut up. We ain’t in no fucking hurry,” the thug with rough hands replied as his fingers bit into the skin of my upper arm.

“Then you better fucking share.”

At this, I struggled ten times harder. I wasn’t getting gangbanged tonight. No fucking way.

“You can have your turn when I’m done with her. Been a while since I fucked a bitch with this much fight in her.”

I kicked out, catching him in the leg, and the other man laughed.

“Tie her up. She’ll probably fucking kill you if you don’t.”

The closest monster took something from the other one before dragging me off the floor and tossing me on the bed like I didn’t weigh a damn thing.

He pressed his mouth against my ear, and his hot breath made my gut churn. “You’re gonna wish you’d been nice to me, slut. Should’ve just spread your legs. Now I’m gonna make you fucking pay.”

“Get away from me,” I growled, trying to roll to the other side, which would put me within grasping range of the shotgun on the other side of the bed.

“Not a fucking chance.”

And then he was on me, pinning me down and forcing my hands over my head. That’s when I heard the *rippppp* of duct tape.

“No!”

The first piece went over my mouth as I screamed and fought from



beneath him. He kept me pinned under his bulk as he tore off another piece and used it to secure my wrists together. The third piece bound me to the bed.

I yelled, but the duct tape muffled the sound so there was no way anyone outside the house could possibly hear it.

As soon as he had my arms taped down, he slithered down my naked body, raking the skin on my legs as he secured my right ankle. I tried to kick with the left one, but he caught it under his knee and rendered me helpless.

*“Nooooo!”* I screamed, but even I could barely hear myself over the rushing static in my head.

He laughed as he taped one foot, and then the other, to the bed posts.

*“Fuck you!”* I yelled, but he couldn’t understand me through the tape.

As soon as I was trussed up like a fucking sacrifice, he chuckled, and the sound sent goose bumps scattering over every inch of my bare skin.

*Fuck. Why couldn’t I at least have clothes on? Jesus fucking Christ.*

Tears sprang to my eyes, even though I fucking hated crying. It was useless to do and certainly wouldn’t help me.

But it was no mystery what was coming next.

Something I swore I’d never let happen again. Over my dead goddamned body—which wasn’t really a stretch of the imagination. I was beaten, bound, and defenseless.

*I can survive this. I can survive. All I have to do is survive.* I chanted it to myself . . . and then something flashed in the darkness.

A knife.

No.

Fuck.

No!

“After we get done with you, I’m gonna make you pay for that elbow to my fucking dome. You hear me, cunt? So you best treat us real nice, or I’ll slit you open from lips to lips.”

Bile rose in my throat, and I nearly choked on it with the duct tape over

my mouth.

“Yeah, you like that. Probably already fucking wet for me. Whore like you probably walks around dripping, just waiting for a cock.”

I wanted to close my eyes, but that wouldn't make it better. If anything, it would be worse, because I wouldn't know when he was coming at me.

I heard a jangle. His belt.

*Fuck. Just survive, Mags. You can survive.*

If they decided not to kill me, that was.

The next sound was the slow, taunting hiss of his zipper.

Cold sweat broke out over my body because there was nothing I could do. I was completely at their mercy, him *and* the owner of the other voice from across the room.

*Please, God. I don't ask for help a lot, but right now, I could surely use a goddamned miracle. Please. Please. Please. Don't make me carry this. This might be what breaks me.*

The thump of his jeans hitting the floor came next, and right then, I doubted God or anyone else could rescue me. Shit like that didn't happen for girls like me. We were the ones the bad shit happened *to*, and we had to learn how to survive it.

*It's not like it's the first time you've been raped.* But there was absolutely no fucking comfort in that thought. None at all. Still, it reminded me it wasn't impossible to live with. I just had to live through it.

“Gotta get hard for you.”

He grunted, and I didn't want to even think about him standing there with his dick in his hand. I prayed he couldn't get it up. Maybe he'd have whiskey dick. I hoped like fuck he had shit blood pressure and couldn't get hard, even if Marilyn Monroe blew him.

“Oh, I'm gonna give it to you so good.” His voice was gravelly, and I was shit out of luck.

Monsters didn't have problems getting hard-ons. They got off on the

violence. Thrived on the evil. Their power only grew as they rip yours away.

Then there was a *thud*, but bound as tightly as I was—my ears half-taped over—I couldn't sense where it was coming from.

It wasn't my imagination, because I could make out his form spinning around.

“Ernie? You okay?” When there was no answer from *Ernie*, the gorilla paused for a few seconds before yelling again. “Ernie! Where the fuck you at?”

That's when I saw it. Another figure in the darkness. This one was taller and filled the entire doorway when he stepped into the room.

“Motherfucker, why didn't you answer me?”

A flashlight turned on, nearly blinding me. The monster shielded his eyes too.

“Because I'm not Ernie, you sick fuck.”

My attacker charged toward the light, but it went dark, and all I heard next was a struggle.

I prayed to God that whoever shined the flashlight was my literal light in the darkness. I shrieked beneath the duct tape, my throat feeling like it had been sliced to ribbons on the inside, and prayed he heard the scream that Ernie said was loud enough to cover six blocks.

*Please, God. Please tell me you sent this guy.*

God didn't answer. He never did. Which meant I'd have to wait to see who survived, and if it was the flashlight guy, I hoped like hell he wasn't here to do something even worse.

I didn't know how long the thrashing on the floor lasted, but it felt like an eternity. Until finally . . . it stopped.

I stayed silent, terrified the one with sour breath was going to stand up and go back to jacking his cock to rape me. But the flashlight came on again.

“You okay?”

My entire body went limp and tears sprang to my eyes. The light moved

with him as he came toward the bed, but this time, it wasn't shining in my face and blinding me.

I mumbled beneath the duct tape, and he flipped the edge of the blanket over my naked body.

*Thank you, God. Thank you so fucking much.* He wouldn't cover me if he was going to rape me, would he?

"This is gonna hurt somethin' fierce coming off. But there ain't shit I can do about it. You understand?"

I nodded, and he angled the flashlight so he could see what he was doing. His fingertips touched my skin, but instead of shrinking away, I felt no fear.

I felt saved. Like I'd been pardoned from certain death. Like I'd been delivered from the depths of hell itself.

"Okay. One. Two—" He tore it off on *two*.

"*Fuck*," I screeched. "Jesus, that stings."

His voice was deeper than the Mississippi, yet smooth like line-dried satin. "Let me get you a cold cloth. Unless you got ice that ain't melted yet."

I couldn't give a fuck about the stinging on my face, and I shook my head from side to side. "Cut me loose. Please, just cut me loose."

We both heard it, the desperation cloaking my words.

"All right. I will. Give me just a second." He reached into his pocket, produced a knife, and a sharp, involuntary surge of panic ripped through my belly.

He must have noticed me jerk back, because he paused, knife in hand. "Hey. It's okay. I'm just gonna cut you loose. Not gonna hurt you. What's your name, anyway?"

"Magnolia," I said, forcing myself to calm the fuck down.

"I'm Moses. And fucking unwilling women ain't my kink, so you've got nothing to worry about right now, okay?"

I swallowed, but my mouth was bone dry. "Okay."

He sliced through the duct tape at my wrists, and I yanked them apart and

drew them to my chest the instant they were free. Holding the flashlight down by my legs, he carefully cut the tape from my ankles. As soon as I was unbound, I rolled off the bed and dove for the shotgun.

“Whoa. Whoa. Hey, now.” He lifted his hands into the air, the knife still clutched in one. “I just fucking helped you. I ain’t here to hurt you. So don’t fucking shoot me, Magnolia.”

It had been a long time since I’d been this sore, and I wasn’t in the mood to beat around the bush. I’d been beaten enough. “Why are you here?”

“I was checking on an old family friend across the street, but the house was empty. I heard you scream. Thought I should check it out. Tried to ask the first dude what was going on, but he didn’t so much want to talk as he wanted to kill me. And, well, I’m guessing you can tell how that story ended.”

I choked back the lump in my throat. “Ernie.”

“Yeah, Ernie. You knew him?”

I shook my head, but since the man wasn’t shining the flashlight directly at my face, he might not have been able to see me. “No. I don’t know either of them, where they came from or why they were here, but—”

“It’s okay. Just . . . put the gun down. Like I told you, unwilling women aren’t my thing.” The beam of the flashlight moved to his shoulder. “Did he get me? Because that fucking burns like a son of a bitch.”

That’s when I saw the blood dripping down his arm, and I lowered the shotgun. “Yeah. He got you.”

The light beam swung back over to me. “Looks like he got you too. Your face is busted to fuck. What do you say we help each other and do some first aid while we figure out where the hell you’re gonna go so this doesn’t happen again.”

“Go?” I glared at him like he was crazy. “I’m not going anywhere.”

He came toward me, and although I didn’t point the shotgun in his face again, I kept it handy.

“You really want to stay here? Because these might not be the only two assholes prowling around aiming to loot shit. This city is a fucking madhouse right now. I’ve never seen it like this before.”

He was right. It wasn’t safe for me to be here alone. But I’d stayed because the house was all I had. If something happened to it, I wouldn’t have shit, and I’d end up working the corner again. That was something I had to avoid, no matter what.

“I can’t leave the house. I gotta protect it. It’s all I’ve got.”

He crouched down in front of me. “Well, hell. I don’t much like the idea of you here all alone, a sitting duck for the next Ernie and friend to come along and . . .” He trailed off, but I didn’t need him to finish the sentence.

I wouldn’t be as vulnerable again. Never again. “I’ll keep the gun closer. I’ll put a hole in whoever comes in this house next.”

“Why don’t you start with getting some clothes on first. That’ll be a right good start.”

I didn’t take orders, or actually even suggestions, from just anyone. But this person had literally delivered me from almost certain death. But why?

“Who . . . who are you? What are you doing here? Let me see you.”

He angled the flashlight so the beam illuminated the most beautiful face I’d ever seen on a man. Chiseled and angular. Warm-toned skin. And green eyes that glowed like jewels.

“Like I said, I’m Moses. And, apparently, I was sent here to save you.”

## TWO

### MAGNOLIA

*Present day*

“**H**e’s been lying to you since the moment you met him.” Mount’s words hang in the cabin of the car, mingling with the scent of the fancy leather.

My gaze cuts to Moses as my imagination goes wild. “What the fuck is he talking about?”

Moses’s glare could eviscerate a man, but Mount just smiles like he’s proud of himself.

*Fucker.* Right now, they’re both the damn enemy.

“I’m not sure what the fuck kind of game you two are playing, but I don’t want any part of it. I knew this shit was too good to be true.” I shake my head, reaching for the door handle. “I’m out.”

I yank the handle and climb out, not caring how expensive the car is when I slam the door as hard as I fucking can.

*Another man, another liar. Why am I even surprised?*

I grind my teeth, fighting against the pain that’s coming. Betrayal fucking sucks. I should know better because I’ve been on both sides of the equation.

*Maybe this is karma.* Ho-It-All pipes up, and I want to bitch-slap her into submission. The last thing I need is to remind myself that I probably deserve

this.

I stalk toward Bernie's house but pause at the gate.

I can't go back inside. Not like this.

The other door flings open, and Moses's massive body emerges from the car right before it pulls away from the curb and rolls down the street like Satan's chariot. *And maybe it is.*

The expression on Moses's face is hard and unreadable. He stalks toward me and opens his mouth, but I beat him to the punch.

Hands on my hips, I steel myself for war. "You married? Got kids? How many?"

"Mama—"

My head slowly moves from side to side. "Don't you fucking *mama* me like it's going to make me any less pissed. For the first time in a long damn time, I thought I had something. I thought *we* had something. And now I don't know what the fuck to think. So, tell me, *where's your goddamned wife, Moses?*"

I'm yelling by the end, but I don't care. It's not like Bernie will hear me over her stories, and if Norma does, she won't interfere beyond sending me a text later to see if I'm okay.

Moses inches closer, holding out a hand, and his wild eyes make an effort to plead his case.

I jerk away. "Don't fucking touch me. I've fucked enough married men. I didn't need to do it again. So unless you're gonna tell me right now that Mount is fucking with my head for some other goddamned reason, you'd better spit out the truth right the fuck now."

"I'm not married. No kids, Mags. That ain't it. Not even close."

A giant whoosh of relief sweeps through me, but I'm afraid to trust it. "You fucking sure?"

He nods. "Never wanted to be tied to any woman other than you. Whether you believe that or not."



The knot in the pit of my stomach loosens, but who knows for how long. “Then what the hell did you lie about?”

Moses glances around the neighborhood as a car slows at a stop sign down the tree-lined street. “Not here. We can’t take any more chances. Whoever the bastard is who’s coming at you, I’m not taking a chance he’s gonna find you here.”

He takes a step toward his car, reaching for the passenger door handle . . . to open it for me. Then he pauses and turns.

“You want to hear it, you’ve gotta come back with me.”

I press my lips together hard. *Like I have a choice.* All my shit is at his house, put away when I was naive to the fact Moses has been hiding something from me.

“Fine. But I want it all. The whole fucking truth. Every bit of it.”

“Deal,” he says, gesturing to the passenger seat.

With my head held high, I walk to the car and slide inside. The novelty of it being a Rolls Royce hasn’t worn off, but I’m in no mood to be impressed right now.

Moses climbs in, and the engine comes to life with a growl. “I could fucking kill Mount for that,” he says, gripping the wheel until his knuckles turn white. “Fucking know-it-all asshole. He gets a sick kick out of meddling in everyone else’s lives.”

He’s not telling me something I don’t already know, but that’s not what I’m interested in right now. I want the truth out of the man beside me.

Mount and his motives are irrelevant. He’s not the one who lied.

“What are you hiding, and why the hell did Mount drop that shit on me like a bomb?” I ask point-blank as Moses steers the car away from the curb.

His square jaw rocks back and forth as he slows at the first stop sign and flips on the turn signal. Facing me, he looks me in the eye.

“That night, the night we met . . .” He trails off as his chest rises and falls with deliberately slow breaths. “I wasn’t in the neighborhood checking on a

family friend. I was there doing a job for Mount.”

I blink three times, processing what he just said. “*That’s* what you lied about?” My mouth drops open as I blink some more. “Jesus fucking Christ.” I scratch my head, trying to figure out how that even matters now. “Who the hell cares why you were there? All that matters is that you were.”

He keeps going. “I also lied about why those other guys must’ve been in your house. They weren’t there by chance, mama. They were there for the same reason I was.”

I lean back into the plush leather seat as a sinking feeling settles in my stomach. I cross my arms over my chest. “I don’t get it. What the fuck does that mean?”

“The job I was doing for Mount—it was stealing something from *your house*. That’s why they were there too. We were all there for the same reason.”

A car honks from behind us, and Moses finally turns onto the next street as I work through what he just told me.

“Mount sent them *too*?”

“No. No.” Moses shakes his head as he guides the car into traffic. “I was there to get what they were looking for, so they couldn’t.”

“What the hell could’ve been in the house that was even worth stealing? And how the hell did I not know it was there?” I ask, staring at his profile as he navigates the road.

“A hard drive.”

“What?” I pinch the bridge of my nose, trying to make sense of all this. “A fucking hard drive? Where? Whose?”

Moses shrugs. “It was stashed in one of the girls’ rooms on the third floor by a client. He used to leave shit there as a safe place to hide it. She didn’t know. No one knew. At least, until he got drunk at a bar and started telling a guy how smart he was for hiding it there, and the information made it back to Mount.”

“And how the fuck did you get tangled up in it?” I ask, not understanding how a gangster from Biloxi took a job from the king of New Orleans to steal something from my house.

He slows at a stop light behind a line of cars and looks over at me. “I was looking for a way out of the life. I told you, I knew if I stayed in it, I’d be dead by thirty. I needed a big score to set myself up for something new.”

The pieces start to come together. “So you went to Mount and asked him for a job?” I still didn’t see why that would be an issue for me.

“Not exactly,” Moses says when the light turns green. As he accelerates, he glances over at me. “I pulled a job in New Orleans. A big job. I thought I’d be able to swing it without Mount finding out, because I wasn’t going to cut him in and pay the toll for working in his town.”

“Oh,” I whisper, comprehension dawning.

Moses nods as he checks the rearview. “Yeah, *oh*.”

“We got a tail?” I ask, looking to the side mirror out of instinct.

“No. Just checking. We’re clean so far.”

“So, then what happened? How did you not get dead immediately? Mount doesn’t exactly give out second chances very often.” I know this because I felt like I’d escaped judgment day when he handed me one.

“He gave me a week to pay him what I owed—ten times the toll—and I didn’t have that kind of cash on hand. I had to pull another job to get it, but that job went sideways. Someone else jacked the cargo and sold it. I was gonna be fucked. That’s when I got another call from Mount. It was the night Katrina was rolling in.”

“Wanting his money?”

Moses huffs. “No, it was like he knew I didn’t have it and couldn’t get it. He had a deal for me instead. Told me if I could get what he needed, he wouldn’t make an example out of me.”

“Ah,” I say as things start to fit together. “So that’s where the hard drive in my house came in.”

“Yeah. And then Katrina hit, and none of us expected her to be such a bitch. But it was also the perfect distraction,” he says, looking over at me again as we make another turn, taking the long way back to his place. “Because I figured the house would be empty. I just didn’t count on someone else being there to try to get what I was after.”

My stomach drops, and for my peace of mind, I have to ask again. “You’re sure Mount didn’t send them too?”

“Yeah, I asked. But the guy who was drunk and sharing his fucking secrets at the bar wasn’t quiet, and whoever overheard didn’t keep the information to themselves. Mount knew, and someone else did too. You know what happened after that.”

I’m quiet for several blocks as Moses takes a handful of side streets. When we finally pull into the garage at his house and the door closes behind us, I turn in my seat to study him.

“And you’ve been keeping this shit to yourself all this time because . . . why?”

Moses’s throat works as he swallows. “I wasn’t exactly in a position to share much information back then. I think part of me liked the idea you thought I was some kind of hero, even though I was anything but. I *wanted* to be that guy for you. I didn’t want you to know I was just as bad as those other bastards who broke in.”

He scrubs a hand over his jaw. “How the fuck could I tell you after what you’d been through? I couldn’t take the chance that you would’ve kicked my ass out. You would’ve been left unprotected. What if someone else had come looking for it, not knowing I already had it?”

“Well, fuck, Moses. Why didn’t you tell me now that you were back?”

He looks up at the ceiling of the car. “I wanted to. I planned to. Mount made me promise I’d come clean with you. I just . . . didn’t want to fuck this up.” His green-gold eyes glow with emotion. “It was too important to me. *You* are too important. I should’ve told you. It was fucking stupid not to.”

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## THREE

MOSES

I wait for Magnolia's response to my confession. Her initial reaction was definitely *not* what I expected.

Thinking I had a wife and kids? Like I would want that with anyone but her? But then again, how could she know? And considering Mount just told her I'd lied to her since day one, I guess her jumping to that conclusion wasn't any more surprising than the bomb Mount dropped on her.

She threads her fingers together in her lap, and I wait for her verdict.

"I get why you didn't want to tell me then . . . but now? You really think I give a single fuck why you were in that house all these years later?" She takes a deep breath and shifts in the seat. "Listen. Lying isn't the worst thing you can do to a person. Trust me. I've been through *hell*, Moses. Things I may never fucking tell you about because I refuse to relive them or even say the words. You get what I'm saying?"

My hands ball into fists as I think of everything Magnolia has faced. "Yeah. I get it," I say quietly, wishing I could have spared her every terrible experience she's ever had, even if they forged her into the incredible woman she is.

She clears her throat and sits up straighter. "So, unless you've got a wife and kids hidden away somewhere, because bigamy doesn't fucking work for me—"

I hold up a hand to stop her there. “No wife. No kids. I fucking swear.”

“And are you fucking with me about wanting to make this real? Or is everything else you said the truth?”

I reach out and take her hands in mine before I meet her gaze. “Every goddamned word was true.”

“Then why the hell did you wait fifteen years to come back and set things straight? Because one lie in the beginning doesn’t mean shit. But telling me you’ll be back and then disappearing for a decade and a half? That’s what I have a fucking problem with.”

I should have known she’d want to know more, and she deserves it.

“That job I said I failed to pull off and pay back Mount?”

“Yeah.”

I lick my lips. “I did some fucked-up shit when I found out it went sideways.”

Her features sober. “How fucked up?”

“I had a woman killed.”

She doesn’t even flinch, but her stare is razor sharp as her chin rises. “And how did that keep you away for fifteen years?”

“Her man . . . he wanted revenge. Any man would. But I couldn’t risk him taking you out to get even, and then he disappeared. It took me a long fucking time to hunt down that ghost, and when I did, I had to bide my time to handle it right. I needed to do it right, because I needed to prove that I wasn’t the man I used to be. I couldn’t come back to you until I was certain as fuck about that. We took care of it, though. Got creative and made it work for all of us. I know down to my bones that the situation is no longer a threat. I wouldn’t have come back if there was a chance that I’d be leading danger to you. Not after all this time. No way. No how.”

Magnolia’s eyes grow even wider and more curious. “It took you *fifteen years* to make sure he didn’t come back and take an eye for an eye?”

“Like I said, it was a complicated situation that required every skill I have

at my disposal to end it the right way. But that's not the only reason."

She shakes her head, and her pretty hair swings. "Out with the rest."

"After I delivered the hard drive—two weeks late—Mount kicked me out of fucking Louisiana. That was the late fee he demanded."

"Two weeks late," she says quietly. "Because you stayed with me instead of going straight to him with the hard drive."

Finally, she's understanding, and it's like the weight of the past lifts off me.

"Yeah."

"And you didn't push me to leave with you because of the guy whose woman you had killed."

"It wasn't the best plan. I'll admit that all day."

Magnolia holds up a finger. "Wait. One thing I don't get. Why did you risk coming back to Louisiana *now* if Mount banned you?"

I meet her whiskey-colored gaze. "I was done waiting. I told Mount he could kill me or he could meet with me, but I was coming back all the same. We worked out a deal . . ."

"And part of that deal was you telling me the truth?"

It shocked me too. "I don't know when the bastard turned all sentimental and shit, but he was adamant you know everything. And I *was* going to tell you. I was working it out in due time. There's kind of been a lot going on."

Magnolia only hums instead of replying, and then she reaches for the door handle and climbs out of the car. I do the same, wondering what she's going to do now.

I don't have to wonder for long, because she marches around the car to stand in front of me.

She pokes me in the chest with a finger. "You listen to me, Moses Buford Gaspard. I do not give a single shit that you didn't tell me the truth. Like I said, lying to me is *not* the worst thing you could do. But despite all that, you lie to me again about something that matters, and you'll be fucking your hand



for a month. You hear me?”

Relief—*sweet, sweet relief*—floods my body as I wrap my arms around my woman and crush her against me.

“You’d better fucking believe it. I won’t make that mistake again,” I whisper into her ear.

“Good, because I’d hate to have to go hunt down someone else to get me off now that I’m used to the idea of good sex on the regular.”

I loosen my grip and stare hard into her face. “No one touches you but me. Never fucking again. You better trust you belong to me and no other man.”

Her lips curve up into a sly smile. “Then you’d better take me inside and remind me exactly why that is. Because a few orgasms would go a long damn way to smoothing out this situation.”

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## FOUR

MOSES

**W**hen your woman tells you a few orgasms are your penance for fucking up, you deliver like your life depends on it—and you make that shit memorable. I’d repent for days on end, if needed.

I lift Magnolia into my arms and carry her through the house, ignoring the questioning looks from Jules and Trey, and kick the bedroom door shut behind us. “You need a reminder? I’ll give you one you won’t forget anytime soon.”

I lower her to the bed, following her down with my body. That’s when she surprises me, hooking a leg around mine and rolling us until she’s on top.

“Maybe *I* need to be the one to give *you* a reminder,” she says with a grin. “Just so *you* understand what you’ve got to lose if you decide to fuck this up.”

“That ain’t happening, mama,” I tell her confidently. I’m not letting her go again. Ever.

“It sure as hell won’t after I’m done with you.” With that, she moves down my body until her hands are on the waistband of my shorts. She drags them down, and my dick, already rock hard for her, springs free. “Damn, I love your cock. So thick and long and hard.”

I can feel the look on her face—all heat and need—in my balls as she

stares at my cock. All the blood in my body has officially changed direction, going straight to where her hand wraps around my shaft.

“All for you, mama. And not that I’m fucking complaining right now, but I thought I was here to give *you* all the orgasms.”

Her gaze cuts up to mine for a moment. “You’re here to give me whatever I want. And what I want right this minute is your cock in my mouth, so you remember exactly why it’s mine. Pay attention, Moby. Because this is a lesson you don’t wanna miss.” She readjusts her position, kneeling between my knees, and sucks the head into her mouth.

*Hot. Wet. And oh so fucking good.*

She’s right. There’s nothing about this I want to miss, and I’m done arguing. If this is what she needs, then she can have it. She can fucking have anything and everything I’ve got.

And when she takes my entire cock down her throat, her nose pressing against my lower abs as she works it, I see heaven.

Magnolia Marie Maison can have my fucking soul too.

She sucks and pumps my cock until pre-cum drips down the head, and then she laps it up like it’s her reward. When she grabs my hand to jack my dick so she can suck my balls into her mouth, I almost come right on the spot.

*And that’s not fucking happening.*

I move, gripping her shoulders and dragging her up my body.

“I wasn’t done,” she says with a pout.

“Don’t care. I’m not about to finish before I’ve gotten you off even once. My turn, mama.” I lift her off me and roll over, pinning her to the mattress.

“But—”

“Shhh.” I strip her dress off and worship every patch of smooth skin I uncover, licking and sucking and kissing. “Like silk,” I tell her, glancing up to see her golden-brown eyes going hazy.

“You’re a tease.”

“I’m just getting started.” I work my way down her belly, pressing a kiss

to the side of the bandage where her stitches are. “These okay?”

She nods and runs her fingers over my cheek. “Can’t even feel them.”

“Good. Bet you’ll be able to feel this, though.” I cup her center with my hand. “This is my cunt. Mine to eat. Mine to fuck. Mine to make come.”

She rocks into my palm. “Then you’d better show it who’s boss. Remind me who owns it.”

A growl tears from my throat. “Damn right that’s what I’m going to do, and you’re gonna fucking scream.”

“Prove it.”

With that challenge thrown down, I press my mouth against the strip of lace separating that sweet, sweet pussy from my lips.

“I love the way you taste. Makes me fucking hard every time I think about how hot and juicy this tight little cunt is. And, fuck, I think about it a lot.”

Magnolia releases a moan of approval as I drag my teeth across her. “Fuck, I love your dirty mouth.”

Flicking the lace aside, I swipe my tongue up the slit, catching her slickness and groaning at the taste. “You like my dirty mouth on this sweet pussy. That’s for damn sure.”

Before she can reply, I devour her, tasting every sweet and tangy inch of her cunt. Teasing her clit until every muscle in her body is tight and begging to come.

Magnolia’s hand brackets the back of my head, pulling me harder against her center, and I lash her clit hard with my tongue as I push a finger inside.

Her inner muscles clamp down, damn near strangling it as she yells, “Moses!”

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## FIVE

### MAGNOLIA

I don't mean to scream his name, but I can't hold back.

The orgasm hits me like a runaway train, and tremors rip through my entire body. The pleasure is so powerful that one hand digs into the bedding as I try to hold on. My other hand anchors me to Moses, and he doesn't stop. Again and again, he brings me to the edge and pushes me over until I'm nothing but thrashing limbs and sensation.

My lungs heave as he finally lifts his head from between my legs. With my sex-fogged vision, I can make out his lips slick with my juices.

The man looks like he just feasted and is still hungry for more. More of me. The intensity of his gaze lights me on fire. It's need and want and worship all wrapped up into one, and everything I need in this world is written on his face.

One lie isn't shit compared to every action that has shown me Moses's character, including that look in his eyes. This man might have come back to fuck me, but he didn't come back to fuck me over. That's not who Moses is. That's not who he's ever been to me.

"I need you," I tell him, spreading my legs wider.

He climbs my body, takes my lips, and I taste myself as he lines up the head of that perfect dick against my entrance. And when he slides home, everything I need becomes clear in his intentions.

He belongs to me.  
I belong to him.  
That's just the way it's gotta be.

Afterward, I lie sated in bed with Moses's big body wound around me.

*God, I missed this.*

Given my former line of work, moments like these were a rarity. I didn't have sex for fun because it had always been a business transaction.

But with Moses . . . sex had been different from the beginning. There was nothing businesslike about it. Those two weeks I spent with him taught me I could have sex for the sole pleasure of it. I'd never known before then.

With that melancholy thought dragging down my postcoital bliss, I roll closer, soaking up the heat radiating off him like a furnace.

I survey his face, the deep golden tan of his skin, and see lines around his eyes he didn't have back then. He wasn't a boy all those years ago—no, he was a man already—but now, the miles and wisdom he's accumulated in the last decade and a half are etched on him.

Similar to the way his initials have always been carved in the stone wall around my heart. *M.B.G.*

Nevertheless, I'm sure he notices the signs of aging on my face too, despite how much time and money I spend trying to beat them back. I should probably welcome them with open arms, considering there were plenty of days when I wasn't sure I'd make it to thirty-five.

I wonder what would have happened if things had worked out differently between us. If we'd stayed together instead of life pulling us in different directions. Would we have made it this long?

Who knows?

Then again, I believe enough in fate that it doesn't matter. Things work

out the way they're meant to be. There's no point in second-guessing God's plan, and all that.

But I do know one thing. I'm not letting him go again. Because I've fucking missed him.

"This mean I'm forgiven?" Moses asks, smoothing a wild lock of hair away from my face.

"You don't even need to ask, Moby."

He raises an eyebrow like he doesn't believe me.

"As soon as I found out you weren't hiding a wife and kids—which, by the way, I would've killed you for and let Mount dispose of your body—I honestly didn't care what you'd lied about."

The corners of his mouth curve up at my statement. "You're a fierce woman, you know that?"

"Never had much of a choice. I became the woman I had to be in order to survive, and then . . . thrive. At least, as much as I could."

"You've done a hell of a job," he says softly, tightening his arm to pull me in closer to his body. "And thank you for your grace. I should've told you everything sooner, but I was too caught up in making you mine first."

"Well, you've got me now. Don't you dare fuck it up."

At this, his face lights up with a wide smile. "You're fucking perfect for me, Magnolia Marie Maison. I spent years wondering if I'd made it all up. How it was between us. How you were."

"And?" I ask, liking the warmth blooming in my chest at the idea of him spending years thinking about me. Because I did the same, despite my every attempt to block out his memory.

He covers my mouth with his, pressing kisses to my lips as he murmurs, "It's even better. Because we're both older, wiser, and more comfortable with ourselves. There's something about it I didn't expect. It makes it all feel even more . . . real, I guess."

I know exactly what he's saying. "I get you." His stomach growls, and

this time, I laugh. “Someone worked up an appetite.”

“Keeping you satisfied is gonna cut down on the cardio I need, that’s for damn sure.”

He drops his head back on the pillow, and I take a moment to appreciate the sculpted muscles of his body.

“Whatever you gotta do to keep all this up, I’m fully in support of it.”

“Same, mama. Same.” He grins and winks at me. “I guess I’d better see what’s happening for lunch.”

I sit up, letting the sheet fall to my lap. “No. Let me. My turn to cook.”

“You don’t need to do that,” Moses says, following my lead and sitting up. “I can cook, or Jules can, or we can order out. Trust me, you don’t want Trey anywhere near the kitchen, though. He’s a take-out-only kind of guy. He’d burn rice too.”

“I know I don’t need to. Obviously, you’ve made it this long without me keeping you fed, but I’m in the mood for it. Don’t worry, I won’t poison you.” I shoot him back a wink as I rise from the bed, and Moses’s hand darts out, snagging my forearm.

I glance down at him expectantly.

“You’re incredible, Mags. And if there’s one thing I could do differently, it would be coming back a hell of a lot sooner. That’s my biggest regret.”

Sometimes I’m unsure of how to react when he says things like that. I’ve never had this before, but I swallow my emotions and tip my head to the side. “No point in wishing for what’s already been and gone. Let’s make the most of what we have now.”

He squeezes my hand and releases it. “Beauty and brains. A deadly combination. There will never be another woman like you, Magnolia. Never.”

I straighten my back and right my posture under his praise. “I know.”



## SIX

MOSES

**W**hile Magnolia digs in the fridge, deciding what she'll make, I sit across the table from Trey.

I keep my voice low as I talk to him. "You gotta give me something, brother. We gotta put this bastard in the ground. I'm not letting him get a shot at Mags. We need information."

Trey bobs his head. "Dude, I know. I'm digging everywhere. I can't find any record of family. Anything that would connect him to another person is missing. If he ever had family, it appears they've been wiped too."

My frustration escalates, because this isn't a problem we've ever run into before. In this day and age, where everyone records their every thought online through social media, plus pictures and family affiliations, it's easy to track down damn near anyone. Frankly, it's a criminal's dream. Your average person doesn't think twice about what they share and how it could be used against them.

Want to find a house to rob? Watch for people posting all their vacation pics. Then stop by during the day, in broad daylight, in a work van, wearing a collared shirt and a name tag, and no one looks at you twice.

But this bastard isn't some petty criminal, and we need to examine every angle.

"Spend some time digging on Alberto Brandon. Mount told us this

morning his wife was murdered the same night of the break-in at Mags's condo. He's the reason the Feds were watching the house. There's a connection."

Trey's brows shoot up to his hairline. "How was she killed?"

"Throat slit."

"Damn. That's ice cold," he whispers, his fingers still tapping on the keyboard. "We have any idea who or why?"

I crack my neck, annoyed at how the whole situation makes my body tighten. "Feds were watching the house because of him, and now his wife is dead. There's something there, I just don't know what. We need more info. Anything you can find."

Trey nods, lifting his hands from the keyboard to crack his knuckles. "I'll hack the NOPD. Find out what they know about the woman's murder. It has to be connected. I'll check in and see what they've got on the break-in too. Maybe they've determined if the blood is animal or human yet. That might give us something."

I rise and tap the top of his laptop screen. "Thanks, brother. Work your magic. We need to get some answers quick so we can take care of this shit once and for all."

"How does jambalaya sound?" Magnolia calls from the kitchen with her head buried in the fridge.

"Perfect, mama." I look at Trey. "You hungry?"

"Damn right. I'm always hungry."

"Me too," Jules says, chiming in. "Especially if I'm not cooking."

Magnolia smiles from where she stands behind the island. "All right. One big ol' batch coming up."

By the time Magnolia has the whole house smelling amazing, Trey is in the

NOPD system.

“Okay, here we go,” he says, his fingers flying.

“What do you have?” I ask, coming around the table to stand behind him.

“Damn, man. That’s some fucked-up shit,” he says under his breath.

“What?” Magnolia asks from across the room.

Trey glances over in her direction, but his fingers never stop moving. The guy can literally carry on full conversations and keep typing without ever missing a keystroke. As someone who still has to look at his fingers on occasion to remember where a few letters are, I can’t help but be amazed.

“Crime scene pictures. You don’t want to see them, mama,” I tell her, wishing I wasn’t witnessing them either.

“Take his word for it,” Trey says, shaking his head like he’s trying to get the vision of Laura Brandon out of his brain, and I don’t blame him. “You can’t un-see shit like this.”

He clicks out of the photos as fast as he clicked into them.

“Any suspects?” I ask, squatting down to read his screen.

He clicks around and shrugs. “No. Nothing so far. But they’re definitely digging. Your buddy Cavender is on the case.”

Magnolia clangs the lid onto the top of the stockpot. “Fuck. He’ll probably be trying to pin this bullshit on me too.”

“Not a chance that’ll stick. You have an alibi, and even if you didn’t, the good detective isn’t going to suspect a woman did this. This was . . .” I trail off, thinking of how to describe the gruesome scene. “Different. And I’d stake my money on the fact it was a man, for sure. Women don’t generally do that kind of thing.”

“It was that bad?” she asks quietly.

I frown and scratch the back of my neck where the hairs are still on end. “Yeah. But nothing you need to see or think about.”

Trey keeps poking around in the case file on Brandon’s wife, but there’s nothing helpful we can find. Fingerprints were lifted from the scene, but after

Brandon and his wife's were eliminated, there were three other sets of prints that haven't resulted in any matches yet. No sign of forced entry. No shoe or boot prints found in the yard.

Whoever did this isn't an amateur.

"That's a big fat zero for information," Trey says, clicking out of the murder case. "Let's see if they have anything on the break-in." His fingers go speeding across the keys again, and he pulls up the file on Cavender's investigation of the incident at Magnolia's condo.

"Check the forensics first," I tell him.

He's already on it, though, and we both scan the report as it pops up on the screen.

Trey notices something first, and lifts his hand off the keys and fists it against his mouth. "Fuck. It really was human blood." His head swivels in my direction, and I read the unease in his gaze.

"That's what Mount said he heard." Magnolia's voice is low and quiet.

I leave Trey's side and head to her at the stove. I pull her into me, wrapping my arms around her. "You're never going back there, and whoever this sick fuck is—we're taking him out. Don't give him a second of your time by worrying. It's not worth it."

"But whose blood was it?" she whispers with a shiver.

"We'll figure that out too, mama. Trust me."

I'm telling her the truth. My brain has been trying to connect the dots on this fucking puzzle since it started unfolding. I go over the timeline of events I've been striving to make sense of.

"Ricardo Ortiz tried to kill you. You killed him. Now someone else is coming after you—who we gotta assume is connected to Ortiz. So it stands to reason someone hired the guy to kill you. Could that someone have been Brandon or his wife?"

Magnolia presses closer into my body. "I don't know why either of them would. Desiree thinks Brandon ran off with one of her girls— Wait. Let's

play this one out. If Brandon ran off with Naya . . . his wife would be pissed.” She jerks her chin up at me. “That makes sense. Doesn’t it?”

I follow her logic. “It could, but wouldn’t a wife go after the woman he ran off with . . . or Desiree? Why you?”

“Because I own the house. Everyone knows I own the house. It’s easy to look up. But could the bitch have been crazy enough to pay someone to kill *me* because her husband ran off with a girl who just happened to live in a house I owned?”

Jules freezes on the other side of the kitchen island. “Woman scorned. That’s all I’m saying. Your scenario makes sense when you add up the rest. Brandon’s wife could’ve found your name and hired Ortiz to kill you. It’s not too hard to figure out Ortiz went into your building and didn’t come out alive. Someone might care about that enough to go after the person who paid him for the job that got him killed. Maybe to find out who his target was in the building? Then Brandon’s wife gets tortured and killed for the information. It all fits.”

Magnolia’s head swings toward Jules, and I could punch him in the face right now. “He tortured her?”

I use my hand to steer her worried face back to me. “Hey. Don’t think about that shit. Not any of it.”

“But . . . but if he tortured *her*—” She blinks up at me, and I already know what the fuck she’s imagining before she says it. “What the hell would he do to—”

I press my lips to hers before she can finish the sentence, but her eyes are on mine and I see the concern in them.

When I pull back, I match her head-on. “No one’s getting their hands on you. You hear me?”

She exhales and then lifts her chin. “I hear you. But we gotta find whoever the fuck it is so we can take him out. How are we gonna do that?”

“Wonder if Ortiz left a car behind,” Jules says, swiping a hand over his

jaw.

I latch onto what might be the first good lead we've had. "That's a damn good question." I release Magnolia and point at Trey. "Can you see if Cavender found one?"

Trey nods, and his fingers go flying again as he brings up the case file for Ortiz's unsolved murder. A murder that'll remain unsolved for a long fucking time, if it's up to me.

"There's no mention of a car. Nothing but forensics and Cavender's notes. He definitely wants to pin it on Magnolia, but he's only got the location working in his favor."

I drum my fingers on the island as I concentrate. "Anything towed or impounded recently from nearby? Abandoned cars?"

"Oh, good idea." It's a few minutes before Trey speaks again. "Okay, we might have something. One car was impounded yesterday. Abandoned."

"What kind of car, and how far away from Magnolia's condo?" I ask, walking over to him as he types the address in and calculates the distance.

"Mustang. Two-tenths of a mile." He looks up at me with a grin. "We might've just gotten lucky."

"Y'all can thank me later," Jules says as he raises his hand in the air.

"It's still at the impound?" I ask Trey.

"Damn right it is. So . . . how the hell are we going to get to it?"

Magnolia pauses, lifting the lid off the pot. "The city impound lot? I know a cop who works there."

All eyes in the room swing to her.

"Well. I don't *know him*, but I know who he is. He always wanted to get better acquainted, if you catch my drift."

"Caught it, mama. Think he'll do you a favor?"

She grimaces with a shake of her head. "I'm not so sure about a favor, but I could definitely go with you and distract him if I need to."

The thought of putting her in that position rings warning bells inside me.

She's more than capable, but her safety is paramount. "If we're breaking into the impound lot, you aren't involved. Hard no."

She crosses her arms over her chest. "This is to find the person who's after *me*. A person who might've tortured some jealous woman. You really think me going along in case you need a diversion is more dangerous than the target on my back?"

"She's got a point there, boss."

I glare at Jules when he agrees with her. "I don't like it."

"And I don't like not knowing who the hell is looking for me," Magnolia snaps back. "We'll go tonight. Maybe you won't even need me. But if you do, I'll be there. Can Trey cut the camera feeds so no one sees you going in or out?"

"Yes, Trey can," Trey says in agreement.

All three of them look at me, the odd one out who doesn't want Magnolia involved in anything that could possibly go sideways.

I take a slow, deep breath and let it out. "Fine. You can come along, but you *only* jump in as a last resort. Jules and I can handle ourselves. I'm not taking a chance that any of this blows back on you. Cavender is too fucking interested in you, and I don't want to hand him another reason to look closer. Got it?"

Magnolia smiles and offers me a salute. "Got it. Now, this needs to simmer a while, and then we can eat."

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## SEVEN

### MAGNOLIA

**T**he guys devoured my jambalaya, coming back for seconds, and even thirds for Jules. Moses kissed me on the forehead and thanked me for the meal, but I could tell he was uneasy about the plans for later.

He's still anxious now, based on the looks he's shooting me from across the room as I carefully apply my makeup in the bathroom mirror.

I pause, mascara wand in hand, and glance his way. "It'll be fine. I don't know why you're worrying about me so much. This is far from the most dangerous thing I've ever been involved in, Moby."

Moses pulls a black T-shirt out of a drawer, tosses it on the bed, and comes toward the bathroom door. "You saying shit like that doesn't change my mind. Matter of fact, it just makes me wish I'd been able to come back a hell of a lot sooner to make sure you didn't have to take risks. I hate that, mama. The thought of you in harm's way fucking kills me."

Warmth blooms around my heart at the sound of his voice and the words he's speaking. How long has it been since anyone but Keira has worried about me doing anything?

I slide the mascara wand back in the tube and set it in my makeup bag before meeting him outside the bathroom.

His hands go to my waist, pulling me against him in a way I love. Moses is a tactile guy, and I adore how he always wants to have his hands on me.



Have me close to him. Every time I get near, I want to soak up his body heat. He's potent, that's for damn sure.

"Don't think like that," I tell him quietly, tilting up to kiss his jaw. "Because I'm still here. You're still here. We're both fine. Whatever happened to either of us in the past is just that—in the past. Tonight, you probably won't even need me, but I'm going all the same because you're doing this *for me*. What kind of woman—no, what kind of *partner*—would I be if I just sat back and let you do all the work?"

"The kind who stays safe so I don't have to worry," he says, his voice low as he angles his head to nibble along my jawline.

"You're saying you'd be fine leaving me here by myself while the three of you go to the impound lot? You wouldn't be worried about me being here all alone? Because I don't believe that either." I poke a finger into his chest, and he pulls back.

Moses's mouth flattens into a line, but even now, I can see I've got him as the corners threaten to turn up.

"You know I'm right. You wouldn't be too keen on leaving me alone and unprotected either. I see it on your face."

His big hand comes up, and his thumb strokes along my jaw before burying in my hair. "How the hell do you know me so well again, already?" The words come out before he presses a kiss to my lips.

"Because I know *you*," I say with a smile.

He moves in to pair our mouths. "Shut up and kiss me, woman. You win. I'll quit fucking worrying."

My giggle is smothered by the taste of Moses, and my entire body lights up, ready for him, even after a single kiss. When he lifts his head, I read the desire on his face too. We spark each other to life with no effort at all.

Moses must see it on my face too. "Hold that thought, mama. When we get back, I'm spending all night inside you."

"Damn right you are," I tell him, rolling my hips to grind my clit on his

thigh while we're standing there. "I just don't want to wait."

Both his hands drop to my waist and squeeze, setting me back a step from him. "After this is done, and you're home safe."

His genuine concern settles over me, and I love how it feels. "You bribing me with sex to stay out of trouble?" I ask, my eyebrows tugging upward.

"Fucking right I am, if that's the incentive you need. Is it working?"

I burst out laughing. "You're something else, Moby. Now, let me finish getting dressed, and I'll be ready to rock."

He checks his watch. "We have forty-five minutes before we should leave. Take your time, mama. The boys and I'll be waiting for you."

He gives me a firm kiss, and I watch him walk out of the bedroom.

*Damn, the ass on that man ought to be illegal.* Then I remember something that makes me smile. *It's all mine.*

I slip back into the bathroom and finish my war paint.

We're getting answers tonight. I can feel it. Because I'm done living in fear. It's time for this bloodthirsty motherfucker to go down.

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## EIGHT

MOSES

**W**hen Magnolia walks out into the living room, all ready to go, I want to march her right back to the bedroom and lock her inside.

Jules whistles. “Damn, woman. Talk about a diversion. *Shit.*”

“Nice,” Trey says, clapping as well as he can with his computer tucked under his arm.

I drag my gaze from the toes of her stilettos, up her mile-long bare legs, to the green dress she’s got on, hugging every damn curve. She’s sexy as fuck, showing just enough skin to make a man realize all she’s got to offer, but the dress covers plenty of her and leaves you wanting more.

I close the distance between us wordlessly.

“I’m ready,” she says with ruby-slicked lips.

I can’t help but want them wrapped around my cock. Blood pumps south, and my dick comes to life. I drag my attention away from that pouty mouth to her whiskey-colored eyes.

“You’re fucking gorgeous. I want to wrap you in a trash bag so no one, especially not some nosy cop, gets a chance to see *my woman* looking sexy as fuck.”

Instead of frowning at me, Magnolia’s lips curve into the most devastating smile I’ve ever seen on her face. Her eyes sparkle, and she leans

toward me. "I'd be just as sexy in a trash bag. Deal with it, Moby."

Her confident words make a chuckle spill from my lips. "Goddamn, you're right, and I know it." Losing the smile, I cup her shoulders with my palms. "But you gotta promise me something."

She cocks her gorgeous head to one side. "What?"

"You're a last resort. Jules and I are totally capable of doing this by ourselves. You only get out of the car if we're about to get caught in the act. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

God, I love hearing her say shit like that, and I can't find any words before she speaks again.

"I'll be fine. It ain't like I'm going to go work a corner. Now *that* would be dangerous. So just have a little faith, Moby. It's all gonna be right as rain. Tonight, we're making progress." She brings her purse between us and flips it open to check inside. When she snaps it shut, she adds, "I'm all set. You guys good to go?"

I've been managed by a pro, and I can't find it in me to mind.

"Yeah, mama. We're ready."

All four of us load up into the SUV and head over to Claiborne and the impound lot. Jules is driving, and Trey has his laptop out and is typing away behind him. I'm in the passenger seat with Magnolia behind me, and it's quiet on the ride over.

We drive under the highway, and Jules takes us in a slow loop around the lot. "Okay, so they've got at least one cop who should be acting as security. But it looks like he's MIA right now."

"That's a good sign, right?" Magnolia asks.

"Good enough," I reply, glancing into the back seat. "But it also means we don't know where he's at or when he's coming back. So we'll need to work fast."

"If you give me a few more minutes, I'll be ready to cut the cameras. I'm

pulling them all up right now. And the Mustang is in spot 117. So . . .” Trey’s keyboard clacks as he does his thing. “Actually, do another loop around the other block and come back and park on the far corner. It’s darker over there. You should be pretty close to the car that way, and hopefully no one will even notice any of us.”

“I’m on it,” Jules says, stopping at a corner and flipping on the blinker. Cop cars are parked in front of the squatty brown building where errant law-abiding citizens are supposed to go to pay their fines and get their keys. But we aren’t those people and haven’t been for a long damn time.

As soon as Jules makes a circuit around the block and approaches the corner and curb where we’ll park, I check to make sure I’ve got everything. Gun. Phone. Slim Jim. *Good.*

“Jules, you got the rest of the tools?” I ask as he brings the SUV to a stop.

He pats his pockets, pulls out a zippered case, and nods. “Got it all. You ready?”

I twist around to the back of my seat to look at Mags. “You know your role?”

She leans forward to kiss me. “Don’t worry about a thing. This is gonna work.”

Trey chimes in. “And cameras are going in five, four, three—”

I grab her face and press a solid kiss to it. “Damn right it’s gonna work.”

“Two, and . . . one. Get the fuck out there. You probably have about five minutes, tops, before they come looking to figure out what the fuck is going on.”

I give Trey a nod, and Jules and I are out of the SUV in a flash. Jules already has the small set of bolt cutters ready, and he’s cutting the fence links in seconds. We’re inside in less than thirty.

*Space 117*, I remind myself as I start searching the painted numbers. I spot the Mustang before Jules and wave him over.

He disables the alarm system and then gives me a thumbs-up. With the

Slim Jim in my hand, I pop the lock and yank open the door.

A wave of stale air that smells like pot and dirty socks billows out. I hit the unlock button and Jules opens the passenger side. He goes for the glove box, pulls out the registration, and gives me a nod. Then we go to town. Each of us fills a bag we brought with anything not attached to the car that might give us information about the late Ricardo Ortiz from Magnolia's building.

Receipts. Business cards. Cell phone—*bingo*.

I shove it all in my bag, and Jules pops the trunk. He hefts a duffel bag out of it as I scan the interior for anything else we could have missed, but I'm confident we've gotten everything.

Jules closes the trunk quietly, and I check my watch. We've got two minutes.

That's when I see the flashlight beam cutting across the lot, three rows away.

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## NINE

### MAGNOLIA

**M**y heart hammers with every second that ticks down on the stopwatch I set on my phone. Trey is fucking with the cameras still, making the ones in the front of the lot—well away from where Moses and Jules are—flash and flicker like they’re trying to come back online.

“If I just cut them all off, and left them that way, they’d know something was up. This way, they’ll think it’s just another instance of shitty equipment not behaving, which is something they’re likely used to.”

I wish it made me feel better, but it doesn’t.

As much as Moses was worried about the possibility of me having to get involved and put myself at risk, I’m a hundred times more worried about him.

Me distracting a cop isn’t a crime in itself; that’s accessory-type shit. But Moses and Jules breaking into the impound lot? That’s bad news if they get caught.

“How good are they at this kind of thing? Do they do it often?” I ask Trey, trying to gauge just how anxious I should be.

Trey barely glances up from his screen as he works his magic. “I wouldn’t worry too much. They’ve had some close calls before, but Moses is smart as fuck. Guaranteed he’s already thinking six moves ahead.”

“Like chess,” I whisper.

“Yeah. That’s what he says. We think like chess, and everyone else is playing checkers. That’s why we’re so fucking good at what we do. So don’t freak out just yet. He’ll be back in no time.”

As soon as he gives me that reassurance, my stomach drops as I see a flashlight beam coming down the sidewalk. If the cop continues walking that path, he’ll go right past the slit they cut in the fence to get in.

“Houston, we have a problem,” I whisper to Trey.

He finally lifts his head and looks out the window. “Oh fuck. He can’t keep walking. He’ll see the fence. This place will be crawling with cops if he does.”

“Looks like I’m up,” I say, my pulse spiking despite my determination to stay calm.

“Mags—”

Trey starts to say something, but I’m not sticking around and taking chances that could put my man at risk. I hop out of the SUV and duck behind a van, so I look like I’m coming from across the street.

“Officer? Can you help me?”

The uniform swings his flashlight toward the sound of my voice. He’s not the cop I know, but I’m not a stranger to . . . well, strangers.

“Jesus Christ, lady. Scared the hell out of me. You lost?” He looks me up and down, his expression bordering on appreciative when he takes in my dress.

“I am so damn lost and confused. I’ve never had my car towed before. I didn’t realize I’d parked in front of a fire hydrant. There were trash bags blocking it, and I couldn’t even see the damn thing.” I giggle as if it’s no big deal. “Sure enough, when I came back, my car was gone, and there was a damn fire hydrant where it was parked.”

He relaxes, and it’s hard to tell, but he appears to blush as he scans the ground before me. “I’m real sorry about that, ma’am, but in the interest of public safety, we can’t allow people to block fire hydrants when they park.”



“I know, I know.” I wave a hand through the air between us. “And I have no problem paying the fine. Trust me, I’ve learned my lesson. I just don’t understand where I’m supposed to go to get my car. I’ve never done this before.”

He turns to point in the direction of the brown building we drove by earlier, but it can’t be seen from where we are. “If you go just down the street and take a right, you’ll spot a building that says . . .”

I think I see the black of Moses’s T-shirt on the other side of the fence, and I can’t take a chance the officer is just going to give me directions and send me on my way. So I loop my arm around his, even though he hasn’t offered it.

“Can you just walk me over there? I can probably find it myself, but walking around here at night by myself gives me the creeps. You’d hate to have something happen to me, wouldn’t you? Do you mind? I’d really appreciate it, Officer.”

His flashlight beam is pointed at the ground now, but his eyes are pointed straight at my tits.

*Good. Look at my tits. As long as you don’t see my man.*

“Well, I’m on my rounds . . .”

I peek up at him from under my lashes. “Oh, shoot. I wouldn’t want to take you away from your duties. I just . . . I’m a little scared of the dark, is all. You never know who’s out there or if they’re watching you. Just scares the bejesus out of me.”

I see the exact moment I win, because his face softens and he smiles.

“All right, ma’am. I’d be happy to escort you over there. You’ll have to work with the officers inside to get your car, though. That’s not my job.”

“Thank you so much, sir. You’re a true gentleman.”

As we start walking, me holding his arm, toward the building and away from the sliced fence, I could do a fist pump of victory.

Moses, however, might want to kill me.

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## TEN

MOSES

“I’m going to kill her,” I say as soon as I slide into the SUV and Jules fires up the engine. “That wasn’t a fucking last resort. We could’ve gotten out —”

“Say what you want, man, but I would’ve done the same thing in her position,” Trey says, defending Magnolia’s actions. “If he kept coming your way, there was a damn good chance he would’ve seen the fence. You sure as fuck wouldn’t have got out the same way. And now cameras are up again.”

“What do you want me to do, boss?” Jules asks.

“Drive around the block and stop in front of the building.”

He cuts his face to mine. “You want me to park in between the fucking cop cars or what?”

“Yeah, whatever you gotta do. Just fucking go get her.”

He shakes his head slowly from side to side as he shifts the SUV into gear. “I hope she knows what the hell she’s doing.”

“You and me both,” I say as he circles the impound lot. I glance back at Trey. “Cut the camera in front of the building again. I don’t want Magnolia on the feed.”

As we turn the corner, I catch sight of the cop she was walking with, turning and leaving her in front of the building. “Slow down, Jules. Give him a few seconds to walk away.”

We crawl down the street as Magnolia picks her way carefully toward the ugly brown building. The swivel of her chin tells me she sees us coming, but she's waiting for her cop escort to get out of sight before she changes direction and raises his suspicions.

Jules comes to a stop as the cop turns the corner, headed back down the fence line he's going to find a slice in, when Magnolia dashes to the SUV.

"Trey, open the door." I give the order, but Trey's already on it, and Magnolia jumps up into the SUV and shuts the door. "All right. Go."

"You find anything?" Magnolia asks as she settles into her seat.

"What the hell were you doing?" I turn around so I can see her face.

"Helping. And, clearly, everything worked out okay, so you need to take that attitude and stow it, Moby."

From beside her, Trey can't help but chuckle.

"Something funny?" I snap.

Unable to hold back his laughter, Trey chokes. "She calls you Moby, and I gotta know—is that short for Moby Dick? Because if it is, that is *the best fuckin' nickname I've ever heard.*"

Trey is laughing all out now. Tears roll down his face as he chuckles, and the mood of the entire car lifts when Magnolia joins in. It's contagious, and soon Jules is trying to hold back a chortle.

Finally, I crack a smile. "What can I say? It may be a nickname, but there's nothing short about it. I bring a lot to the table."

Jules bursts into laughter.

It takes us a few blocks before we're able to control ourselves, and to tell the truth, we needed the moment of levity.

When the mirth finally dies down. Magnolia asks again, "You get what we needed?"

"Yeah, mama. We found the 'Stang and emptied it out. Ricardo didn't have a lot, but he had enough. Now we just gotta sort through it and see what connects him to the fucking asshole who broke into your place."

*And who might have slit Alberto Brandon's wife's throat.* My brain fills in the part I don't need to say, because I guarantee everyone else is thinking it too.

"Good. It's time for this bastard to go down," Magnolia says from behind me.

"And he will. Don't worry about that. We're gonna find him and take him out."

Jules takes a winding and backtracking route to the house in the Marigny, just in case we have a tail, but I don't see any signs of one.

"We should be good, man. Let's get home and start digging." I twist in my seat to look at Trey. "We got a cell phone. Hopefully that'll be our jackpot."

"Disposable?" He squints, and I know what he's thinking. A burner won't do us as much good.

I shake my head. "No. It looks like it's a nice, new one."

"I'm surprised Ortiz was smart enough to leave it in the car when he brought his fucking wallet to the job," Jules says, disgust for the rookie mistake underlying his tone.

"His wallet didn't do us any favors helping to figure out who the fuck he really was," Trey says, pointing out the truth. "Clearly, he wasn't worried about it being found. Maybe that means he was getting cocky with his anonymity. Could also mean his cell has answers his wallet didn't."

"Okay, okay," Jules says, conceding the point. "As long as you find a name we can hunt down to put this son of a bitch to sleep, we'll be all good." He hits the button on the visor. The garage door opens, and then he parks inside.

I'm out of the SUV first, bag in hand, but I'm not racing into the kitchen to empty it out on the table. First things first. I yank open Mags's door and pull her out and into my arms.

"When I heard your voice outside the car, my heart practically fucking

stopped. I do *not* like you taking risks, mama. Not one fucking bit.”

“All’s well that ends well,” she replies, pressing a kiss to my lips. “Besides, that’s about the best encounter I’ve ever had with a cop. You worried for nothing.”

I run my hand over her hair and press my mouth to her warm forehead. “Come on, woman. I’m taking you inside. As soon as we’ve sorted through this shit, I’m taking you to bed and showing you exactly how I fucking feel about you.”

Her smile could light up the pitch-black night. “You’ve got yourself a deal, Moby.”

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## ELEVEN

### MAGNOLIA

**W**hen we make our way inside, Jules is dumping the contents of the bags onto the kitchen table. Moses and I walk toward him, and I'm hoping like hell we find something from the damn car to tell us who is after me so we can put an end to the man.

The memory of the words smeared on my wall—in blood—still scares me, and that pisses me off more than anything. I don't let men bully or intimidate me anymore, and the fact some nameless, faceless asshole disrupted my life and put me on edge is driving me crazy.

There's no two ways about it. He's gotta go, and I hope he rots in hell.

Moses leaves my side and crosses to Trey and Jules. He claps his hands together. "All right, boys. Let's do this. Time to piece together every goddamned thing about this bastard so we can find out who the fuck would care that he died."

Trey grabs the phone first. "I'll take this. There's gotta be something useful on it."

He strolls over to the end of the table and unearths a cord from the laptop bag on the floor. After he finishes untangling the knot it's tied in, he plugs the cord into the phone and then into a little silver box connected to the laptop.

He grins immediately. "She's dead, but she won't be for long, and soon, we'll have a hell of a lot more answers about ol' Ricardo."

Moses nods in his direction. “Good. We fucking need them.”

Jules studies receipt after receipt. “Dude, this guy loved him some Popeye’s and drive-through daiquiris. He ordered the same damn thing every time.”

“Which locations?” Moses asks, reaching for a pocketknife on the pile. “Could be near where he lives.”

Jules squints at the fading print on the paper. “They’re from a couple different ones. I’ll sort them out and see if there’s a pattern.” He moves to the other side of the table to start individual piles.

I stand beside Moses as he flips open the pocketknife. The handle is silver and set with what looks like wood or bone. Immediately, my brain flashes back to that asshole Ricardo coming toward me in the elevator with the knife that sliced me open.

This whole situation is beginning to wear on me more than I thought.

Moses must feel me tense beside him, because he looks at me. “You okay?”

“Yeah. Just . . . remembering.”

He follows my gaze down to the knife. “He ain’t ever gonna hurt you again, mama. He’s long dead now, and whoever the fuck is out there? I won’t let him get you either. Not even over my dead body.”

I shake my head. “Don’t say that.”

His stare narrows. “Say what?”

“Over your dead body. That’s not happening, and we’re not talking about it.”

The corners of his mouth curl up with the easy, soft smile that Moses gives me every so often. The smile I love seeing on his face, because it makes him feel like . . . *mine*.

“All right, mama. I won’t say shit like that if it bothers you.”

“Thank you.” I gesture to the weapon. “That’s a pretty fancy-looking knife.”



Moses raises it between us, testing the balance of it in his hand. “Definitely decorative, but still lethal.” He pauses and flips it over to the other side. “*And* it was a fucking gift. That’s good.”

“What do you mean?” I lean closer, and he taps the blade under his thumb.

“It’s engraved.”

I lean in closer to read the barely legible markings.

*Ricky, Always be sharp. Tony*

“Who is Tony?” I wonder out loud.

“No idea, but Trey’ll find out for us.” Moses turns to his friend, who is messing with the phone at the end of the table. “Won’t you, T?”

“Yeah. Give me a few minutes to break into this phone. It uses one of those patterns to unlock it. I gotta run a program that’ll give it to me.”

“A few minutes?” Jules asks with a huff. “Losing your touch, man?”

“Shut up, asshole. I’d like to see you do this.”

Jules shuffles through more loose scraps of paper. “I’d draw all the easy patterns first because I don’t think this dude was a mental giant. He literally stopped for Popeye’s every damn day for a week—and never bothered to throw away a single receipt.”

Moses returns the knife to the table. “When you get it open,” he says, ignoring Jules’s commentary, “look for a Tony. I’m guessing it’s a father or a brother. Or maybe . . . fuck, I don’t know. But it’s gotta be someone he was close to. Men don’t go through the trouble of engraving shit for people unless there’s a damn good reason.”

I spot a yellow Post-it note that’s crumpled into a ball, and I smooth it out on the table. Written sloppily in blue pen is my address. Well, my *former address*, including my condo number.

Holding it up for Moses, I say, “In case we needed confirmation he was

coming for me specifically . . . here it is.”

“Dumbass didn’t even bother to memorize it. Jules is right, definitely no mental giant there.”

“And I’m in!” Trey says with a fist pump from the end of the table. “Okay, you said look for a Tony? I’m browsing his contacts.”

“Check his texts and recently called numbers. Search history too. Anything you can think of.”

Trey’s fingers dance across the keyboard before he picks up the phone again and starts tapping around. Moses moves to the end of the table to stand behind him, while I pick up another piece of paper from the pile. This one is sticky and gross, and I toss it aside before I realize it has a phone number written on it.

“There’s one with a phone number. No name. Just digits.”

Moses holds out a hand. “Let’s see if he called it.”

“What would that tell us?” I ask as I pick it back up and hand it over, quickly wiping my fingers off on my dress.

“Either he didn’t call it at all, or he called it from another phone,” Trey says.

“Like a disposable?”

Moses’s handsome head bobs. “Yeah. There are certain things you don’t want attached to your account, and that could be one of them.”

“Our boy Ricky didn’t have too many friends,” Trey says, seeming unimpressed. “He’s got a dozen numbers saved. Only five text conversations. No one named Tony.”

“Any names catch your eye?”

“Fuck no. Homeboy didn’t like to use real names—or he didn’t know them. We’ve got Popeyes Ho, Bar Bitch, Landlord, Pizza Face, and White Christmas.”

“Search the landlord’s number,” Moses says, frustration written all over his face. “Figure out where he lives. We could find more there.”

“On it.”

Hearing Trey didn't find a Tony seems like another dead end, and it's weighing on me. If nothing comes of this whole thing tonight, I haven't the slightest idea of what to do next.

Moses comes back to me, wraps an arm around my shoulders, and pulls me against his side. “We'll find him. We're just getting started on this stuff. It'll be okay, mama. I won't stop until it's done.”

I sigh, feeling some comfort, but I'm frustrated as hell. I want all this shit over so I can figure out what the fuck is going to happen with my life now that Moses is back in it. But as long as this guy is out there, I'm living in limbo, and I don't like it one bit.

Instead of stewing on it, I dig into the pile of garbage on the table, helping Jules sort more of the Popeye's receipts by location and tossing the losing scratch-off lottery tickets aside.

I grab the vehicle registration slip and check the address. I don't know where it is, and I usually pride myself on knowing New Orleans pretty well. Picking up my phone, I type the address in to see if I can determine where it is. The map on my phone brings up an industrial area.

“This address can't be right. It looks like a factory or something over there.”

Moses glances up from the phone in Trey's hand. “Address must be bogus, just like on his license. Too bad the DMV doesn't check shit like that.”

I slump forward, defeated again. “How are we going to find out where he lives then?”

“I've got his phone. One second,” Trey says, tapping the screen a few times. “Which means I have his GPS location history. I'll see if he used his home address to get directions to anywhere . . .”

A few minutes later, Trey grins. “And . . . bingo. The most-used starting address in his GPS history is an apartment complex about five miles away.”

Finally something. Excitement floods me. “We going?”

Moses shakes his head. “Not tonight. It’s way easier and safer to break into a place during the day when most everyone’s at work.”

I stretch my neck and knead the knot forming there. “You sound like you know plenty about it.”

He shoots me a sideways smile. “This ain’t our first rodeo. Sometimes . . . shit gets crazy in our line of work, but we gotta do what we gotta do.”

“All right, there is *nothing* on a Tony or Anthony in this phone. He could be one of these nicknames, though. I just have no clue which fucking one.”

“Is there a Ghost?” I ask, partly joking and partly not, because that’s what this new fucking asshole really feels like now.

“Not one of those either. Sorry, Mags. I’ll find something, though. Just give me more time to work my magic.”

An hour later, all we know for sure is where Ricky lived, that he watched a fuck-ton of porn on his phone, and he really fucking liked knives. His eBay purchase history was full of antique ones and crazy blades. What we didn’t find is any evidence of family who might be out for revenge, and I have to admit that I’m disappointed as hell.

To distract myself, I check my cell, hoping to find a text from Desiree. She promised she’d check in when she refused to leave with the girls who were all thrilled to be getting paid to head to Gulf Shores and lie on the beach, but I haven’t gotten anything from her yet tonight.

I shoot her a message, reminding her to let me know when she gets it so I can stop worrying about her. When the telltale bubble with the dots doesn’t pop up immediately, I set the phone aside and lay my head across my arms on the table.

Moses notices immediately. “All right, mama. I’m taking you to bed.

Time for you to crash.”

I hate being the weakest link, but the past few days have worn me down. Arguing, I murmur, “You’re not done.”

“I know, but you are. No need to stay awake and fuck with this shit. You need sleep. You don’t get enough as it is. Come on.”

He holds out a large, inviting hand. I take it, letting him help me rise from the table.

“I can stay awake for days at a time, Moby. I’m no wilting flower here.” I would have sounded a lot more convincing if I didn’t yawn mid-sentence.

Moses’s eyes go soft. “I bet you can, mama. You’re as tough as gator jerky, but even badasses need to get sleep when they can.”

“Fine. Only because I want to and not because you’re telling me to.” I lumber a few steps, my feet heavy. “Night, guys,” I call to Trey and Jules as I walk toward the hallway.

“Night, Mags,” Trey replies.

“We’ll see you in the morning,” Jules says with a chin lift. “I’ll have coffee on around six.”

“That’s too fucking early,” I say with a shudder.

Jules’s laughter follows us down the hall.

When we reach the bedroom, Moses pushes the door open and then shuts us inside.

I turn around and let my head rest on his chest. “Please tell me we’re going to find this guy.”

He smooths my hair away from my face and curls his palm around the back of my neck. “We’re gonna find him. This’ll all be over soon.”

I raise my head to gaze up into those green-gold eyes. “And then what happens?”

“You mean with us?”

I’m too tired to nod, but my brows lift to answer.

“You decide what kind of life you want, and I’ll figure out how to give it

to you.”

I blink twice. “It can’t be that easy.”

He holds my chin up with his thumb and index finger. “It can be as easy as you want it to be. I wasn’t telling tales when I said I came back to put a ring on your finger, mama. You and me, this is permanent. I’m not letting you go again or walking away. I want you in my life and by my side every day.”

“What if I want to stay here in NOLA? Will Mount let you?”

Moses’s jaw tightens. “You leave him to me. But know this—no one is standing in the way of us being together. Not now and not ever fucking again. Not even Mount.”

More than anything, I want to believe what he’s saying. But even if Moses is wrong about Mount, I’ve got a trump card. “If he gives us trouble, I’ll get Keira involved. If she knows this is what I need to be happy, then she won’t let him fuck with it, because I haven’t had a lot of that in my life.”

Moses stares at me thoughtfully. “I’m gonna make it my life’s mission to give you as much happy as you can handle, mama. Mark my words, that’s what I aim to do.”

I slide my arms around his waist and squeeze. “You’re already off to a good start. Now . . . if we could just get rid of the cop who wants to pin the murder on me and the guy who wants me dead, we’d be doing even better.”

Moses presses a kiss to the top of my head. “I’m working on it. Now, you get some sleep. I’ll be back in later.”

As I crawl into bed by myself, I can’t help but think about everything that’s gone crazy in my life since Moses showed up.

My business is totally on hold, what’s left of my savings is taking a beating just to pay the bills, the house I worked so fucking hard to make my hidden sanctuary is already on the cops’ radar, the house I’m selling Desiree is being watched by the Feds, one guy has tried to kill me, and another is trying to finish the job.

Despite all that, I'm going to bed with a smile on my face.

*There's gotta be something fucking wrong with me*, I think as I pull the blankets up around my shoulders. And then I remember the reading Celeste did for me.

*Everything's changing, and I just gotta get through to the good shit. Because that's coming too.*

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## TWELVE

MOSES

“I’m coming with you,” Magnolia says with her hands on her hips and a mulish expression on her face.

“Mama, I know you want to help, but this is something you need to stay clear of.”

“Goddamn it, Moses. If I hadn’t been there at the impound lot, shit could’ve gone sideways. I can handle myself. I’m not some PTA mom who thinks she can get into robbing houses with no problem.”

I can’t hold back my laugh at her example. “I know you can handle yourself. But it’s barely a two-man job, and there’s no need to put you at risk or chance giving Cavender more to investigate. You know I’m right.”

Magnolia bares her teeth, and it takes everything I have not to pick her up, throw her over my shoulder, and take her back to bed for a repeat of the morning wake-up call I gave her.

I lean down to nip at her lip. “I’d think you’d be less surly considering the orgasms you had this morning.”

Her glare could cut me to ribbons. “I’ll be damned if you think dicking me down first thing in the morning will make it so you get your way for the rest of the day.”

My laughter comes out in a booming burst. “Goddamn, woman. You’re so fucking perfect for me, I can’t even begin to tell you.” I school my



expression into a sober one. “But you’re not going. My job, my rules. You stay with Trey and give him a hand. Jules and I have this.”

Magnolia is pissed, but I can tell she’s finally going to concede when she rolls her eyes.

“God save me from overbearing men who think they know best.”

“God ain’t saving you from me, mama. You’re stuck with me.”

I grab her hips and yank them toward me. She crosses her arms over her chest right before she collides with my body and I give her a deep kiss.

“Be pissed at me if you want. I’m keeping you safe, and that’s not negotiable.”

“Fine. But you gotta go by my old house and somehow not be seen by the Feds because Desiree still hasn’t checked in with me. I’m fucking concerned about her too.”

“You got it. We’ll go in through the alley. I’ll tell her not to worry you like that again.”

“I appreciate it,” Magnolia says, but she looks like she’s got a mouth full of sour grapes.

I kiss her again anyway. “We’ll be back in a few hours.” Leaving her always feels like going against the grain, but this time it’s for the best.

“You’d better let me know if you run into any trouble.”

I throw a hand over my heart. “I promise.”

With that, she finally kisses me back, and instead of it being hard and fast, she throws herself into it like it’s the last time she’ll ever kiss me. When she pulls away, I read the apprehension in her eyes.

“Nothing’s gonna happen, mama. It’ll be quick. In and out. We’ll get answers, and be one step closer to putting this bastard in the ground so you never have to worry about him again. Everything’s gonna be all right.”

*Famous. Last. Words.*

“Someone’s already been here,” I tell Jules as we step into the living room of the apartment.

“How do you know?” he asks, looking around for signs of life, but not finding any.

I have absolutely no concrete reason to sense what I believe to be the truth, but I feel it in my gut. “Call it a hunch.”

We walk through the apartment, which stinks like rotting garbage, and the first thing I notice is what’s *not* there. No photos. No knickknacks other than knives. Nothing personal. This was either a crash pad, or Ricardo just didn’t give a fuck.

“This guy just ate and drank and collected knives, it looks like,” Jules says from the kitchen. Knowing how focused my right-hand man is on health and fitness, it’s no surprise how much he despises what we see around us.

“I’ll take the bedroom. You dig through the shit in the living room. Maybe he’s got something there we’re missing.”

We split off, and I start searching through the bedroom closet. I don’t give a fuck about the man’s clothes and shoes. I need something from his past. Anything we can use to track down who might have given enough of a fuck about him to be trying to find who killed him. Either someone loved him, or someone needed him for money. So, family or a partner.

I flip the lids off his shoe boxes and only find shoes. At least, until I get to one on the very bottom of the stack in the far back corner.

“Fuck yeah,” I mumble as I find a scattering of pictures on top of a few more knives.

I rummage through the keepsakes until I find a photo with two boys in it. One is a foot taller than the other, but they look enough alike for me to guess they’re related. There’s nothing written on the back, so I can’t be sure, but I’m willing to stake some serious cash on the fact that Ricardo has a brother or a cousin.

I tuck the entire box under my arm and back out of the pigsty of a closet.

Quickly, I check the bathroom before returning to Jules. “Any leads?”

He doesn’t seem too excited about anything and waves his hands around. “Got a couple books of matches, partially used, from the same bar. It’s a long shot, but maybe something.”

It’s better than nothing. “Good enough. Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

Jules looks at the box under my arm. “You find something useful?”

“I sure as fuck hope so.”

At that moment, someone knocks on the door, and Jules and I lock eyes on each other. I point to the slider that leads out to a small ground-floor patio. Jules doesn’t hesitate, knowing the drill, and we move silently, slipping out of the apartment.

As soon as we’re in the SUV, which was parked a block and a half away on a side street, I set the box on the floorboard. “Drive past the front of the apartment. I want to check out who the hell was knocking on the door.”

“You got it, boss.” Jules turns the wheel and takes us past the building.

We wordlessly look at each other when we see a patrol car parked across the street.

“You think someone called the cops on us?”

I shake my head. “Not sure, but I don’t fucking like it. Let’s get the hell out of here, swing by Mags’s old place, and then back to the house. Something about today just doesn’t feel right.”

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## THIRTEEN

### MAGNOLIA

**M**oses and Jules don't return to the house until about an hour after I expected them back. I've been helping Trey connect the dots, mapping out what we know of Ricardo's life. So far, all we've got is he had a few fuck buddies, liked to party, ate like shit, and wasn't a very good criminal.

We found this last bit out by googling all the addresses he'd used his GPS to find.

"So that house reported a foiled break-in, that one reported an attempted robbery, and this guy shot at someone in the dark who got away? Ortiz was the most piss-poor crook I've ever heard of."

"But he did manage to get lucky with this one," Trey says, reading an article on his screen. "Husband found stabbed to death. Wife was arrested but later released when evidence didn't support the cops' theory that she was a suspect."

"Fucking Ricardo," I say, checking the time again. I didn't need to bother because the rumble of the SUV comes through the open slider door a moment later.

Trey and I glance expectantly at each other. "They're back," we say in unison.

I jump out of my seat, relieved Moses is finally home, because I've felt

all sorts of unsettled since the minute he walked out the door. But when he walks in, my stomach twists into a knot at the expression on his face.

“What’s wrong?”

He closes his eyes for a beat before finally meeting my gaze. “Got some bad news, mama. You’re gonna want to sit down for it.”

My entire body stiffens. “Why? What happened? Just tell me. You’re freaking me out right now.”

Moses comes toward me and pulls me against him. “We went by your old place. The house.”

“What? Is Desiree okay?” My heart thunders in my chest, and I hold my breath. When he just shakes his head, my heart catches in my throat. “Fuck. Fuck. Just tell me, Moses. My brain is going all over the place right now. Whatever you’ve got to say, it can’t be worse than what I’m imagining.”

He dips his head forward, touching his forehead to mine. “It was bad, mama. We got in and out. Called the cops on an anonymous tip line.”

A shudder works through his body, and fear floods my veins.

“Jesus Christ. What happened to her?”

Moses lifts his head away from mine, and then slowly shakes it back and forth. “You don’t want to know. But . . . she’s gone. It was *him* . . . and she’s fucking gone.”

For the first time since this whole fucking thing started, tears stream down my face. “No!” I clench my hands into fists and pound them against Moses’s chest as agony rips through me. “No! This isn’t fucking fair! She didn’t do anything to anyone! What the fuck?”

Moses holds me while I rage and cry and scream until my throat goes hoarse. When I tire myself out, he cups the back of my head and brings it against his chest.

For several long moments, I stand there depleted, scared, and fucking livid.

I suck in a snuffling breath. “What the fuck are we going to do? This has

to end. We have to fucking end this. Desiree didn't do anything. This shouldn't have touched her. He's gotta fucking die. I'm gonna fucking kill him myself."

My phone vibrates on the table, and Moses glances over at it. "Keira. You want to talk to her?"

My body vibrates with aching wrath, and the last thing I want to do is dump it all on Keira. "I don't know."

"I called Mount on the way back here. Told him what happened. She might already know. Talk to her, mama. Talk to your friend."

He picks up the phone and offers it to me. My hand shakes as I take it from him and tap the screen before it stops vibrating.

"Hey," I say, my voice raw.

"Oh my God, Mags. I just heard. I'm so sorry. I know you and Desiree were close." She sounds utterly sympathetic and likely on the verge of tears herself.

"Yeah," I say, not sure how else to reply.

"You're not okay, so I'm not going to ask. But . . . I really, really want you and Moses to come stay with us. Lachlan agrees. Whoever this guy is, he's not stopping until he finds you, and I'm not losing you." She's rambling, and her voice rises when she begs, "*Please*, just say yes. Please."

I know my man won't leave anyone behind. "There's more than just me and Moses. We've got two of his guys too."

"You're all welcome. We have plenty of room. And *no one* can get to you here. It's literally the safest place in the entire city. Hell, the entire planet."

I look up at Moses, who is listening to the conversation. Without me voicing the question, he nods that he agrees.

"Okay, Ke-ke," I tell her. "We'll do it."

"Thank God," she replies with a sigh of relief. "I'll tell Lachlan. V will come with instructions. Don't worry, Mags. We're going to keep you safe. I'm not letting anything happen to you. Not ever again."

When I hang up with Keira, my hands aren't any steadier. Tears slip down my face as I conjure up images of what Moses found when he went to check on Desiree.

"How . . . how did he kill her?"

"Mama . . ." Moses shakes his head. "Trust me when I say, *you don't want to know.*"

I look deep into his gaze and see true sorrow and horror there. "*I have to know.* This is because of me. It's all fucking because of me."

He clasps my face between his palms. "You didn't do this. You tried to make her go with the girls. You offered to *pay her* to go. She knew the risks of staying. You did everything right. Everything you could fucking do. You can't control what some fucking psycho does. This isn't your fault, understand me? *You didn't do this.*"

My entire body shakes, and if I don't get myself under control, I'm going to fall the fuck apart and be useless to everyone. I grind my teeth as I take a long, slow breath in and release it.

"Atta girl. Another. Deep breaths," Moses says, releasing his grip on my face.

I inhale and exhale a couple more times. Although I still feel like my heart is shredded when I'm done, I'm no longer in danger of curling up in a fetal position on the floor. That's something no one needs to see. I also don't want to do it because I may never get up, and that simply isn't an option.

This is bigger than me. I've put everyone in danger. But at least we have the strength and power of the most ruthless man in the city backing us.

"Good girl. Okay. Let's go pack. The sooner we're locked down at Mount's, the better."

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## FOURTEEN

MOSES

**I** would have done anything to save Magnolia from feeling what she is right now, and I fucking hate that we haven't been able to track this fucking monster down.

The shit in the box from Ricardo's closet will have to wait until I get Magnolia somewhere that not even the devil himself could get to her.

After what I saw in that house . . . a shiver rips down my spine.

I've witnessed some fucked-up shit in my day. Really fucked up. Hell, once upon a time, I gave orders for bad shit. But nothing like what I saw, and I never want to see that again. There's no doubt it'll visit me in my nightmares as it is.

When the cops find the crime scene, they're going to come looking for Magnolia again, and that's another reason I want her somewhere untouchable. I'm not taking a chance that Cavender or another asshole cop will show Magnolia a picture of what happened to Desiree.

She doesn't need to see that. Ever.

We both pack quickly, and as Magnolia fills her suitcases again, it strikes me that she's moving for the third time in a fucking week. Yet she doesn't argue. She doesn't bitch. She just . . . does what she's gotta do.

Any other woman would be losing her goddamned mind right now, catatonic with all the chaos and change, but not Magnolia Maison.



If I had any doubt about whether she could handle my life, it's been wiped away. She's strong as hell and all mine.

Within an hour, Jules is letting in Mount's silent second-in-command. V's got an envelope in hand and lifts his chin when he sees me, holding it out.

I don't have to wonder how he knew where we were, because I gave Mount the address. Although, he probably knew it already. Wily bastard.

I take the envelope and open it. Mount's instructions are in a dark, heavy scrawl.

*Come to the same entrance you used before. Don't bring a tail. After you park, give the keys to V. He'll have the vehicles moved out of sight and stored with my personal collection. You won't need them.*

When I finish reading the note, I meet V's gaze. "We're almost ready."

He gives me a nod and goes outside to wait.

Jules's gaze follows him. "That dude is really fucking quiet."

"Probably safer to be known for being silent if you're around Mount all the time." I glance toward the hallway where Jules and Trey have rooms. "You guys almost ready?"

Trey walks into the kitchen with a duffel bag slung over his shoulder and a hard case for his computer equipment in hand. "I don't know about Jules, but I am."

"My bags are already in the SUV. I'll take yours and Magnolia's out as soon as you're ready."

I clasp his shoulder as Trey heads outside. "Thanks, man. And about earlier . . ." I trail off, thinking of Jules's face when he followed my yell into the room where I found Desiree. "You okay?"

His expression is somber. "Fuck, man. That . . . that was bad shit. I feel like I should make the fucking sign of the cross every time I think about it."

“I know. You need to talk, you let me know, okay? We’re gonna find this fucker.”

Slowly, his head bobs up and down. “Fuck yeah, we are. No man should be allowed to live after doing that to a woman.”

I swallow the acid rising in my throat and pull him in for a quick backslapping hug. “Fucking right, brother. You’re so fucking right.”

When I release him, his expression is determined, which is exactly how I feel.

“I’ll go see if Mags is done and grab my bags,” I tell him. “You drive the SUV. I’ll take the Rolls. After we get there, the keys all go to V. Mount’s got a place for them. Don’t leave anything here. We may not be coming back.”

“Got it. And I’m set, but I’ll give Trey’s room another look. Fucker always forgets some cord somewhere.” As much shit as he gives Trey, they’re like brothers, and I’m glad that they’ll hang close when we arrive at Mount’s.

No one should be alone after witnessing what we did today.

We break apart, and I retrace my steps to the bedroom where Magnolia is zipping her second suitcase closed. “All done?”

She turns to see me standing in the doorway. “Yeah. I’m getting good at packing this shit quick. Good thing I travel light these days.”

I hate what this is doing to her, but it only fuels me to see it through to the end. “Not for much longer, mama. We’re going to get through this, and then we’ll settle down somewhere for a good long while.”

A ghost of a smile flickers over her lips. “That sounds like a fantasy at this point.”

“It will be. Just you wait. If you’re ready, I’ll take your bags, and Jules will load them up. V’s here, and we’re ready to rock.”

She takes another slow, shaky breath and releases it. One more sign of how much this shit is eating her alive, and I’m fucking over it. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

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## FIFTEEN

### MAGNOLIA

**C**oming in through one of the family entrances at Mount and Keira's isn't exactly new to me, but I've never come with so much baggage before. And I'm not just talking about luggage.

Thoughts of Desiree and the sharp stabs of grief are with me every step we take through the twisting and turning corridors until we come to a hallway carpeted in black, white, and gold.

Keira rushes toward me as soon as my feet sink into the plush nap. "I'm so glad you're here," she says, flinging her arms around me and squeezing me tight in a hug. "I'm so damn sorry, Mags. I can't believe this is happening, but we'll fix it. I told Lachlan I don't care what strings he has to pull or favors he has to call in. Whoever this person is has to be stopped, like *yesterday*."

I return her hug, taking the comfort she's offering. "Thank you, Ke-ke. Don't know what I'd do without you."

She pulls back, still holding on to me, and offers me a small smile. "And I don't know what I'd be doing with my life right now if not for you. I'd say we're pretty damn even."

The fact that my best friend is thanking me for meddling in her life the way I did goes to show I don't know how to do friendships the normal way. Thank God Keira doesn't know how to either.

“Let me show you your rooms. If you need anything at all, you can pick up the house phone and hit zero. Don’t be afraid to ask. We literally have twenty people running around here taking care of this place, and they’re all willing and more than happy to help.”

She leads us to a set of tall white-and-gold double doors and opens them. Moses and I follow her inside and, I swear, it’s like entering a luxury hotel. Everything is black, gold, and white, and Keira points out the amenities.

“The fridge is fully stocked with liquor, beer, wine, soda, water, whatever you need. The kitchen is on standby to prepare whatever you would like. Anytime, night or day. Again, just hit zero, and someone will take your order and bring it to you.” She looks around me to Trey and Jules. “Your rooms are going to be just down the hall. They’re much like this one. Just give me one second, and I’ll show them to you.”

“I can show them.”

The deep voice comes from the hallway, and we all turn to see Mount . . . the ruthless king of New Orleans . . . carrying his princess, dressed in all pink.

“Rory’s awake! How’s my baby girl?” Keira rushes toward them, her arms outstretched for her daughter.

Rory, however, has other plans. She buries her face in her father’s neck, and there’s an audible whimper.

“Someone didn’t sleep during her nap, and now she’s angry at the world. If she had the nuclear codes, she just might use them,” Mount says, uncharacteristically teasing his wife.

“Aw, baby girl,” Keira says, patting her on the back. “And now she only wants her daddy, isn’t that right?”

How the man can manage to look so forbidding while carrying a cranky almost-toddler, I have no idea, but he manages it. Oddly, it suits him very well.

“Of course. Because no other man will ever be good enough for her. Isn’t

that right, princess?” Mount says in what is most definitely the friendliest voice I’ve ever heard him use. There’s no question the man loves his daughter something fierce.

Rory makes a grunting sound against his neck, and I can’t help but smile. She’s the most precious thing I’ve ever seen. This little girl will know nothing but love because Mount won’t let anything touch her. *Ever*. And that’s exactly how it should be.

Thoughts of what might have happened to Desiree try to intrude again, but I block them out.

*It’s not going to help anything right now, I tell myself.*

Keira says something to Mount and Aurora that I can’t hear, but his reply carries farther.

“She can stay with me. We’ll show these gentlemen to their rooms, and then see if she wants to take another shot at a nap. Maybe read a book or two. I guess I’ll have to do the voices.”

The baby snuggles into her daddy, and I have to wonder if she knows she’s got him wrapped around her tiny little finger.

Keira presses a kiss to the back of her baby girl’s head, and Mount leads Trey and Jules down the hall. Trey turns around to look at me and Moses, and his eyes look like they’re going to bug out of his head. Keira laughs when she sees his expression and leads us back into the suite.

“People don’t know what to think about Lachlan and our little princess. I swear, I had no idea how quickly and easily that girl would be able to bring her father and his gruff personality to heel. She’ll be spoiled rotten by the time she’s two at this rate.”

“That’s what baby girls are supposed to do to their daddies. Hopefully, you’ll have a houseful,” Moses says with a soft smile. “I pray to the Lord above every day that I’ll get to know the exact same feeling.”

He snags my hand and squeezes it, and I freeze.

*Wait. Is he saying what I think he’s saying?*

Keira's grin is so wide, it's in danger of splitting her face clean in half. "You want children, Moses?"

Without hesitation, he nods. "Yes, ma'am."

When he glances down at me, I stare at his face in shock.

"You really do want kids?" I ask him in a cautious tone.

"I'd love three, but I'd settle for one. I guess it's really up to you, mama."

Something I keep hidden deep inside me comes to life as soon as he says those words. "Maybe just start with one and go from there."

Moses's smile beams so full of joy—the complete opposite of how he looked only an hour ago when he came into the house after returning from Desiree's. I wish I could burn this new image into my brain to replace all the ugliness of today.

"It sounds like you two are on the same page then," Keira says quietly, backing out of the room, no doubt to give us space so we can discuss the topic further. There's no question in my mind Keira would love it if I started popping out babies tomorrow so she and I could raise them together.

"Here come your bags," she says as she reaches the hallway. "I'll let you two get settled. Your guys will just be down the hall to the right. If you hit zero and ask to be transferred to their room, the operator will be able to assist you. If you're up for dinner, it'll be very low key, at seven."

Moses releases my hand, and I walk toward my friend. "Thank you, beautiful. We appreciate all you're doing for us."

She smiles. "It's my pleasure. I'm not letting anything happen to you, Mags. Not if it's in my power." Her arms come out, and she wraps me in a tight embrace. As she does, she whispers in my ear. "And that man . . . well, you're going to have to tell me all about him later when we get some time alone. I gotta hear everything about the guy who wants to give you *three* babies."

I squeeze her back. "Thanks, Ke-ke. You're the best."

She releases me after a long, but much-needed moment. "All I want is to

see you happy. Now, we just need to find this motherfucker and kill him all the way dead.”

The smile she adds to punctuate her sentence knocks a chuckle loose from me, when I could have sworn it would be impossible to laugh for the rest of the day.

“Mount’s rubbing off on you.”

“I’m sure he is, but that’s what real love does.” She pulls back, and her head falls to the side. “It makes you stronger than you ever dreamed and do things you never imagined possible. And now it’s your turn.”

Real love. *What a concept.*

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## SIXTEEN

MOSES

**M**ount sits at the head of the table, with his wife to his right and their daughter between them. I don't know why that surprises me, but it does. She wears a bib that reads *My Dad Says It's Okay*, and I'm still shocked that he's so openly affectionate with the girl.

Then again, we are in the inner sanctum. If he thought any of us were a threat or would use any of this information against him, we'd be dead before we could make it out of the room.

Jules and Trey are on their best behavior, although they don't escape Mount's notice.

"I understand you're the hacker," he says to Trey as wine is poured.

"I prefer to think of myself as chief technical officer of our operation, but yeah, hacking's part of what I do."

The king lifts his chin. "Most difficult hack?"

"Nothing I can disclose without getting arrested by Interpol."

Mount looks suitably impressed. "Interesting." He focuses on Jules next. "And what is your role?"

"Probably a lot like your silent guy. I watch Moses's six. Do what needs doing. We go back a long way."

I give Jules a nod. "Jules and I have been colleagues for over a decade. Trey's been with us for just a year less."

“Quite the impressive business the three of you have built.”

“Wouldn’t have built it if not for you,” I say.

Mount’s full attention swings to me. “How’s that?”

I glance across the table at Magnolia, wondering if I should have told her this first, but either way, it’ll be good for her to hear. “When you banned me from the state of Louisiana—”

“Of course you would do something like that,” Keira says, shooting her husband a dirty look.

“Different time, hellion. Different time.”

She rolls her eyes and goes back to her salad, and I continue telling my story.

“I was on my way through Texas when I ran into a guy on the outskirts of Houston. His accent was strong and distinctly New Orleans. He was drunk in a bar, talking about starting over. Being that I was starting over too, I moved down a stool and listened to him ramble. I was on my second drink when he finally came out and told me he’d faked his own death in the aftermath of the storm.”

Jules and Trey both grin because they’ve heard this story before.

“No shit?” Magnolia says, curiosity stamped on her pretty features.

“Yeah. He, uh . . .” I squint toward the baby, not sure I should be adding the last piece of the story.

“She doesn’t understand what you’re saying, so go ahead,” Keira tells me.

“Well, he found an unrecognizable body that was his height and weight and coloring, and made sure his wallet was in the pocket and his signet ring on the finger. Left it in his house, which was flooded.”

“What was he running from?” Mount asks.

“Alimony payments,” I say with a snicker. “Bastard had an ex-wife who hated his guts and swore she’d never, ever remarry because she wanted that check from him every month. He was sick and tired of working his ass off

only to pay her a huge chunk of the money. So he decided to run and start over.”

Keira bursts into laughter. “Leave it to a man to decide that faking his own death was better than paying his ex-wife.”

As everyone at the table laughs along with her, several people come out of the door I assume leads to the kitchen, carrying massive platters of food that fill the air with the scent of Creole cuisine. For the most part, conversation stays remarkably light for the remainder of the meal, and just seeing Magnolia relax and fucking breathe easy for a few minutes feeds me in ways the plates upon plates of food could never do.

After dinner is cleared away and Keira is lifting the baby out of her seat, Mount shifts toward me.

“Join me in the library for a drink,” he says, not a request so much as a command.

Instead of agreeing immediately, I glance over at Magnolia.

Keira jumps in and says, “Mags, I’d love to steal you away for a few minutes too. I just need to put Rory down first.”

Magnolia pushes her chair away from the table. “I’ll help you with your baby girl. I could use an impossibly sweet distraction.”

As the women rise, Mount kisses his daughter good night and says something to his wife.

I toss my napkin down on the table and stretch. As soon as I do, I remember the box of shit I took from Ortiz’s apartment.

“Jules. Trey. Go through the box I took from Ricardo’s apartment. See what you can find. There was a picture of him and another kid, a similar-looking older one. Could be a brother.”

Trey’s eyes light up. “If it’s a decent picture, I can age the guy up and get an idea of what he might look like now. It’d at least give us something to run through facial recognition to find out where he might be now. *If* that’s who’s doing this.”

Mount's attention follows the conversation between me and Trey. "Do it. No matter who he is, we'll find him and bring him in. Even if he's not the person behind this, he might be able to give us intel on who is. I can be very persuasive."

Trey opens his mouth to reply, but closes it before he says a word. I can only imagine he was going to say something like, "You think we'll be able to find him?" or "Do you think he'll really tell us anything?" But Trey clearly remembered whose table he's sitting at. Our operation may be smooth and sophisticated when we're running normally, but Mount and his empire are on a whole different level.

"Good plan," Trey says instead.

Mount rises from the table and heads for the door, not waiting to see if I'm following him. I give both Trey and Jules a chin lift. I don't need to say anything more, because they know what the goal is here.

Magnolia safe. End of story.

I trail Mount out of the room, through his maze of hallways, and into the library where I met with him before. He goes to the sideboard and pours us both a drink without asking my preference. Naturally, in this house, Seven Sinners whiskey is always the liquor of choice.

After he pours three fingers in two tumblers, Mount hands me one and then settles in one of the leather armchairs. I take the other.

"How bad was it?" he asks after taking a sip.

"Desiree?"

He doesn't correct me, which is answer enough.

"Fucked up. *Really* fucked up. Shit I never wanted to see and hope never to again."

His face is grim. "She was tortured?"

I find it hard to swallow the smooth liquid with visions of the scene in my mind. "Yes. And it wasn't quick."

A muscle ticks in Mount's jaw. "If he gets his hands on Magnolia—"

“He won’t.” I cut him off with a hard stare. “Not gonna fucking happen.”

“Then we find him,” Mount says, nodding in agreement. “Whatever it takes. This is my city, and he’s trespassing.”

“Trey will age up the picture I found, and we’ll hope like hell we’re looking for the other kid in it. There’s a good chance the guy we’re chasing is a ghost too, though. Ortiz was erased, and well. It stands to reason his family—if that’s who the other kid is in the picture—might’ve been too.”

Mount sips his whiskey and studies me. “If he’s been erased, then there’s a reason why. He has enemies who want him dead. That may be something we can use.”

I stare down at my whiskey, my ego wanting to jump in and remind him that no one touches this motherfucker but me. I want to kill him myself—with my bare hands—for what he’s done to Magnolia and her life. But it doesn’t matter.

At the end of the day, I just want the motherfucker dead. I want her free of the fear that’s dogging her. I want to make all the bad in her world disappear. Guess it’s a damn good thing I’m the best at making people vanish into thin air.

“Whatever it takes,” I tell the man across from me. “I want him ended.”

Mount leans back in his chair. “I was surprised when you came here and declared your intentions. Fifteen years is a long time to be away and then try to come back and make something work. But it seems like you’re not having any trouble on that front, despite my slight, and quite necessary, interference.”

A half laugh slips past the smoky flavor on my lips. “Yeah, you really tried to fuck that up for me. Thanks.”

One corner of his sly mouth turns up. “Magnolia’s important to my wife. I decided truth was important for her too. You seem to have overcome the obstacle just fine.”

I could strangle the man for what he did and how he did it, but he’s right

—I am glad it's out in the open now. Glad I don't have anything more to hide from her.

“It hasn't all been smooth, but we have an understanding now. She knows I'm back for her, and I'm not fucking around.”

“What are your plans after we get this matter settled?”

The way Mount refers to the man who has been terrorizing Magnolia makes it sound like he's decided it'll be handled with little to no effort. I hope like hell he's right. His question, though . . . he's fishing for information, and I'm not ready to give it to him. Mount turns information into a weapon, and he doesn't need any more to use against me.

“I'll be talking to Magnolia about those plans when the time is right. I'm sure you'll hear about them one way or another.”

Mount's brows lift, and a curious stare sharpens on me. “You're suddenly less forthcoming with your information.”

“There are some things even the all-powerful Lachlan Mount doesn't need to know first.”

He sips his whiskey, studying me. “You've come a long way from the Biloxi gangster who pulled a job in my town without my permission. I have to say, Moses, I'm impressed, and that doesn't happen often. Your business is a strong one, a necessary service in the world you and I live in. Are you planning to continue operating after this is all settled?”

I think about the reputation I've built and the clients who get referred to me, needing help. Then there's Magnolia. I don't want her to live a nomadic life that she didn't choose for herself—if it's not what she wants.

“I don't know yet. That will be another discussion between me and Mags. I can give her whatever life she wants, and I'll let her choose.”

Mount swirls the whiskey in his glass. “I approve. Although, selfishly, I hope you stay in business. You never know when someone will need a skill set like yours. Let's just hope you don't need to use it for yourself and Magnolia by the time this is all over.”

I hear what he's saying, but then again, after what Magnolia and I have both been through in our lives, disappearing together doesn't sound like a bad plan at all.

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## SEVENTEEN

### MAGNOLIA

**I**t's not the first time I've watched Keira put Rory to bed, but just like the others, I'm struck by how badly I want to have that.

*How the hell are you going to know what to do with a baby?* Ho-It-All picks the worst times to show up and ask hard questions, and she also knows how to go for the jugular.

Keira steps away from the crib and comes toward me, standing near the doorway to Rory's room. She grins and tiptoes, motioning for me to step into the connecting parlor with her. She closes the door noiselessly and waits while holding her breath. When she hears only silence, she grins.

"Thank God. I swear the girl hates sleep. She always wants to be awake and busy—especially if her daddy is anywhere near."

With my insecurities riding high, I ask my friend, "Did you ever worry you wouldn't know what to do with a kid? That you wouldn't know how to be a mom?"

Keira's attention cuts to my face, and although she can't read what she sees there, her expression softens. "Come on, let's sit down. I'll tell you all about how terrified I was that I wouldn't have a clue what to do with a baby, and how worried I still get about screwing her up for life."

She leads me to a pair of gold club chairs set up in front of an ancient fireplace that is more likely to spin around into a secret passage than to ever



hold a fire in its grate.

Skeptically, I ask, “You’re really worried about not knowing what to do with her? But you . . . you had, like, the perfect childhood. Great parents. Everything.”

Keira tucks her feet under herself in a chair, and I take the one across from her. “And you’re scared that because you had Bernie’s voice in your ear—telling you every damn thing you did was wrong—that you won’t know how to be a mother?”

I stare down at my hands, which are clasped together in my lap. “I’ve never been afraid of much, which probably has been the root of most of my problems. But when I think about how much I want a baby, I’m fucking terrified, Keira.” When I lift my gaze, the soft smile on her face almost undoes me. “What business do I have even wanting to bring a life into this world when I know how ugly it can be? When I know how ugly *I’ve* been? I don’t deserve it. Maybe I shouldn’t be allowed to have children.”

Keira bolts out of her chair and drops onto the ottoman in front of mine. She covers my hands with hers and crushes them to get my attention.

“Stop that. Right now. That isn’t the Magnolia I know and love, damn it. You’re strong, smart, and a survivor. I don’t know how you got through everything you’ve faced, but you’ve done it and you’ve thrived. We’ve all done things we’re not proud of, but when it comes to a baby, they don’t give a damn about any of that. All they want is love and protection. And you are the fiercest protector I’ve ever met, Mags. Don’t you dare let yourself think for one second you wouldn’t be an incredible mother. The fact you’re agonizing over it right now says a ton. Don’t you think?”

I release a heavy breath and then voice my other fear. “But I couldn’t do it here. How could I raise a child in this town, where I’ll never escape my reputation? I won’t have an innocent painted with the same brush. My son or daughter should never know what it’s like to walk into a room and have everyone know their mother was a whore.”

Keira's grip tightens on my hands. "Then as much as it kills me to say this, maybe you don't do it here." She presses her lips together in a tight line. "Because I understand what you're worried about. Aurora is the daughter of the most feared man in this city. At first, it terrified me that his enemies could possibly use her to get to him. But I won't live in dread. None of us can and still have a full life. And I refuse to let my daughter grow up knowing that kind of fear."

"Jesus, Ke-ke, I never really thought about that. *Christ*. How do you handle it?"

She smiles, her pride and bravery shining like a beacon. "We pay a lot of money for security, and it's worth every last penny. And when Rory is old enough to know who her father really is and what he does, I pray she understands it doesn't change who he is to her. She loves him unconditionally, and knowing my girl carries my blood, she'll love him no matter what, and nothing he does will ever touch her."

My friend is amazing and such a powerful force of motherhood. "You know she will. She's her father's daughter."

Keira leans back on the ottoman and glances upward toward the heavens. "God help us, because that's the truth. She's going to be a handful. I already know it. And Lachlan is liable to spoil her rotten. You have no idea how much I have to hold that man back. He wanted her to have a pony for her first birthday. Not for her to ride, because he deemed it too dangerous, but just for her to pet because she thinks they're pretty."

Laughter spills from my lips, and I try to keep it quiet, knowing Mount and Keira's princess is in the next room, and I don't want to wake her. "So you put a stop to the pony?"

She rolls her eyes. "Yes, barely in time."

"And what did she get instead?"

"That huge-ass bouncy castle."

I snort out a laugh this time, remembering how massive it was in the

center courtyard at her party. I'd assumed it was a rental. "Of course, because what else do you give a princess?"

When Keira yawns a half hour later after more chatting about Rory and being a mom, I stand and stretch. "I think it's time for you to go to bed, Ke-ke. No doubt, that girl of yours will have you up at the crack of dawn."

"God, yes. I miss sleep. Still. But I'll see you in the morning. If there's anything you or Moses or his guys need, all you have to do is ask." She throws her arms around me. "I'm so glad you're here. It makes me feel a million times better knowing you're in the safest place you could possibly be."

Warmth fills my chest, and I'm struck by how damn lucky I am that I've got such a good friend. "Thank you, Keira. You're too good to me."

"Not even close. I'll walk you back to your room. I'm sure Moses is already there, or at least won't be too much longer. Lachlan practically has a sixth sense for when I'm tired and shows up as soon as I'm getting ready for bed."

"Because he knows he's getting laid," I tease, giving her the side-eye.

She chokes on a laugh. "You might be right about that. Either way, I'm sure he and Moses will work everything out and have a plan of action soon."

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## EIGHTEEN

MOSES

**A**fter I leave Mount, I track down Trey and Jules. They don't have a suite quite as large as ours, but their rooms are certainly luxe and right next to each other with a connecting door.

Inside one of them, they've got all the contents of the box from the apartment laid out on a table, and Trey is pounding away on his laptop.

"What'd you find?" I ask as I stride into the room. It's getting late, and my woman will be waiting on me.

"Two pictures of Ricardo and the other guy. From the facial features, they definitely share blood. I'm still putting the photos through some aging software and refining them. Then we'll run the best one through facial recognition, like you said. If this guy is a ghost too, there might not be much out there, but if there's anything to find, I sure as hell will."

Trey's confident, and with good reason. He's damn good at what he does.

"Good. What else?"

Jules points to the knives. "He's got a knife obsession, which makes sense why he didn't take a gun when he went after Magnolia. Considering what happened to the other two women, I'm thinking it's a trait they share."

"Good point. So we've got a couple of guys obsessed with blades. If there's anything we can run down on that angle, do it. Knife shows. Dealers. See if there are any avid collectors who match the aged photo. You never

know where we might get a hit.” We can’t leave a single rock unturned. We don’t have the luxury of missing a single detail.

“We’ll definitely check all those avenues,” Trey says.

“Anything else?”

Jules shakes his head. “Not really. These guys move in the fucking shadows. It’s frustrating as fuck.”

“What did we find on the phone?” I ask Trey, who peeks over his screen, but the clicking of the keys continues.

“No number for a sibling. I did find a bank account, though. There have been monthly deposits for the last five years on the same day. Same amount. It’s like Ricardo gets an allowance.”

Where there’s smoke, there’s fire, and there’s nothing like money to fan a flame. “Where are they coming from?”

Trey answers, “Offshore account.”

“Did you get the name on it?” I ask, my anticipation rising. There’s gotta be a fucking way to find this bastard.

Trey sighs. “Numbered account. I hacked their system. There’s literally no record of the account holder’s name. Whoever this guy is, he’s—at least so far—flawless at covering his tracks.”

“Or he paid someone who is,” I say, clenching my hand into a fist. “Whoever is running things with them is smart, one way or the other. But we’re smarter. Keep looking. We’ll find this asshole. I’m about fucking done with chasing our tails. What about a record of another Ortiz at the school we found Ricardo at?”

Trey shakes his head. “Tried that as soon as we realized there was a second guy who could be related. I found plenty of Ortizes, but I was able to follow all of them up until now. None of them fit the profile or were erased like Ricardo, so I’m guessing this dude didn’t go to that school. The pictures are the best chance we have right now, boss.”

“Fuck,” I say with a grimace, but Trey looks hopeful.

“Even if he’s erased everything from his past and all connections to his brother, we have to be able to get something with facial rec. People don’t realize how many times a day they’re caught on cameras. I’ll find him.”

“I know. Keep looking, whatever it takes. I’m assuming Jules told you how we found Desiree at Magnolia’s old house.” I glance at Jules as he and Trey both give me a short nod. “So you know what we’re facing if we don’t end this. I’m not taking any chances with her. No fucking way.” I hate adding pressure when they’ve both been working night and day on this, but I’m hanging on by a thread.

“I hear you, Moses. I’m on it. Facial rec is going to take a while,” Trey says. “I’m hoping I’ll have something in the morning.”

“Then we take this fucking asshole out. I want this done and behind us—in hours, not days. I’m sick of him having the upper hand.”

“I’ll find something. He’s going down,” Trey says decisively, and all I can do is hope like hell that he’s right. Because this isn’t how we normally roll. We’re always the ones with information, and *we’re* the ghosts.

With determination in my every step, I leave Trey and Jules and head back to the suite where hopefully Magnolia is relaxing. I’m ready for my woman and a bed.

When I enter the room, though, I find her setting up chess pieces on the board I brought with us atop a table in the living area. She saw me pack it earlier, and I suppose decided to put it to use. *Works for me.*

She looks up, a knight in her hand, when I close the door. “I wondered when you’d come back. I thought maybe you got lost, because trust me, it’s definitely a possibility in this place.”

I cross the room, my feet sinking into the thick carpet beneath them, and pull her into my arms. “Doesn’t matter if it’s a maze, I’ll always find my way back to you, mama. That’s one thing I can guarantee.”

“Just don’t take fifteen years to do it again, and we’ll be fine.”

My chest rises and falls with a silent chuckle. “Duly noted.” I gesture to

the chess piece in her hand. “You want to play a game before we crash?”

“Yeah. I thought it might help take our minds off everything going through them right now. It’ll be good for us.”

Her features show no signs of the stress she’s under. At least, not unless you know what you’re looking for. I recognize the burden in her eyes, and I’m certain she’s thinking about what happened to Desiree. I don’t like it at all.

“We’ll play all night, if it’s what you want.”

She lets her forehead rest against my chest for a few moments. “Thank you. And thank you for *not* telling me what happened. As much as I want to know, I really don’t. I’m not sure I can handle it.”

I curl my hand around the back of her head and stroke her silky black hair. “Hush. You’ve got no need to carry that.”

When she’s gathered her composure again, she steps away, and her whiskey eyes look slightly less haunted. I take the knight from her hand and place it on the board where it belongs.

It only takes us thirty seconds to set up the rest of the pieces. She sits in the chair behind the white side, and I take the black. We’ve always switched places for each game, and I remember very clearly the last game we played, and she was the black.

“You remember too,” I say softly.

Her gaze cuts to me. “Remember what?”

“Our last game. You were black. I was white.”

A cheeky grin tips her rosy lips. “And I almost . . . *almost* let you win.”

My jaw slackens at her confession. “You did no such thing, woman. You weren’t letting me win. I almost had you. If I recall, I beat you good a few times those last couple of days.”

Her smile is secretive enough to give the Mona Lisa a run for her money. “Are you sure about that?”

I scoot my chair closer to the table and rest my elbows on it. “I’ve been

practicing for fifteen years. I'm ready. Bring it."

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## NINETEEN

### MAGNOLIA

**I** threw down the gauntlet, and I did it on purpose. I need this game to suck me in and take all my concentration, because my mind is not my friend tonight.

I should have known that sitting across from Moses at a chess board would be all it would take to tame my frazzled thoughts. With him on the other side of the table, there's nowhere else my brain can go. Between him and the game in front of me, they take up all my attention, which is exactly what I was hoping for.

We're six moves in when Moses pauses before reaching for his piece. "We didn't even wager. I think that was an oversight."

While the game is the perfect distraction, our back-and-forth shit-talking is one of my favorite parts. "You think you're going to win, big boy? That's why you want to wager now, isn't it?"

"Well, smartass, that is one reason," he says.

I let my chuckle loose, because I love how he smiles when he hears me laugh. *Why didn't I ever notice that before?*

"Then place your bet, Moby. I'll be happy to win whatever you're putting on the line."

His green-gold eyes flash, and I have a feeling I'll love whatever it is.

"When I win, you let me take you on a vacation as soon as this is done.

No questions asked. You just pack a bag and get on a plane with me.”

I lean back in my chair and appraise him. Admittedly, I’m shocked by the wager. “And I’m supposed to be *trying* to win this game?”

His grin is quick and wide. “*If* you win, I’ll let you pick the place. We’ll go wherever you want, mama.”

“You’ve got yourself a deal,” I tell him, stretching across the table to shake on it.

He reaches for my hand, but instead of shaking it, he lifts it to his lips for a kiss.

“Thank you,” he says.

“For what?”

“Giving me a second chance. No matter how determined I was, I needed you to give it to me, and I’ll always be grateful you did. And that you didn’t toss me out on my ass when I dragged my feet on telling you the full truth about how we met.”

I think for a moment before I reply, studying his face. I see the sincerity in his eyes, hear the affection in his words. And the promise they both deliver.

“I was pissed as hell when I first saw you, because I thought it was so easy for you to forget about me, and that’s why you never came back. I hated that you’d moved on, but I never could truly put you behind me.”

He shakes his head. “No. That wasn’t it at all. It wasn’t fucking easy being away from you. Not a single day. It almost fucking killed me at times. You’re an incredible woman, Mags. And it didn’t take long for me to realize I was never going to find another one like you. You’re one of a kind.”

“I want a baby,” I blurt out suddenly.

I don’t know why I said it, but it’s the truth. Maybe because I’ve always wanted a child of my own, but it seemed impossible. Like a pipe dream. And if there’s a chance he’s serious about a family, I refuse to waste any more time.

“I’m getting old,” I add. “I don’t want to wait until I can’t. I want one soon.”

A riot of emotions flash across Moses’s face—shock and surprise being chief among them.

“I’ve got one condition,” he says, carefully schooling his expression.

“What’s that?”

“You have to marry me before the baby’s born. Because I want him or her to grow up with what I didn’t have.”

I press my lips together, laughing to myself, because he’s officially maneuvered me into exactly what he told me he wanted when he came back to town.

“All right. You knock me up, and I’ll let you put a ring on my finger as soon as we get that positive test back.”

Moses couldn’t possibly smile any bigger, which knocks loose my laughter, because we’re totally fucking crazy for considering either concept. Marriage? Parenthood?

He’s . . . well, he’s whatever the technical term is for an underground identity eraser and death-faker, and I’m a retired madam. Mom and Dad sounds like a punch line when used with reference to us.

It’s absurd, but maybe it’s perfect too. If we only dare to go after what we both want most . . . what a life that could be.

The game forgotten, Moses pushes up from his chair and lifts me out of mine. “Then we’re getting started on this project right fucking now.”

I giggle and pretend to resist. “What about my dream vacation?”

“I forfeit,” he says with a smile, never losing step. “You were gonna win anyway. You had me, and we both know it.”

He carries me through the living room and straight to the bed. Like I’m precious, he lowers me to the mattress, taking my mouth in a smooth, drugging kiss.

Soon, when there’s nothing but the taste of Moses on my mind, he goes to

work, stripping me naked and working his way down my body with his lips. My hands wander his shoulders and back, etching every line and sinew into my memory.

When he reaches my belly, he presses a kiss there and gazes up at me. “Magnolia?”

“Moses?”

“You’re going to be the most incredible mother. I hope you know that.”

It’s almost like he had my heart, literally in his hands, unbeating, until that moment. With one brief, simple sentence, it comes alive. “I guess we’ll see soon enough.”

He shakes his head. “No. It’s a foregone conclusion. I see it in my mind’s eye.”

His faith in me is a gift, and I drag him back up my body and urge him to his back so I can strip him.

When we’re both naked, I settle between his legs and take his heavy cock in my hands. I might not know how to verbalize what I’m feeling, but I can show him. I suck him deep, laving the shaft and head with my tongue.

He lets me have control, but only for a few minutes. With his muscled thighs tensing around me, he lifts me off his body and flips us again.

“Now, time for some baby-making.”

I can’t help but laugh, husky as my voice is now. “You realize, it’s not necessarily that easy. I’m on birth control.”

Moses shrugs. “Then we’ll practice, and you quit that shit. When the time is right, it’ll happen. I have faith.”

And so we practice, and when I come, I bite down on Moses’s shoulder to keep his name from waking up everyone in the entire damn compound.

And then we practice again.

And again.

Until I drift off, curled around the only man I’ve ever been *in* love with.

My last thought, before I fall into a dreamless sleep, is that I’m going to

have to figure out how to tell him. *Three little words can't be so hard.*  
But they are. At least, when you've never said them before.

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## TWENTY

MOSES

**T**here's a knock on our suite early in the morning, and I carefully untangle my arms and legs from Magnolia's. After throwing on a pair of shorts, I quietly leave the bedroom, closing the door behind me, and make my way to the one in the living room that leads to the hallway.

"Thank fuck you're awake." Trey's face is beet red, and he's bouncing like a tweaker on payday. "I texted you like two hours ago, and I've been dying to fucking tell you what I found."

I rub the sleep from my eyes, willing my foggy mind to clear. "What?"

"I found him. I'm damn sure Ortiz has a brother. An older brother. That's who's in the picture."

This isn't surprising, and basically what we all assumed. Hopefully, there's more to his urgency than this.

"How did you find out?"

He slaps the door frame. "NOPD caught him on camera running a red light three days ago. It's a shit picture, but the features are a close enough match to the picture I aged up to get the hit—I combined them and refined the image to get another hit. An article in a tiny fucking free community newspaper from ten years ago that no one would ever have thought to wipe, because it went out of business shortly after. But our guy? They reported he was killed."

*Fuck yeah.* There's always *something* people miss, and it's the little details that'll get you.

"For-real killed or . . ." I start to ask the question, assuming that Trey wouldn't be this excited if the guy was dead for real.

"Everyone *thinks* he's dead for real, but the article said the cartel was suspected to be behind the murder. They were using it as a call to arms to get residents to patrol the border and protect their town."

Relief shoots through me. *Finally, a concrete link to a possible lead.* "Thank fuck for that. If they suspected the cartel was behind the faked murder, there's a damn good chance that's why he had to disappear. It would also explain why Ricardo's a ghost too."

Trey nods excitedly. "Yeah, exactly. Because we fucking know the cartel don't just go after one person, they go after their whole fucking family too. Whatever he was into, it went sideways as fuck."

"What's his name? Tell me everything you got on him."

"Antonio Reyes. And fucking embarrassingly, I got almost nothing on him except that article and the NOPD picture. Everything else has been erased. I don't know what the hell he could've done to put himself in the cartel's crosshairs, but they found the body—presumed to be his—in a ravine ten days after he was reported missing by a neighbor."

Frustration charges through me at the lack of information, but I lock onto what we do know. "Do we know how they identified the body as his?"

"No," Trey says with a shake of his head. "The article was light on facts and heavy on trying to get people riled up. But I swear this is our guy. Anyone else, I'd have his whole life story by now, but there ain't shit to find."

"Why the different last name? Was there anything in the article on his brother?"

"I'm guessing two different fathers. I don't know for sure yet, but I'm trying to find out. The article just said he was the last surviving member of

his family. Apparently, there was a car fire a few months earlier that wiped out the rest of them, but they didn't mention names. Like I said, community paper."

Even without names or more details, I'm with Trey—it sounds like this is our guy. "He could've arranged the car fire to get his family clear when shit started to go bad then."

"That's what I thought," Trey says and then lights up like a goddamned Christmas tree. "But now we know he's here from that NOPD red light camera. It's him, Moses. We really fucking got him."

"Fuck yeah." I clench my hands into fists. "Now we just have to find him or draw him out. We need to meet with Mount as soon as possible this morning. Tell him what we got."

"Yeah, boss," he says, already turning to head down the hall to his room. "I'll go get all the shit."

"Give me ten minutes. I gotta wake up Mags and tell her what you found, and let her know this fucking nightmare is almost over."

Trey gives me a nod and hurries the rest of the way down the hallway. I close the door and make my way back to Magnolia. When I open the door to the bedroom, she's awake and watches me walk inside.

"What's going on?" It's not surprising that she doesn't expect good news. Her face is pinched at the brow and she's worrying her bottom lip.

"Trey found him."

She sits up, clutching the sheet to her chest. "He's sure?"

I close the distance to the bed and sit beside her. "T's fucking good. It took him a while, but now we know why."

Her head weaves back and forth, as if searching my eyes for answers. "Why?"

"We were right. He's a ghost too. Supposedly died in a ravine ten years ago. Pinned it on the cartel. Chances are he's been running this entire time, just in case. It's one of the more common reasons people call us in, so it's not



a big shocker to find out the cartel is tied to why he's hiding."

Magnolia's brain is working. "The cartel wants him dead . . . Can we use that? Let them know where he is? They can take him out."

It's an idea I haven't had a chance to contemplate, but it's a solid one. Although, it's dangerous as fuck to get involved with any cartel, whether or not it benefits them.

I squeeze her leg beneath the sheets. "It's worth considering. Trey's grabbing his laptop, and he'll be back in a few. He'll show us everything."

She wastes no time, and begins untangling her limbs from the linens. "I'm getting up. I'll be ready."

"Sounds good, mama." Before she gets too far, I lean over to take her lips with a kiss. "And thank you for last night."

She pulls back to meet my gaze. "Not sure you need to be thanking me when it was a joint effort, but I appreciate the gratitude."

"You gave me a gift, and that's what I'm thanking you for." There's still a questioning expression on her face, so I clarify further. "*Our future*. That's all I can see now. You and me and a family. It's a beautiful picture, and I can't fucking wait for all of it."

She snags my hand and threads her fingers through it. "Yeah. It is, isn't it?" She wags her eyebrows, and finally some of the fiery Magnolia I adore sparks back to life. "Now, let's put this cock-sucking asshole in the ground so we can make it all happen before we need geriatric care."

I kiss her firmly again. "Get up and get dressed. It's time to end this."

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## TWENTY-ONE

### MAGNOLIA

**M**oses leaves the room as I roll the rest of the way out of bed. I'm nearly to the bathroom when my phone vibrates with a call. I backtrack and pick it up, thinking it'll be a call from Taylor, checking in to let me know how it's going at the beach.

But it's not.

It's from an unknown number.

I almost let the call go to voice mail, but something stops me, so I tap the screen to answer it. "Hello?"

"Ms. Maison?"

"Who's this?" My tone isn't exactly friendly because I have no idea who the hell is calling me on an unknown number or how he knows my name.

"You're a hard woman to track down, Ms. Maison. This is Detective Cavender of the NOPD. I've been trying to get in touch with you since yesterday."

*Fuck. Cavender.*

I should have expected he'd be on the hunt for me from the moment Moses told me what happened to Desiree, but I had other things on my mind—like feeling guilty and terrified because whatever happened was so bad, even Moses wouldn't speak on the horror he saw.

Taking a slow breath, I compose myself. I can handle this. Cavender

doesn't know shit. He just knows he has a body in a house that I'm currently selling . . .

No, not currently. I *was* selling.

Desiree is gone now. A wave of emotion threatens to sweep me under, but I hold it together, fighting off the sorrow and anger and helplessness.

“Well, you've found me now. What can I do for you, Detective?” There's a bite at the edge of my words, but I don't care.

“I need you to come down to the station and answer some questions about a homicide,” he tells me.

I grit my teeth, not wanting to have this conversation, but there's absolutely no way I can avoid it. Still, I try anyway, playing dumb, because I'm not supposed to know about Desiree. My eyes burn when I think of what might have happened to her.

*No, rein it in. This isn't the time to fall apart.*

I prop one hand on my hip, even though Cavender can't see it. “Didn't we already have this discussion, Detective? Because I have nothing new to add to what I already told you.”

He tsk-tsks, almost sardonically. “Different homicide, Ms. Maison. This one took place in a property that's also connected to you. Not your condo.”

“Where?” I snap out, even though I'm aware of precisely where.

He rattles off the address I know by heart.

“What the hell happened? Who?” My questions come in racing clips.

I hear clicking over the line, as if he's annoyingly playing with an ink pen. “Come down to the station in an hour, and I'll give you more details.”

Goddamn it, he wants me to come to him. Probably so it'll be easier to arrest me if he decides there's even a shred of evidence to connect me. Which there *isn't* because I wasn't there.

*I'm so sorry, Desiree. If I'd been there . . .* I shut the thought down. It won't do me a damn bit of good.

*Coulda. Woulda. Shoulda.*

Nothing can help Desiree now.

My eyes sting again with acid tears, but I force myself back to the conversation. What did Cavender say? Oh yeah, he wants me to come downtown.

“That timing doesn’t work for me, Detective.”

He has the audacity to chortle. “Oh, excuse me. This isn’t a friendly request, Ms. Maison. You come to the station *or* I’ll find you and bring you in.”

I think about where I am right now, and it almost makes me laugh.

*Yeah, right, Detective. You ain’t finding me.*

But then my mind returns to Desiree again. If there’s a chance the cops can somehow find this guy—the one who Trey tracked down—then I have no choice but to go and do whatever I can to put them on the right path too. *Maybe I can offer them something Trey has, and they can find him?* Renewed by the possibility, I decide.

“I’ll be there at noon, Detective.”

“Good, Ms. Maison. I take it you know where you’re going?”

*Snide motherfucker.*

“Yeah, Cavender. I know where the hell the police station is. I went there when I was raped as a teenager, but no one seemed to be taking sexual assault seriously back then. See you at noon.”

I hang up the call and go in search of Moses with my heart hammering. He’s not going to like this at all, but maybe he’ll see it my way too.

Us and Mount.

The police and the FBI.

Maybe even the cartel, if it’s safe-ish.

The more people looking for this guy only helps my odds of living through the day. Maybe no one else has to die because of this craziness, except for the man himself. I pray he meets his maker—and soon.

I don’t have to go far to find Moses. When I close the bedroom door

behind me, he's in the living room with Trey and Jules. They're all standing around Trey's computer on the table. Moses has his arms crossed, and a militant expression lines his face.

"We're not using Mags as bait. It's not fucking happening. Mention it again, and you and I are gonna have a problem." He glares down at Trey, and the others look in my direction as I enter the room.

"I didn't mean it like that," Trey says to Moses while meeting my gaze. "I just said we need to draw him out somehow and we know Mags is who he's most interested in."

"He's right," I tell Moses, watching the expression on his face turn into a dark, violent thundercloud.

"Gotta find another way. You're not going anywhere near that bastard, mama. I won't have it. Not in a fucking million years will it fly with me."

Jules steps away from the back of Trey's computer and pulls out the chair beside him before dropping into it. "You sure the DMV database doesn't have shit? If we could get a current name and address, we could just go take him out ourselves."

"Tags on the car that he used to run the red light were stolen, so that's not helping. I'm trying a different facial rec program on the red light photo and one I refined. I hope like hell we'll get another hit."

I go to Moses's side. "Where was the light that he ran? Where was he headed?"

Trey's attention drops back to his screen and his keys click before he replies. "Poydras and Carondelet."

I face the man who's trying to protect me. "That's not far from where we saw him when he was tailing us—near the World War II Museum. He sticks close to downtown, obviously, if he's looking for me. But where the hell is he staying?"

"Little brother's shithole is only a few miles from there too. But he wasn't crashing there. At least, didn't look like it when we went to check the

place out.”

My gaze cuts to Moses’s face. “Could he be staying there and just covering his tracks?”

He shakes his head almost instantly. “Too risky. If he’s a pro at staying off the grid, and he knows Ricardo’s dead and the cops have his body, he wouldn’t take the chance that they might somehow figure out who he is and come knocking. My money’s on a hotel in the area where the red light camera caught him. Somewhere he won’t be noticed much.”

“Too bad the cops haven’t made that connection,” Trey says, typing away. “What about another anonymous tip?”

I glance between the two men, because this is my opening to tell them. “Cavender just called. I have to be at the station at noon to answer questions about a homicide.”

The entire room goes quiet as Moses whips his head toward me, and we lock eyes.

His jaw flexes. “You’re not going.”

“I have to go. I told him I’d be there.”

Moses steps away from the table and comes closer to me. “Not risking you, mama. Not for anything. I’ve already told you this, how many times?”

I don’t want to argue, but sometimes you wish in one hand and shit in the other to see which fills up first. Spoiler, it’s the shit hand. “I’ll be fine. I’ve been questioned before.”

“No.” His tone is final, but it doesn’t matter.

“You don’t want me to see what happened to Desiree, and I sure as hell don’t want to either, but I’m going.” I look at Trey for a second. “Is there anything I can give the police that won’t incriminate me, but might put them on the path of the guy who’s doing all this? Can we at least *use* the cops?”

There’s a distinct growl from Moses’s direction, and I scowl back to find his green-gold eyes glowing with intensity.

“Goddamn it, Mags. You’re not putting yourself in danger. That’s the

whole fucking reason we're locked down here. *So he can't get to you and do what the fuck he did to Desiree.* I'm not putting you at risk. Fucking forget it."

"I'll send a lawyer with her."

A deep voice comes from behind us, and we all turn to see Mount standing in the doorway.

"V will drive her. No one will get to her."

Moses's expression frosts over. "I get that you're used to calling the fucking shots—really, truly, I am—but this isn't happening."

"If Magnolia doesn't show, Cavender will hunt her down. He's not on my payroll. He's a straight arrow. A prick, all the same, but he doesn't fuck around. He'll find her regardless. Might as well make it on her terms and try to use it to your advantage."

Moses reaches out and pulls me against his side. "I fucking hate it."

"I'll be okay. I can handle it," I tell him, looking up into his face, but he's still seething at Mount.

When Moses finally glances down at me, I notice something I've never seen in his eyes before.

*Fear.*

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## TWENTY-TWO

MOSES

I want to strangle Mount for agreeing with Magnolia, but I'm being overprotective as fuck, and it could be marring my judgment.

Who can blame me? She's my woman.

I spent fifteen goddamned years without her, and now that I have a second chance, I won't allow anyone to take it from me. Especially not some NOPD detective who can't be bought.

But because I'm a stubborn son of a bitch, I also refuse to let Magnolia out of my sight. Which is why Jules and I are both sitting in the SUV across the street from the police station, watching as V opens Magnolia's door. The lawyer climbs out of Mount's Maybach after her, and V walks them right up to the entrance of the building.

They disappear inside, and I'm not fucking happy about this.

"It's going to be okay, boss. That fucker isn't taking her out at a police station. And if our buddy Antonio Reyes so much as cruises past, we'll be on him, and then he'll be done."

I rip my attention from the precinct and start scanning the street for that exact purpose, even though I don't think there's a chance in hell we'll see him. I don't feel that lucky.

He's smart, which makes him doubly dangerous because he's definitely vicious as fuck.



My right-hand man attempts small talk. “It may not be the best time to bring this shit up, but how is everything going with Magnolia?”

I glance over at Jules, a guy I trust with my life. “It’s going good. Better than good. You know, despite all this shit.”

His eyes crease at the corners as he smiles. “That’s what I like to hear. You deserve a woman who gets you after all the shit we’ve been through.”

I recall the conversation Magnolia and I had last night. “She wants a baby,” I tell Jules, my voice rough and low. It’s unfamiliar to discuss this kind of thing, mainly because it’s never happened to me before, and because guys just don’t sit around daydreaming together about bassinets and rattles. Yet, here we are.

Jules’s eyebrows damn near shoot up to his hairline. “Holy fuck. That’s fucking huge, Moses.” He slaps my shoulder. “Damn, man. Good for you.”

“I know.” And I’d feel a hell of a lot better about it if it weren’t for this thick, dark cloud blanketing my world right now with Reyes on the loose.

“You ready for that shit? So soon?”

I don’t second-guess or hesitate. “Fuck yes. With her, it’s all different. It’s gonna work. She gets it. Gets me. Mags is it for me. And if she wants a family the way I do, I’m gonna give it to her as soon as I possibly can. I’m marrying that beautiful warrior of a woman.”

Jules grips my shoulder. “Fuck yeah, you are.” He pauses, shaking his head with a smile on his face. “When you first told me what your plan was and why we were coming back, I thought you were even fucking crazier than normal.”

I choke out a laugh. “Yeah, I figured.”

“But, man,” Jules says, his grin growing bigger with each passing second, “I didn’t doubt you even then. You say something, and you do it, because that’s the man you are. And whatever your plan is after you get the family started, know I still want to be part of it.”

The topic hasn’t come up before, but while we’re here, I ask, “You don’t

want to retire?”

“I’m too young for that shit. I wouldn’t know what the hell to do with my free time. Probably get into trouble. Why? You thinking about retiring for good this time?”

My shoulders rise and fall. “None of us ever needs to work another day in our lives.”

Totally replacing the darkness in my life with light would ensure I wouldn’t muddy up our future. It’s hard to have one foot in the door and the other deep inside a dangerous game. I’d never want my future with Magnolia—or our children—to be compromised. Suddenly, risks just don’t seem all that worth it anymore.

Then again, it’s all I know.

Jules reads my silence. “Don’t get me wrong, man. I understand if you want to bow out. But I fucking get off on what we do. Don’t know that I’m ready to give it up yet. Wouldn’t you be bored? You get a charge out of this shit just like I do. It’s not all about the money. Not anymore.”

I think of the people we’ve helped disappear—rescued, actually, in a lot of ways. People who, like the sons of bitches Reyes and Ortiz, would have otherwise been killed by the cartel or someone else who wanted them dead. As our skills got more in demand, we were able to pick and choose who we helped, and not all of them have been terrible people. Some were damn decent, just desperate.

“I don’t know what I want to do yet,” I tell Jules honestly. “But whatever we decide, it’ll be a group decision. You, me, Trey, and Mags. She’s part of the team now.”

“We’re all right with that. Besides, if you stay in the business, I bet she could help us take it up a notch. She’s something else.”

“Yeah. Yeah, she is,” I say, looking back to the entrance of the station, wishing like hell I could hear and see what’s going on inside.

## TWENTY-THREE

### MAGNOLIA

I hate everything about cop shops. From their ugly paint to the industrial flooring to the smell of burned coffee, judgmental stares, and injustice. However, cops are only part of a broken fucking system not doing a good enough job protecting the people who need it most.

I'm perched on an uncomfortable plastic chair inside an interrogation room with Barton Fields from Mount's legal team beside me. He was in the car waiting when I climbed in the Maybach outside of the family entrance to Mount's hidden kingdom. He introduced himself with a no-nonsense handshake and proceeded to tell me exactly how this appointment would go.

Except, the meeting hasn't even started.

I check the time on my phone again. "It's quarter after twelve. Is he fucking with me?"

Fields looks at the mirror on the wall opposite from where we're sitting. "No. He's making sure to waste your time because you didn't ask how high when he said jump." From the way Fields says it, I can tell he assumes someone is watching from the other side of the one-way glass. "But if they keep us waiting five minutes longer, we're leaving."

Fields's assumption must be right, because at 12:19, the door to the interview room opens and Cavender struts in.

"So sorry to keep you waiting, Ms. Maison." He comes toward the table

and holds out his hand to Fields first, which pisses me off. “Detective John Cavender. Who are you?”

“Ms. Maison’s counsel, Barton Fields. We’ll be keeping this meeting brief, as Ms. Maison doesn’t have any information regarding the homicide you told her about on the telephone this morning.”

Cavender’s gaze swings to me, and he offers me his calloused palm. I shake the extended hand, even though I don’t really want to.

“Is that right, Ms. Maison? You don’t know anything about Desiree Harding’s untimely death? Or should I say her gruesome murder in your brothel?”

Hearing him even say her name chokes me up instantly, and Fields thankfully jumps in.

“If you could give her a moment, Detective, we’d appreciate it. This news is understandably difficult for Ms. Maison to hear so abruptly. Some compassion would go a long way.”

Oh, this attorney isn’t here to play, and I’m glad he’s by my side.

“Fine. Take a minute. Would you like a bottle of water? A coffee?”

“Water, please,” I choke out. This time, the tears burning in the back of my eyes are coming forward. I attempt to blink them back as Cavender rises to go to the door.

He opens it and barks, “Water,” at someone outside before closing it again.

When Fields offers me a folded tissue, I take it and dab at my eyes. “Thank you.”

“You knew Ms. Harding well then, I take it?” Cavender asks, and I can feel the pressure of his intense gaze assessing me. Judging me. Likely condemning me.

I blot at the tears I don’t want falling in front of him. Regardless of what he thinks, this is no fucking act. Grief for what happened to Desiree rips me to shreds inside. Because *this is all my fault*.

No. I can't think about that right now. It won't help anything. Instead, I dry my eyes and look Cavender directly in his.

"Yes, I knew her. For years. She bought the house from me. She was still paying on the bond for deed."

"When was the last time you were at the house?"

I shake my head. "I don't know. It's been at least a month or more."

He scribbles a note on his tiny steno pad. "How long has it been since you've seen Ms. Harding?"

Time has nearly lost all order in my head. The last week is all one big blur. "A few days ago."

He clicks his fucking pen. In-out. In-out. In-out. "Where?"

I pause for a second before answering, but I decide I have nothing to lose by telling the truth. "At a private club."

Cavender's head bobs, and I sense there's a good possibility he already knows exactly what club I'm talking about. Especially since he doesn't ask for clarification.

"Did she give you any reason to think she might have been in trouble or that she was fearing for her safety?"

I shake my head, and it's not a lie. Desiree wasn't in trouble. She wasn't afraid.

What happened to her had *nothing* to do with her. It was because the sick motherfucker couldn't get to me. *Which isn't fucking fair*. Guilt cinches around my lungs like barbed wire, and Cavender's next question just twists it tighter.

"Do you have any idea who may have wanted her dead? Or even who might have killed her?"

I pin Cavender with a glare. "If I had a name to give you that you could use to track down Desiree's killer, I would give it to you. Gladly. *Immediately*. But please believe me when I say I don't have one. In fact, while you're wasting your time with me, the killer could be getting away. Do

you want that? Do you want them to get away with this?” My voice rises with the raw emotions hitting me again.

“So, no guesses then? Nothing?”

I almost breathe a sigh of relief that Cavender didn’t pick apart the way I answered his prior question.

Fields jumps in to take this one. “As Ms. Maison said, she’d give you a name if she had one. Do you have any other questions she could possibly answer to help with your investigation? If not, Ms. Maison has appointments this afternoon to get to.”

Cavender gives the lawyer a hard stare before turning his attention back to me. “You’ve had a lot going on lately, Ms. Maison. Someone gets killed in your condo building. You move out the next day. Then there’s the break-in where someone wrote on your wall with blood, explicitly saying they’re coming to get you. Which, by the way, the lab matched the DNA found to yet another ongoing homicide investigation.”

I jerk back in my seat, my mind immediately going to Laura Brandon. Her throat was slit the same night my condo was broken into, and Moses and the guys reasoned out what they thought happened to her.

“Which other homicide investigation?” I ask Cavender, deliberately playing dumb.

“I’m afraid I’m not at liberty to give you more information on that case, unless for some reason you think you have a connection to a *third* dead body.”

Cavender is fishing, but I’m not taking the bait.

“She doesn’t have any information, Detective. Ms. Maison is self-employed and runs a very successful and completely legal business which should be of no interest to your department in any way. She agreed to come in to talk with you on her own very valuable time, and if you don’t have any further questions that are relevant to this investigation, then we’ll be on our way so Ms. Maison can return to work,” Fields says, sounding so polite as he

delivers the equivalent of a *fuck you* to the cop.

“Just one more thing,” Cavender says, reaching into a manila envelope. He pulls out what looks like an evidence bag and tosses it on the table. “Recognize this?”

It’s a knife crusted with dried blood. Desiree’s blood. I jerk back in my seat as the knife slides to a stop in front of me.

“That was uncalled for, Detective,” Fields says, his tone sharp as he reprimands the cop.

But there’s no need. I understand exactly why the detective is playing this game.

“Is that . . . is that what killed Desiree?” I ask with a very real tremor in my voice.

“One of the murder weapons. The only one we’ve been able to find so far. Why? Have you seen it before?”

I shake my head because I can’t find my voice to lie.

I have seen the knife before. *I gave it to Desiree for protection.* And it’s a duplicate of the one I used to kill Ortiz in the elevator in my building.

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## TWENTY-FOUR

MOSES

**A**s soon as Magnolia is in the Maybach and on the way to Mount's, I want to race after her and beat her there, but I can't.

We have to take another route and wind back and forth around the city, so we can watch for a tail. A tail I want to kill because he's the reason my woman was in the police station in the first place.

Antonio Reyes is going down, and I'm going to be the one to take him out. He'll pay for every bit of fear he's instilled in Magnolia. No one does that to my woman and gets away with it.

When we finally reach Mount's a half hour later, Jules and I are out of the SUV as fast as we can move. V steps out of the garage. Apparently, he's been waiting for us. I hand the keys off to him with only one thing on my mind.

"Where is she?"

He jerks his head toward the garage we exited through on the way to the station.

With the driving need to see Magnolia with my own two eyes and make sure she's okay after the interview with the cop, I charge through the garage and yank open the door that leads inside. The twisting and winding hallways are like a fucking labyrinth, and it takes me three wrong turns to find my way back to our suite.

"Mags?" I call her name as I push open the door. "You here, mama?"



“In here.”

I follow her ragged voice into the bedroom and stop short as soon as I pass through the doorway. Magnolia is on the floor, her knees pulled up to her chest, her arms wrapped tight around them.

Rushing to her, I drop onto the carpet and pull her into my arms. “What’s wrong, baby? You okay?”

Her whole body vibrates as she shakes her head. “I’m working on it. But . . .”

“What happened?” I demand, wishing I could wrap my hands around Cavender’s throat and squeeze for whatever he did or said that put Magnolia into this state. I tamp down the rage, though, because taking care of her comes first.

“The murder weapon . . .” Another shudder goes through her as she searches for words.

The mention of the murder weapon unleashes a mental picture I don’t want to see again. I can still smell the coppery tang of blood as I walked into the room where we found Desiree’s lifeless, dismembered body. I push the vision out of my head, forcing myself to focus on Magnolia.

“It’s okay, mama. You’re okay. Whatever the fucking detective did or showed you, none of it can get you. You’re here with me. I’ve got you now. *Forever*. I’m not letting anyone hurt you again.”

She lifts her watery gaze to mine, and unshed tears turn her whiskey eyes even glassier. “He used Desiree’s stiletto to kill her. I *gave her that knife*.”

The crushing guilt she must feel almost smashes us both into the carpet. “Fuck. Baby, I’m so sorry.”

She shakes her head. “No, you don’t understand. I have one exactly like it. I used it to kill the guy in the elevator. Do you think he knew? Is that why he did what he did to her?” Magnolia holds back a sob as she says it, and I tighten my arms around her.

“Oh, baby. Hush. *Fuck*. No. He couldn’t know that. No fucking way. The

cops haven't made anything to do with his brother's death public."

"Are you sure?" Her question carries a ragged edge.

"I'm sure, mama. If she had it out, it might've just been a weapon of opportunity. I don't think he knew."

She blinks back the tears gathering in her eyes, and I want to kill the fuckers for putting them there. All of them. Reyes, Ortiz, and Cavender. Seeing a woman who is strong, capable, and formidable, curled up practically in a ball on the floor, guts me. And then she hits me with something else that's heavy on her mind.

"But aren't they going to think the same person killed both of them?"

*Fuck.* That's not something I put together. *Shit.*

"Hey, hey. No. Let's not worry about that. You didn't kill Desiree, and the cops know that. What happened to her wasn't something a woman would do. Trust me, mama. They have to know that. Fuck it, if anything, they'll think whoever killed Desiree killed Ricardo first."

She blinks again. "Are you sure?"

I nod. "One hundred percent."

But even as I say it, a possibility comes to life in my head. *What if they do try to tie the murders together? What if they get lazy and pin it all on Magnolia?*

"Where is your knife?" I ask.

Her gaze turns sharp. "Why?"

"Because that's something we gotta get rid of. No evidence, mama. We toss it so there's never a concern."

"I should've done that already," she says, tapping her head in frustration against my shoulder. "God, I know better than this shit. Why didn't I get rid of it?"

I think of the way I found her that night, stitching up her own side where he cut her. "You were a little busy. But if you tell me where it is, I'll make it disappear. It's what I'm good at."

“It’s in my house in the Quarter, in the safe in my closet. It’s clean. No blood, no prints. I made sure of that, at least. I was going to toss it, but . . .”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of it. Now, let’s get you up. You need a shower. Get the police station grime off you. You’ll feel better.”

I rise and pull her with me, and she locks her arms around me.

“Thank you,” she whispers.

Staring down at her dark hair, I press a kiss to the top of her head. “You don’t need to thank me for anything.”

“Yeah, I do,” she says with a hiccup, gazing up at me. “I don’t know what would be happening right now if you weren’t here. I’d be handling this shit myself because I’m no good at asking for help. But I’m really, really glad I’m not alone right now, Moses.”

I tighten my hold around her. “You’re never gonna be alone again, mama. Whatever comes, we handle it together. That’s how it works from here on out. We’re a team, and I’m not letting anything happen to you. I waited too damn long for my second chance to risk throwing it all away.”

She lays her cheek against my chest, and we stand there for a moment, saying nothing. When she finally pulls back, I catch a single tear on the pad of my thumb.

“What’s next?” she asks.

“I’ll go check on Trey’s progress and hope he’s got an address for our guy, and then we’ll put together a plan to take him out. I’m sick of him being two steps ahead of us. It’s time we catch the fuck up.”

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## TWENTY-FIVE

### MAGNOLIA

**A**fter my shower, Moses goes in search of Trey, but I stay in the room, the vision of the blood-encrusted stiletto seared into my head.

Once my hair is dry, I venture out to the living room, feeling at a loss for what to do with myself. With my girls away and business on hold, there's not much for me to work on. I can't remember the last time I had this much free time on my hands. The hustle I'm so used to has come to a complete standstill because of the asshole who attacked me in the elevator.

I wander to the chess board, trailing my fingers over the pieces. Other women might wonder how different their life would have been if they'd gone with Moses or if Moses had stayed, but I don't waste any time on that.

There's no going back.

You get one chance to make a decision, and then you have to live with the consequences of it.

But what I said to Moses earlier is completely true. I don't know how I'd be handling this without him. I'm a strong woman. That's a fact. But I'm also smart enough to realize this could have gone a hell of a lot differently if Moses's timing to return to me had been off by just a day or two.

A knock at the door distracts me from my thoughts, and I'm grateful for it. Melancholy ain't my thing.

I cross the room and pull the door open to find Keira. Her expression radiates empathy.

“Are you okay?”

Shrugging, I answer, “Okay enough.”

Keira throws her arms around my shoulders and hugs me, and I accept the comfort she offers. Right now, I’ll take what relief I can get.

“I hate that you’re going through this. I want it over.”

“You and me both, girl. You and me both.” I give her a hard squeeze before she pulls back.

“So, what now?”

I release a long breath. “Hell if I know. I don’t even know what to do with myself right this minute. Can’t say I’ve ever been in this situation before.”

Knowingly, she gives me a rueful smile. “Lockdown is no fun. Trust me, this is something I’m all too familiar with.”

I think of the man my best friend is married to, how it came to be, and again hope I made the right moves where that was concerned.

Keira must read something on my face because her features sharpen. “I wouldn’t trade this for the world, Mags. So stop with whatever you’re thinking.”

“Oh, you read minds now, Ke-ke?”

She rolls her eyes. “When it comes to you, sometimes I can. I was actually coming to ask if you’d do *me* a favor.”

“Name it,” I say without hesitation. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for Keira. That’s the plain and simple truth.

“Rory’s nanny is off tonight, and Lachlan and I have to—”

“Yes,” I reply, not even letting her finish. “I’ll watch your baby girl anytime you need.”

She sucks her bottom lip in her mouth for a beat. “Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. Just grab me when you need me.”

Her head tips to the side, and she grimaces. “What about Moses? Do you think he’ll be cool playing babysitter?”

I recall what I said to him about wanting a baby and how his face lit up. “He’ll be just fine. Probably good practice for him.”

Keira’s eyes bug out. “Oh my God. Are you . . . are you pregnant?”

The laughter spilling from my lips is totally due to the shell-shocked look on my best friend’s face.

“No. Not yet, anyway. But I’m pretty sure that’s where we’re headed next.”

Keira throws herself at me again, and this time her arms lock around me like a vise. “That’s the best news I’ve heard all freaking year! I’m so happy for you, Mags.”

I squeeze her hard, feeling the love pour off her. Keira is one of a kind and absolutely too good for me. “Thank you, babe. I appreciate it.”

She releases me once more and her eyes glisten as she gapes at me. “All I’ve ever wanted is for you to be happy,” she says, and I believe her.

“I’m working on it, Ke-ke. I promise.”

For the first time, I believe myself too.

A buzz comes from Keira’s pocket, and she pulls out her phone. “Crap. I’m supposed to be on a conference call right now. I’ll be back shortly. Thank you so much for agreeing to watch Rory tonight.”

“Anything for you. You know that.”

She blows me a kiss and backs out of the room, leaving me alone again with my thoughts.

When Moses returns an hour later, the first thing I notice is the frustration on his stony face as he closes the door behind him.

“Mama?”

“Right here,” I say from the chair in front of the empty fireplace.

He turns toward me, a smile replacing the strain on his features. “Didn’t see you there. You doing okay?”

I rise as he closes the distance between us. “Are *you* okay? I saw your expression when you came in. Trey couldn’t find an address, could he?”

The smile Moses had pasted on fades as he shakes his head. “No. This bastard knows how to hide, even from all Trey’s tricks.”

“Has that ever happened before?”

“We’re usually the ones wiping all the information about people, so we know where to look for things that usually get missed. But this guy . . . he’s smart. It’s pissing me the fuck off.”

Moses reaches up to grip the back of his neck, and I step into the heat radiating off his body and lay my palms against his solid chest.

I try to give him what he’s been giving me—reassurance, support, and hope. “We’ll end this, one way or another. What about Mount? Any leads from his side of things?”

Moses’s arm wraps around my body, anchoring me against him like he doesn’t want to give me the opportunity to step away. I’m okay with that, especially because I have no plans to retreat. I don’t need space. Not from him. Not anymore.

“Nothing yet, but he’s got eyes all over the city watching.”

“We will find him,” I say with conviction. “He’s going to pay for what he’s done.”

Moses leans down to press a kiss to the top of my head. “Damn right. But until then, Trey won’t stop digging, and I’m just . . .” He trails off, and it hits me that he’s probably as unfamiliar with inactivity as I am.

I fill in the silence. “We’re babysitting Rory tonight.”

Moses jerks back and peers down at me. “Babysitting? Can’t say that’s something I’ve ever done before.”

“I suppose it’s about time we both learn.” A sense of peace comes over

me when I add, “Together.”

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## TWENTY-SIX

MOSES

“**A**nything happens to her while you’re in charge, and I. Kill. You. No questions.” Mount’s tone is even, but he means every word he says, based on the way he stares at the little auburn-haired girl clinging to her mama’s neck.

“I get it. She’s your world,” I say. Honestly, someone would have to go through me and Magnolia to get to Rory tonight anyway.

Mount’s dark gaze lifts to spear mine. “You *don’t* get it. Until you’ve held your own child, you won’t.”

He’s right, so I don’t argue.

“Nothing will happen to her. You have my word.”

Mount’s jaw is stiff as he gauges me, but finally he nods. “We’ll be back in three hours. V will be posted outside the door of whatever room you’re in at all times.”

It’s gotta be rough leaving his whole world in the care of someone like me, so I don’t press him. “Got it.”

“Are you done trying to scare the hell out of the people who are doing us a favor?” Mount’s wife asks as she comes toward him.

The man’s entire posture relaxes as soon as Keira slides an arm around him, and he plucks the baby from her hold.

I hope like hell no one else ever sees the vulnerability I do right now,

because they'd know that the king of New Orleans' criminal underworld could be toppled by striking at his daughter or his wife. He'd go mad without them.

"I'm just expressing to Moses how things stand."

"We'll be home in a few hours. Everything will be fine." Keira looks to me. "Thank you so much, Moses. We're incredibly grateful, and if Lachlan has made any death threats, you can just ignore them."

Mount's gaze swings toward his wife, rife with protest.

"Don't glower at me. I know you. Remember?"

His chin lifts, and Mount meets my eyes once more as Magnolia takes her place beside me.

Rory snuggles into her father's collar as he presses kisses into her messy hair like he's eating her ear off. I don't use the word often, but I'd dare to call it cute.

"Time to play with Auntie Mags for a little while, sweetheart," Mount says as the tiny girl pulls her face away from his body and holds her willing, waving arms out to Magnolia.

"That's right, princess. Let's go play with your blocks." My woman's voice is soft and bouncy as she speaks to the toddler, and then adds to her parents, "All nineteen million of them."

They immediately look guilty, but unashamed at the same time.

As soon as Magnolia has the little girl in her arms, an image hits me. It's one of our kid and how fucking sweet our life will soon be, because neither of us are wasting any more time. We missed out on fifteen years together, and we're not squandering another damn day.

I reach out to shake Mount's hand. "Have a good night." I glance at Keira. "We've got this covered."

Keira leans over to hug me, and I sure as hell don't miss the look on Mount's face when she touches me. "Thank you for being there for Mags. She needs you more than you realize. And thank you for this too."

“It’s a privilege,” I reply as she steps away, shocked that I still have two working kneecaps.

*That man is a goner, I think with a smile. And I am too.*

“How in the hell does she move so fast?” I spin around to catch Rory darting across the room, blocks in both hands, which are flailing above her head. My heart is in my fucking throat at the thought of her face-planting on the carpet. “Slow down, little girl. There’s nowhere to go in such a hurry.”

Magnolia’s laughter mixes with Rory’s as she cuts to the side to scoop her up. “That’s because Princess Aurora has so much to do. Isn’t that right, *bébé?*”

Rory unleashes a wave of chatter that’s barely intelligible to those of us who don’t spend all day around her. I catch a few words, but I still have absolutely no idea what she’s talking about. Frankly, she doesn’t seem to mind.

Magnolia giggles and smiles, and Rory claps the blocks together.

“Let’s see if you can fit them in the holes, smarty-pants.”

Magnolia carries the dainty girl to a table covered with small stations for kids to learn shapes. Rory knows exactly what to do, shoving the blocks in the plastic holders where they fit before using the table to scramble around the other side, stopping only to spin a wheel, and then grabs more blocks. These she doesn’t try to put in the holes. They go straight to her mouth, where she starts gumming them to death.

I gawk and jerk my gaze to Magnolia. “Is she supposed to do that?”

“She won’t choke, and Mount won’t kill us, if that’s what you’re wondering,” she says with a grin.

“Are you sure? Because I’m one hundred percent sure that he meant what he said. And I wouldn’t blame him either.”

Magnolia beams as I crouch beside her and Rory on the floor. “You’ll be just as fierce with our baby,” she says with a twinkle in her eye.

“You’re damn—*shit*—dang right.”

Magnolia’s joy-filled chuckles float through the room. She needed this today.

“It’s okay, Moby. She won’t pick up bad language from you if she hasn’t picked it up from her mom and dad yet. At least, that’s what Keira tells me when I curse.”

Rory turns around, smiling with drool dripping down her chin, and shoves a block at me. “You!” she orders plainly. So I take the block from her, not thinking twice about how she just gnawed on it.

I point to the hole where it goes. “You want me to put it in here?”

She lifts her narrow chin—which she inherited from her mother—and nods slowly and sagely. “*You.*”

“Okay.” I slide the block into the hole, and Rory screeches with excitement, clapping her hands. Then she rushes toward me and hurls herself into my arms.

As her miniature body collides with mine, I reach out to steady her. She looks up into my eyes and squeals. “Mo! Mo! Up! Up!”

I melt. There’s just no fucking other way to describe it.

Now Mount’s death threats make perfect sense.

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## TWENTY-SEVEN

### MAGNOLIA

**M**oses freezes as he stares down at Rory, who's clapping her hands and demanding to be picked up. I see the charmed expression on his face. It's obvious he didn't realize how fast this child could steal her way into his heart.

The only reason I recognize the look is because I've been there too. I didn't grasp how badly I wanted this for myself until I saw Keira go through all of it. And, of course, Rory ran away with my heart too.

Moses reaches out to carefully lift the princess in the air as she shrieks with glee. The smile spreading across his face is nothing short of beatific.

Then, as if on cue . . . she pukes all over him. In slow motion. I have no idea how so much projectile vomit could come out of such a small body, but it does.

*Oh, how the mighty fall.*

"Shi—oot!" Moses yells, and the door bursts open as V charges inside, his gun drawn. He skids to a halt when he sees what happened and immediately starts backing away, pinching his lips tightly shut to keep from laughing.

"Get someone from the cleaning crew, please," I tell him, and I cover my mouth to hide my own chuckles.

Moses gapes at me, wide-eyed and unbelievably shocked. "I have vomit

in my ear, don't I?" he asks as it drips down his face.

"Yeah. You do. I'll take her, and you can go grab a towel from the bathroom, run back to our suite, and get cleaned up. I'll stay with her."

We trade possession of the adorable puke monster, and Moses heads to her bathroom for a towel. I'm on his heels, carrying Rory.

"What did you eat, angel cake?"

She starts talking in her adorable high-pitched gibberish, and I don't catch any words that would account for the magnitude of the vomit comet I just witnessed.

Moses wipes off his face, and I have to give him credit for not throwing up all over the bathroom when he sees how covered he is.

"Jesus Christ. How is this even possible?" he asks, his voice now a hushed whisper as he stares at me and Rory as I turn on the tub with her smaller baby bath in it.

"Welcome to the wonderful world of toddlers. You still want to do this with me?"

As soon as the question is out, I'm terrified of the answer. Even with the barf bomb, I want a baby so damn bad. If Moses is freaked out by the first sign of hardship, I don't know what I'll do.

But standing there in a pink bathroom, with puke all over his shirt and still dripping from his ear, he smirks playfully. "Yeah, mama. You can bet your sweet ass I want to do it with you."

My heart swells so big, I swear it might explode.

"But next time, you're picking her up," he says.

My laughter chases Moses out of the room, but my heart has never been so full.

When Mount and Keira return a couple of hours later, Mount is the first one

through the door of the nursery. He bypasses me and Moses sitting in two chairs in the corner, playing a silent hand of cards, and goes straight to the crib where Rory is fast asleep. Only once he touches her does the tension in his body drain away.

Mount may be a cold son of a bitch in ninety-nine ways out of a hundred, but there's no doubt in my mind he loves his daughter more than life itself. It's actually refreshing as hell to witness.

Keira hugs us both and waves us out of the nursery so we can talk without waking up her baby girl. As soon as we step into the hallway, she closes the door.

"Lachlan will stand there and watch her sleep all night, if I let him," she says with a shake of her head and a smile on her face. "How did it go?"

My best friend looks from me to Moses and then back again.

"It went great," I tell her. Then I look to Moses, who is freshly showered and clean. "But Rory had a bit of an upset stomach for some reason, and she puked all over Moses. However, she seemed fine right after. No fever. I've checked a few times."

Keira's green eyes go wide as she scans Moses's giant body. "Oh no. She . . . she really has some distance with that mess, doesn't she?"

He chokes on a laugh as Mount joins us in the hallway, shutting the door quietly behind himself.

"What happened?" he demands.

Keira quickly fills him in, and Mount's shoulders stiffen.

"I'll have the doctor come check her out. You should've called him immediately." He shoots a hard look in my direction.

Keira puts a hand on his arm. "Rory doesn't have a fever. She's fine. Just like the doctor has told you every single time we've called him over for something like this. Kids just puke sometimes, Lachlan."

Mount's expression could be carved in granite. "I don't want to take chances—"

“We’re not,” Keira says, leaning into him. “I’ll go in and give her a kiss, and if I have any inkling there’s something wrong, we’ll call him. Deal?”

“Fine,” Mount grunts out.

*He might be ruthless, but that child is lucky as hell to have a daddy who cares about her so much,* I think as Keira disappears inside.

Mount grills Moses about every moment we spent with Rory while they were gone until Keira comes back out.

“She’s absolutely fine. Now, let’s let these two get off to bed. Thank you both so much.” Keira steps toward me and wraps her arms around my neck. “Thank you, babe. I appreciate you.”

I’m pretty sure Mount wants to drag her away from Moses as she does the same with him, but miraculously, he controls the urge that seems to be barely contained beneath the surface.

After we say our good-nights, Moses and I walk hand in hand back to the room where we’ve taken up temporary residence.

Once inside, I strip off my shirt. “My turn for a shower.”

Moses comes up behind me. His big hands curve around my shoulders and his thumbs dig in, massaging the tension out of my achy muscles. It seems to be my new normal, but I melt under his touch.

“God, that feels good,” I murmur as I stretch my neck to one side and then the other.

When I’m utter putty in his hands, he gives me one more squeeze and presses a kiss to the nape of my neck. “Go shower. I’ll set up a game, if you’re down to play.”

I turn in his arms and lean against his solid warmth. “I’m always down for a game with you, Moby. I’ll be right out.”

Less than ten minutes later, I step out of the bathroom wearing only my towel.

Moses is carrying two glasses of amber liquor that I’m sure is Seven Sinners over to the table set for our game.



His vivid green eyes lock on the knot tucked between my breasts, and he licks his lips like a hungry wolf. “On second thought, this should be a game of strip chess. With you wearing just that. Seems fair, considering you’re still that much better than me.”

The devil on my shoulder is completely responsible for my answer. “Do I lose when I drop the towel, or do I get to keep playing?”

Those eyes of his flare with passion, the gold seeming to glow. “Oh, you’d better keep playing.”

I’m walking a thin line, but I’m not scared. “You think you’ll be able to handle it?”

“I can handle anything you’ve got.” He shifts on his feet as if his pants are suddenly less comfortable. “Do your worst.”

I strut over to the table and lift one of the glasses from his hands before I pick my side. “Then game on.”

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## TWENTY-EIGHT

MOSES

**R**ight now, you might say I'm a foolish man, but I don't give one good goddamn about it. Not when I'm staring at my woman's tits while she deliberates over her next move. I'm down to my pants and socks, but it doesn't matter. There's no losing in this game. Not when I'm sitting across from Magnolia, a smile on her face, and my dick jerking every time those luscious tits bounce.

*Life can be so fucking good.*

When she takes my next piece, she smiles at me like a vixen. "Keep stripping, Moby."

"Happily." I reach down to tug off a sock and toss it on the pile beside the table.

"You ready to admit your plan backfired something fierce?" Magnolia asks with a calculated gleam in her eye. "Because you sure can't play for shit when you're staring at my tits."

My lips part, a smile stretching across my face as I shake my head. "Backfired? Depends on what you think winning means to me. Because from where I'm sitting, this is the best idea I've ever had."

Her rich, deep laugh sends her chest bouncing, and I reach for a chess piece at random and move it without looking at the board.

"You're not even trying," she says through her laughter. "You can't even

make that move with a pawn.”

I rise from my chair, take two steps around the table, and scoop her into my arms. “Then we both know who won the game, but I’m winning the whole damn night.”

I carry her out of the living room and into the bedroom, which is dark but for the dim light coming from the lamps on the nightstands. I kick the door shut behind us and walk her over to the bed.

“You’re really calling the *whole* night a win? Complete with baby puke and everything?”

She sounds upbeat, but I hear the undercurrent of concern in Magnolia’s voice. She’s afraid, after Mount and Keira’s kid’s vomiting episode, that I might have second thoughts about doing the whole baby thing. That’s where she’s wrong.

“Mama, there would be no greater privilege in my life than to put a ring on your finger and give you a baby. I’m not changing my mind at the first bump in the road. Kids are a mixed bag of a whole lot of crazy shit, but as long as it’s you and me taking it on together, I’m ready.”

Magnolia’s face softens. “You really mean that.”

I lower my head to touch my forehead to hers. “Damn right I do. And if you give me a baby girl, you better pray for us all, because I’m going to have to stay jacked and ripped as hell so no boy ever looks at her twice. I’ll have to get T-shirts printed with my picture on them saying *That’s My Daddy* so they know what they’re dealing with if they get within twenty feet of her.”

Magnolia’s joyful giggles fill me with things that are both unexpected and welcome. Lightness. Hope. *Peace*.

“You’re crazy, Moby. I seriously hope we have at least one girl, because I love the sound of all that.” She goes quiet for a beat, and her expression takes on a serious cast. “And I love you.”

My heart slams against my chest, and I know my woman can feel it. Her arms tighten around my neck as I let her words sink in, repeating them in my

brain. *I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.*

I've waited so fucking long to hear those words from her, and it takes me a good ten seconds to pull my shit together. My arms constrict around her, and I crush Magnolia to my chest.

"I fucking love you, woman. So goddamned much. I should've come back sooner—"

Magnolia silences my regrets with a shake of her head. "No more agonizing over the past. We're living in the present and only looking forward."

"I don't know what I did to deserve you," I whisper into her ear as I keep her locked against me.

"Does it matter? Because you're stuck with me now."

I lift my head. "Damn right. So this baby-making business . . . from what I hear, it takes a lot of rehearsal to get it *just* right."

"You know, I believe I've heard the same thing."

I lower her the rest of the way to the bed, and neither of us says another word that anyone else could understand for the rest of the night. And when I fall asleep beside my woman, my hand curved around her hip, I'm certain it's all going to work out.

I don't know what the fuck we're going to have to go through to get to the other side, but there's no way in hell I'm going to lose the paradise I've found.

I will fight for this.

For us.

For our future.

Come hell or high water, I'm never letting her go.

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## TWENTY-NINE

### MAGNOLIA

**T**wo more days of playing house at Mount and Keira's, and we still don't have any more answers. At this point, I'm starting to wonder if Trey really is as good as Moses says. Although there's no way I'm going to ask that question. Especially since the asshole who wants me dead has been erased and must know all the tricks for staying off the radar.

Still, it's frustrating as hell. At least, during the day. At night, Moses drives all dread and worry from my head with that big, hard body of his. Good *Lord*, the man has it going on.

And every night, when we fall asleep, he has to be touching me somehow, somewhere. Whether it's his hand on my leg, or me pulled back against his chest, he's always making contact with me. *I love it.*

And speaking of *love*, after we both said those three little words for the first time, they now come out easily.

I've never had this before, and it feels like a revelation.

He loves me.

I love him.

We have a future together—as soon as I'm safe from Antonio Reyes.

Moses is hunkered down with Trey and Jules, chasing another lead, when my phone rings. I check the display and am shocked to see Celeste's name on it. The old woman has *never* called me before. I even forgot we traded

numbers.

Then again, I usually see her at least a few times a week, so she's never *needed* to call me.

I tap the screen to answer. "Hey, Celeste. Everything okay?"

"So you are alive. Mercy me. I was starting to wonder if my gut was steering me wrong."

"I'm alive. I'm . . . dealing with some heavy shit right now. That's why I haven't been around."

"I can sense it. Even though I haven't seen you, I've felt it every day. Been waiting for you to come by so I could see for myself that you were okay, but I got tired of wondering and waiting. That's why I'm calling."

A wave of warmth passes through me from the concern in Celeste's voice. *She truly cares*. I've always thought she did, but now there's no question in my mind.

"It's good to hear your voice, Celeste. I really appreciate you calling. I'm fine. Safe. Just . . . flying under the radar for a bit until we sort some things out."

"That explains the card then." Her rough voice carries a note of something that puts me on edge.

I freeze in my tracks, having been wandering around the suite while we spoke. "What card?"

"I got a powerful urge that I had to draw a card for you, to make sure you were safe, so I did."

A prickle of concern raises the fine hairs along my arms. "What was it?"

"The Hanged Man," Celeste answers quietly.

A beat of silence thrums between us as I attempt to call up the exact meaning of the card from memory, but I don't get that card often and I'm coming up blank. I can only picture the guy hanging upside down from a branch, but not what that symbolizes.

"What does it mean exactly?"

Celeste releases a wheezy breath. “Traditionally, it refers to surrender, sacrifice, or being stuck. He’s not going anywhere while he’s hanging upside down. Then again, some interpretations say he has the ability to get himself out of it too.”

“What does it mean for me, though?” I ask quietly as my mind goes crazy, wondering about the possibilities.

“You said you’re lying low for a while to sort some things out. It *could* mean exactly that. You’re suspended in time because you haven’t yet chosen which direction you’re going.”

“Could?” I need Celeste to clarify, because I’ve got all sorts of uneasy feelings rushing through me now.

“Yes. Could. You know the cards aren’t always clear.”

I swallow and realize my mouth has gone totally dry. “What about the surrender and sacrifice part?”

“Ultimate surrender or self-sacrifice,” she murmurs, like she’s talking to herself and not to me. “What did you get yourself into, Magnolia, that would require you to sacrifice yourself?”

Instantly, the image of the blood-encrusted knife Cavender slid across the table at the police station pops into my head.

“I . . . I told you what I did in the elevator. But what I didn’t tell you is that someone else wants revenge for that now. He wants me to pay. He . . .”

“Oh, child,” Celeste says, her voice calm but radiating concern. “How someone else reacts is not your doing. You didn’t have bad intent. You just protected yourself. Isn’t that right?”

I think of the night in the elevator when Ricardo Ortiz lunged at me, determined to end my life. I didn’t kill him with bad intent. It was him or me. Celeste is right. All I did was protect myself.

I didn’t ask for him to attack me. I didn’t make that choice. I just reacted to it.

Kill or be killed.

“No,” I tell Celeste. “There was no bad intent on my part. I only did what I had to in order to survive.”

“Then take a deep breath and forgive yourself for it. Even if you didn’t realize it, you’re carrying around something that’s drawing more bad things to you, child. You gotta let it go. Forgive and move on.”

“I didn’t realize I was.” Admittedly, the guilt over Desiree floods my mind, but I haven’t given much thought to how I feel about killing Ortiz. It’s not exactly something I want to spend a lot of time thinking about.

“That’s why I felt the need to call you so strongly. You don’t need my permission, Magnolia. You just need to be reminded there are steps you haven’t taken that you need to address. That explains the card too. You’re hanging there, not sure what to do next. Free yourself by forgiving yourself.”

“I can do that,” I say, even though the words get caught in my throat and I have to force them out. I’ll unpack the rest of my emotional baggage when this nightmare is over.

“You can. You’re a strong woman. Only something big and powerful would tie you up in knots. But you’re stronger than that. You can do this. Just be true to yourself, *chère*.”

I swallow again, but the lump in my throat won’t go away. “Thank you, Celeste. I needed to hear that.”

She cackles. “Celeste knows. I’ll leave you be now. Do what you need, get unstuck, and move on.”

“Thank you,” I whisper as the call ends.

I’m left holding my phone in nerveless fingers, wondering how in the hell Celeste knows me so well. I take a few steps toward the bed and drop onto it, saying a silent prayer for forgiveness over taking another’s life.

It never occurred to me to forgive myself for that night, but as soon as I will it so, it feels like a weight has lifted.

Thankful, I say another prayer for Celeste, to keep her safe and healthy.

When I stand, it’s like new purpose flows in my veins. I need forward



movement. No more stagnation. Things need to happen now, because I'm tired of waiting for the answers to come to us. We have to go out and get them.

With that knowledge driving me, I search the compound for Moses. Maybe there's something I can do to help find this asshole so we can all move on with our lives.

It's time.

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## THIRTY

MOSES

**W**hen Magnolia opens the door to what Trey and Jules have dubbed their war room, my lips tug with a smile—until I meet her steely gaze.

“What’s wrong?”

She shakes her head. “Nothing. I’m just . . . I’m ready for this shit to be finished. What do we need to do to draw this guy out? We can’t hide out and wait forever. I’m no coward.”

Magnolia has no idea Trey dug up some new information on our guy, so I’m not sure what’s fueling her words.

“We’re not just hiding out and waiting. We’re finding solid leads so we can end this shit safely,” Trey says. “You’re probably not real impressed with my skills right about now, but I’m fucking good. It’s just that this guy did everything right and stayed off the grid. Whoever he hired to wipe him out didn’t come cheap. At least, now we know why he was so fucking paranoid.”

Magnolia’s attention cuts from me to Trey. “What do you mean? What do we know now?”

I hold out an arm, and without question or hesitation, Magnolia comes to me. “He’s never been in the US legally, and we’re pretty fucking sure he did a stint as a *sicario*.”

She blinks up at me. “What the fuck is a *sicario*?”

“A hit man for a cartel,” Trey says, his tone grim. “But this dude was smart as fuck. He came up with a plan to get out, which doesn’t usually work, but he made it happen when he faked his own death. It was real enough that the cartel he worked for bought it. Not that it was hard for him to do the wet work himself, considering all the bodies he’d have access to.”

My gaze darts to Trey, hoping he understands he’s shared enough. Magnolia is no shrinking violet—if anything, she’s iron strong—but she still doesn’t need Trey to paint a picture of the violence this guy was involved in.

“How will this help us find him?” Magnolia says, asking the million-dollar question.

“Now that we know he’s got a connection to the cartel—and which one—there’s a possibility they’d like him back. We can pull Mount’s connections in and see if they’ll offer assistance.”

Magnolia gapes at me like I’m crazy. “I thought that was too dangerous. Do we really want to go down that road?”

“We’re all ready for this to be over. Aren’t you?” The question comes from Jules, and carries more attitude than it should. If I could reach him, I’d smack him upside the head.

“Hey. *Everyone*. Chill the fuck out. We’re getting stir crazy and we all want this over, but we gotta work with what we have.” I look into Magnolia’s eyes. “I’ll talk it all over with Mount. If we can find a different way, we will. But I’m not letting our lives sit on hold much longer. We’re going to finish this, one way or another, so we can all move on.”

Her lips press together, and she nods. “Okay. Whatever we have to do to make that happen.” She starts to pull away from me as the phone in her hand vibrates.

Magnolia’s attention drops to the screen, and I read the name at the same time she does. *Norma*.

“It’s been one interesting morning so far. Let’s hope this is uneventful.”

As soon as she says that, something twists in the pit of my stomach, but I

have absolutely no idea why. As much as I want to keep my arm wrapped around Magnolia, I let her go so she can step away and answer the call.

Trey's fingers fly over his keyboard as Magnolia greets her great-aunt's caretaker with a smile in her voice.

It doesn't last long, though.

Five seconds after she says hello, Magnolia spins around to stare at me, her expression stricken. "She's . . . she's dead?"

Fresh tears spill from her eyes and streak down her face as I close the distance between us, wrapping my arms around her and pulling her against my chest. The phone tumbles from her grip, but I squat down to grab it and put it on speakerphone.

Norma's voice comes over the line. "I'm so sorry, Magnolia. You two had your issues, but she loved you."

A sob escapes from my woman, and her fingers dig into my shirt. "How?" she asks in a broken whisper.

"We're not sure yet, but knowing your aunt Bernie like I did, she passed in her sleep just like she planned."

I clear my throat and speak up. "Hello, Norma. It's Moses. You're sure it was natural causes? No sign that anyone else has been there or broken in? Nothing disturbed?"

"Oh . . . hello there, Moses. Um . . . no, I didn't see anything out of the ordinary. The house was all locked up tight when I got here. It doesn't look like anyone could've gotten in. Why would you ask that, anyway?"

Magnolia drags a hand over her face to wipe away the tears. "No reason, Norma. He's just thinking of all the possibilities. She was in her bed when you found her?"

"She sure was. She looked just as peaceful as could be. Angelic, almost, if you'd believe that." Norma lets out a gusty laugh. "Not that you probably will. But don't be sad. Bernie was ready. She'd been waiting for her time to be called up. She was tired. I think she really was having strokes, and she

knew it. Something was affecting her, even though she said she was fine. It was her time.”

Magnolia shakes against me, and I wish I could absorb her grief. *Jesus Christ*, this woman has been through too fucking much.

“Th-thank you for saying that. I know she was ready. She said it all the time.”

“Yeah, she did. She was a stubborn soul, so I’m not surprised she got to go out on her own terms before her quality of life suffered too much,” Norma adds.

“Did you . . . did you call someone?” Magnolia asks. “Are they on their way?”

“Yes. I called 9-1-1 first, just like they say to, and then my nephew, he’s with the fire department. Everyone should be here shortly. If you want to see her, though, before they . . .”

Magnolia shakes her head. “I . . . I don’t know if I want to see her like that. I need to remember her spitting fire and telling me everything I’ve done wrong in my life. If it’s all the same to you.”

I squeeze Magnolia tighter as Norma replies.

“Oh, honey. You keep your memories just where they are. Old Norma will handle everything. And just so you know, Bernie sensed it was coming. Just yesterday, she had me find the book with all her requests on the funeral. She changed a hymn and told me to keep it out because I’d be needing it myself soon.”

A tremor ripples through Magnolia’s body, and it takes a second before the quiet chuckle follows. “Of course she did. Controlling it all, to the very end.”

Norma’s voice seems to lighten. “That was old Bernie. Bless her. I’m to give the book to the funeral home and tell them to make a copy for the pastor. She was adamant that she did *not* want a jazz funeral, no matter what you say.”

Magnolia's shoulders shake. "Like I would force that on her."

"You know, honey, I think she secretly hopes you'll do it anyway. She always said it was too much revelry on a somber occasion, but I think it's exactly what an occasion like this calls for. Even if it's just a few of us in attendance."

Magnolia glances up at me. "We'll talk about it. When does she want the funeral?"

"On a Saturday, of all days. So we've got a bit of time being it's only Tuesday. I'll get everything sorted out. You best not worry about a thing because Bernie left everything real clear."

"God love you, Norma. She was so lucky to have you. And so am I."

"God love you too, child. It's been a privilege. Now, I see that nephew of mine coming down the street. He's going to make sure everything goes smoothly for us here. I'll keep you in the loop."

"Thank you, Norma."

The call ends, and Magnolia's phone falls to the carpet again as she wraps her arms around me. Her bones seem to go liquid as she loses her grip.

"I got you, mama. Come on, let's go back to our room."

She doesn't say anything as Jules jumps up and rushes for the door, opening it for us.

When we step into the hallway, Magnolia finds her footing and walks in a straight line, but I'd bet everything I have she's not seeing what's in front of her. She's just going through the motions.

When we turn the corner, I catch sight of Keira's red hair bouncing along her shoulders ahead of us. She turns around, presumably at the sound of footsteps. Her eyes go wide when she spots Magnolia walking rigidly beside me.

"Something wrong?" she asks, immediately locking in on us both.

Magnolia shakes her head. "It's fine. Everything's fine."

That's when I realize her go-to is always *fine*. This woman, who is

stronger than any other human I've ever met, hates showing weakness, even to her closest friends.

But Keira sees right through her. "What happened?" She glances at me, her expression sharp, like she's ready to go to battle for her friend, and she's relying on me for answers or to determine if I'm responsible for Magnolia's current state.

Three beats of silence pass as I let Magnolia find the words. With each moment, Keira stiffens further.

"Bernie passed in her sleep. I just got the call," Magnolia says, her voice steady and unemotional despite the chaos undoubtedly raging inside her.

"Oh, Mags. I'm so freaking sorry." Keira rushes forward to embrace her, whether Magnolia wants it or not.

"Bernie knew it was coming," she says, her voice wavering. "She always knew everything. And of course she wouldn't want a jazz funeral. She wouldn't want anyone to have a reason to be happy on the day she was buried." The pain in Magnolia's voice completely changes the tone and meaning of the words coming out of her mouth.

"Of course she wouldn't," Keira says quietly, rubbing Magnolia on the back. After a few moments, she lifts her head to look at me. "Is there anything I can do to help? The restaurant can cater a lunch. We'll make everything easy for you. Whatever you need."

Magnolia pulls back from the hug. "Norma says Bernie has it all planned. Probably right down to the last detail. She even *got her book out yesterday* and gave it to poor Norma. How the hell could she have known it was the end?"

Keira's head slides back and forth slowly, and Magnolia faces me.

"How could she have known?"

"I don't know, mama. I've never been that age before. But I gotta believe sometimes people just know. Or maybe it really was her trying to control things to the very end. Either way, she was ready. Bernie made that clear."

Magnolia nods twice, and tears well in her beautiful eyes. “I think I want to lie down.”

“Of course,” Keira says with another quick hug. “If you need anything at all, just let me know. We’re all here for you.” She kisses Magnolia on the cheek and pats me on the shoulder. “Take care of her.”

“Yes, ma’am. That’s exactly what I’m going to do. We’ll holler if we need anything.”

I lead Magnolia into the bedroom, and as soon as the door closes behind us, she releases her hold on me and stumbles toward the bed.

“Mama—”

She waves me off, but instead of sitting on the mattress, she drops to her knees beside it, burying her face in the blanket on top. The sound of her weeping all but rips the heart from my chest.

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## THIRTY-ONE

### MAGNOLIA

**M**oses kneels beside me on the carpet and wraps his heavy arm around my shoulders, but I can't look up. Not when I'm falling apart.

Grief, the likes of which I've never felt before, tears through me with its angry claws, shredding my insides to pieces. I'm afraid to open my eyes, because I've never experienced this kind of pain before without being broken and bleeding.

I don't want him to see how shattered I am right now.

*Goddamn you, Bernie. Goddamn you. You knew it was the end, and you didn't hold me close and tell me you loved me. You didn't tell me you were sorry for throwing me out of your house when I was sixteen. Goddamn you for leaving me. You were the only family I had left. Damn it, I mattered to you, but you never gave me the words, and I didn't know, until this moment, how badly I needed them.*

My sobs, pitiful sobs, fill the air, and Moses holds me closer, anchoring me to his strength.

*Goddamn you, Bernie. I loved you so much, and I didn't tell you either. Why didn't we just get over our stupid pride and tell each other all the things that really mattered?*

"I'm here, mama. Cry it out. I got you," Moses whispers in my ear as he

rocks me back and forth.

“She didn’t ever s-say she was sorry.” I manage to get the words out, punctuated only with a few hiccups. “She put me on the street when I was sixteen, and . . . and she never told me she regretted it.”

“Oh, baby. No. You know that woman lived with regret every single day of her whole fucking life about it. You know she did. She had to. She loved you. You know it deep down.”

I shake my head, blinking the tears out of my eyes so I can see his face. “She never said it, though. I didn’t know I was waiting for it. I didn’t know I needed it. But now I’ll never get it.”

Moses crushes me to him with an embrace that holds me together. “You felt it. She felt it. That’s why she didn’t have to say it. She knew you knew.”

My tears soak his shirt as gut-wrenching wails take over. *I did feel it. I believe she regretted it too. But I still wanted to hear her admit it.*

I lose track of how long we’re on our knees, but when my tears finally dry, Moses is still wrapped around me, keeping me from splintering apart.

I rise, and he comes along, sitting beside me on the bed. I gaze into his green-gold eyes. “She was the only family I had left, and now she’s gone.”

The tears burning behind my eyes don’t spill over this time, but I feel them there all the same. Taunting me. Telling me I’m not strong enough to get through all of this at once. Telling me the grief will win if I let it.

“You’ve got family, mama. Right here. I’m with you to the end. You and I are ride or die. And my boys are your family too, if you want ’em. They’ll drive you fucking nuts, but they’re here for you. And Keira, she fucking loves you like a sister. You have family. Doesn’t matter if they don’t share blood. In the end, blood doesn’t make you closer. It’s about who you love and who loves you back.”

I blink back wetness again as I think about what he said. About who loves me and who I love.

“I love you,” I blurt out, not sure why, but I have to say it that very

second.

“I know you do, mama. And I love you so goddamned much. We’ll get through this together. First one minute. Then one hour. And then one day at a time.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose, my head pounding like twin drums. “I just can’t believe she’s gone. I swear, she lived to disapprove of everything I’ve ever said or done.”

“She wouldn’t have disapproved if she didn’t care,” Moses says with a small smile.

I think of all the arguments Bernie and I had over the years. If that’s any indication, then she cared a whole hell of a lot.

“I’m going to miss that old bat something fierce. There are days I would’ve sworn it wasn’t true. But, goddamn it, I loved to rile her up. God, I’m going to miss that too.”

Moses pulls me closer and lifts me up to sit across his lap, with his arms holding me tight. “Of course you will. But I’m pretty damn sure it wouldn’t have mattered when this happened. It would have always been too soon. That’s just how it works.”

I lay my cheek against his chest and let him hold me while I soak up his warmth and strength. “You learn all that from losing your grand-mère?”

Moses sweeps the hair away from my face and tucks it behind my ear. “Yeah, that taught me a hell of a lot, even if I didn’t go the right way with life after she passed. It’s been a long damn time since I had blood family in my life. Which is why I know the family you make for yourself is just as important, because that’s all I’ve got left.”

I peek up at him as he swipes his fingers across my cheeks once more to clear away the tears. “I’m so sorry you lost her, but I’m really glad you found a new family too. I don’t know what I’d do without you right now.”

A ghost of a smile touches his lips. Just enough to give me hope that this dark, oily emotion churning in the pit of my stomach and leaking into my

chest won't last forever. Because right now, the hold it has on me feels stronger than anything I've ever felt before.

“We'll make it through this together, mama. I got you. I'll hold you together, no matter what.”

And we stay like that, me on Moses's lap, his arms around me, until I fall asleep.

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## THIRTY-TWO

### MAGNOLIA

**T**he morning of Bernie's funeral dawns gray and cloudy, with a drizzle of rain that she probably requested specifically from the Big Man upstairs. Bernie would totally do that kind of thing. She was old school about mourning, and would definitely want us to be reminded that today is a solemn occasion, not one for celebration.

What surprises me more than anything is the four SUVs waiting at the curb when we go out, all dressed in black, to head to the graveside service.

Moses notices my hesitation. "Mount and I discussed security. There's a damn good possibility Reyes knows about the funeral, and I'm not taking any chances with you. We came up with a plan that gets you there and back safely. If Reyes tries to come at us, we'll take him down."

My mind hasn't been on Reyes or our less-than-ideal situation all week. In all honesty, nothing has been on my mind but the weight of my grief and regrets.

I've slept, cried, spent time with Keira and Rory, made love with Moses, played chess, and just tried to get through each day. I haven't even talked to my girls—but Moses and the guys have handled everything, explaining the delay in their safe return, and promising to help them get back on their feet once everything dies down.

I've let every ball I've been juggling fall, but instead of shattering, Moses

has been there to catch and handle even the biggest responsibilities. He's an amazing man, and I don't know what I'd do without him.

I think of the lie he didn't want to admit to telling me. The lie our entire relationship was based on. *I was right*, I think. Because one lie that didn't hurt anyone doesn't matter when compared to hundreds of his actions, proving exactly who he is at the heart of it all.

And now, he and Mount have arranged everything so I can actually go to Bernie's funeral without looking over my shoulder every five seconds for a man who wants me dead—when I didn't think about making sure I stayed safe at all.

"Thank you," I whisper to him as he helps me into one of the SUVs.

Jules and Trey are in the one behind us. Mount and Keira are in the one in front of us. I don't know who is in the lead car, but it doesn't matter. My *family* is coming along to stand by my side while I say good-bye to someone who mattered to me. It feels good knowing people care enough about me to do that.

All week, I've grappled with the fact that I'm never going to hear Bernie say those words I wanted to hear, and I think I'm starting to finally make my peace with it. But, God, it's hard to let go of something you needed from someone you'll never see again.

I take a slow breath, careful not to let the tears start rolling again. I haven't cried as much in my entire life as I have this week. I guess I've never had the luxury. But grief is ruthless and sneaks up when I least expect it, taking me by surprise in vicious waves. My only hope for today is to get through this and give Bernie a proper good-bye.

Thirty minutes later, the vehicle slows to a halt behind the one in front of us, and the driver shifts into park.

"Whenever you're ready, mama. We've got a few minutes before we need to get out."

I peer out the window at the marble buildings of the funeral home and

cemetery, and take a deep breath. *I can do this.* “I’m ready. Let’s not keep Bernie waiting. She hated that.”

Moses gives me a sympathetic smile and opens the door. He climbs out, then offers me his arm. With my head held high, we march toward the entrance together.

Keira and Mount are ahead of us, waiting near the door, flanked by four men in suits who I’ve never seen before. Trey and Jules come up behind us, and the six of us walk inside to meet Norma and her nephew.

As soon as I’ve said my hello to him and thanked him for helping his aunt earlier this week, Norma holds out her arms, and the tears I’ve been holding at bay scald my raw eyes.

“Oh, child. So good to see you,” she whispers as she wraps her wiry arms around me. “You don’t need to weep for ol’ Bernie. She wouldn’t want your tears. You know better than that.”

I snuffle them back because Norma is undoubtedly right. “I can’t seem to stop them lately,” I say, shaking my head as I dab at the corners of my eyes with a tissue.

Norma clasps my shoulders with her palms. “Because you’re a good woman, Magnolia Marie. Anytime you need a reminder of that, you just call Norma. I may not be good for much else at this age, but at least I’m good for that.”

I throw my arms around her and squeeze her tight. “Thank you so much for everything you did for her. You were truly the only person she liked.”

Norma’s laugh comes out like a cackle. “That’s where she had everyone fooled. Bernie cared too much about too many people. Left her feeling stripped bare after a spell, so she covered it all up best she could with a streak of contrariness.”

I release her from the embrace and jerk my head back in shock. “I don’t believe that for a second.”

Norma smiles and reaches into her pocket. “This might help. The pastor

found it in the book I gave him on the funeral service. Bernie must have stashed it in there.”

I study the envelope in her hand. My name is written in Bernie’s precise script. Part of me is terrified of what might be in it, but the other part is hoping against hope her words will give me comfort.

Norma must read the indecision on my face. “Read it when you’re ready. It’s not going anywhere.” Then her attention lifts above my head. “It’s good to see you too, sir.”

The warmth of Moses’s presence behind me is a comfort as he reaches out a hand to shake Norma’s.

“It’s a pleasure to see you again, ma’am. Thank you so much for everything you’ve done. We appreciate it more than you know.”

Her smile is just as bright as ever. “It was Bernie’s specific request that I handle it so the burden wouldn’t fall on Magnolia. She never wanted to be a burden.”

As she says the words, the letter practically scorches my hand. I want to open it right then, but I don’t want to break down in front of everyone, so I slip it into my purse.

“Mags?”

A familiar voice comes from behind us, and security steps forward to block her before Keira waves them back.

“Temperance? How did you . . .” I glance from her to Keira, who has to be the reason she’s here.

“Keira told me. Kane couldn’t make it, but I wanted to be here for you.”

Another hug has me fighting to choke back my emotions. “Thank you for coming.”

“Of course.”

She squeezes me hard until Mount taps Moses on the shoulder, and we hear him say, “Time to get things rolling.”

We separate, and I kiss her on the cheek. I’ve always liked the girl, and



couldn't be more thrilled she finally found her path to being happy.

Moses takes my arm and leads me toward the small area where the pastor waits to perform the service. As soon as we're all in place, he begins. Even though I should be paying attention, my mind is on the note in my purse.

*What did you want to say to me, Bernie? Why couldn't you say it while you were still here? If you decided to give me one last dressing-down in this letter, I swear I'm going to burn it.*

A chuckle almost escapes from my lips as I think about Bernie sending down a lightning bolt in my direction for the very thought. But she doesn't. The pastor begins to sing a hymn, and a few voices from the crowd, most notably Norma's, join in, making it carry far beyond the marble walls surrounding us.

When the short service is done and the last blessing is said, I move forward to shake his hand.

"Thank you, Pastor. Bernie would've been very pleased."

Much to my surprise, he chuckles. "I don't know about all that. I'm sure she would've said I was off-key in that last hymn, but we can hope I did her justice."

As Moses's arm tightens around my shoulders, I smile. "I didn't notice at all. It was beautiful. Besides, Bernie would've been thrilled because I didn't turn this into a jazz funeral. We truly appreciate everything."

"Oh, so the brass quartet I saw walking up just a minute ago isn't for Bernie?" he asks.

I spin around and spot the men standing with their instruments. Norma grins as she walks away from them and toward us and the pastor.

"Norma . . . what did you do?"

The older woman's smirk widens into a grin. "She can't tell me no, now. It's just one song. I think we could all use some joy in our hearts today."

Moses pulls me back against his chest as they start off with a dirge that turns upbeat as we follow them through the cemetery. By the time they finish

that one *very long* song, everyone in the cemetery is clapping their hands and praising Jesus.

Including one person I do *not* want to see at all, especially here and now.

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## THIRTY-THREE

MAGNOLIA

I stiffen as the brass players lower their instruments, and instantly, Moses is on guard.

“What? What is it?”

I turn slightly and gesture toward the men. “Cavender’s here. And the guy with him . . . I’ve seen him before. Who the hell is he?”

Moses scans the cemetery, and I see the exact moment he spots the cop next to a tall blond guy who doesn’t fit the mold of NOPD at all. Too fit and good looking.

“Where’d you see him before? Tailing you?”

I shake my head. “No. But . . . I swear I recognize him from somewhere . . .” I pause as it hits me, and I spin to face Moses completely. I don’t need them seeing the shock on my face. “In the Quarter. By my new house. He said he was a new neighbor. Needed direction to a café. He’s a cop too, isn’t he?”

Moses looks over my shoulder at where they’re standing, positioning themselves between us and the SUVs. “Whatever Cavender is after, he must be really sure of himself to show up here.”

“We can’t avoid him, can we?” I ask, hoping like hell Moses will say we absolutely can avoid them, but knowing he won’t.

“As much as I’d love to tell you yes and that you don’t have to talk to that

asshole ever again, we probably don't have a choice."

"Problem?" Mount stops next to us, and instead of looking at me, he follows Moses's stare to the two men.

"Not a problem. Annoying inconvenience is all," Moses says in reply.

Mount's attention flickers from one man to the other. "Cops. I'll have security escort them out. This is private property."

A voice pops into my head, and I swear Ho-It-All is channeling Bernie herself. "*No scenes at my funeral, Magnolia. You don't have a reason to be running from the law, do you?*"

It's probably a good thing she isn't here to hear me answer the question with a big fat *yes*. Because I killed a man while defending myself. Because his brother is after me. Because the cop would like nothing more than to pin that and a few other murders on me.

"*Then you should've told the truth up front,*" the ghost of Bernie argues.

"We can have the cars pick us up at the other entrance," Moses says. "There's no reason we need to do this today."

"No. Let's get it over with. I don't want him to assume I'm running from him. It'll only make me appear guilty. And I sure as hell want to know who the other guy is, and how the hell he knew to be snooping around my new house."

"That's your choice then. Keira and I will be in the car," Mount says before sweeping my best friend away.

We watch them both walk right by the cop, and Cavender stares at Mount like he'd love to be the one to put him away. But Mount's untouchable, even for Cavender.

Me, not so much.

Cavender looks cockier with each step we take toward him and the blond guy. *All-American*. That's what I nicknamed him that day. What the hell is he doing here?

"Mr. Gaspard. Ms. Maison. You two are remarkably hard to track down

lately.”

“You realize we’re here for a funeral, right?” Moses asks with unveiled irritation. “A solemn occasion.”

Cavender shrugs. “You don’t return my calls, and neither of you seem to be anywhere we look. So I had to do what I had to do.” He stares at me. “Our sympathies for the loss of your great-aunt, Ms. Maison.”

“Who the hell are you?” I ask the blond guy. “Because you’re not here looking for directions to another café, are you?”

“Agent Pomeroy. FBI.” He pulls his credentials from his pocket and flips them open.

*FBI. Jesus Christ. The Feds were watching me too?*

Even though my brain is going crazy, I manage to keep my expression passive. It doesn’t hurt that I’ve cried out all the feelings in me, leaving nothing but emptiness behind for this encounter.

“What the hell does the FBI want?” Moses asks.

Cavender smiles triumphantly, and I swear I wouldn’t stop if I accidentally ran the man over in a parking lot right now. *So sue me.*

“Well, we’ve been working with the Bureau on some overlapping areas of interest. Specifically, Desiree Harding’s murder, the death of another female, and the murder of the man in Ms. Maison’s former residence. Who, by the way, we seem to be having trouble identifying conclusively. A whole lot of things aren’t adding up.”

“In her residence? I think you mean in Magnolia’s former condo building, where dozens of other people live as well,” Moses says, correcting the cop.

“You’re right,” Cavender says, tilting his head to the side. “But, funny thing . . . we’ve got reason to believe at least two of those murders I mentioned are connected, maybe even all three. Our friends at the Bureau are lending their resources so we can gather the evidence to prove it.”

“Connected?” The word comes out before I can stop myself from speaking.

Cavender nods. “Yeah. Same or similar murder weapon. For all we know, this could be a case of a serial killer.”

My mouth drops open in shock.

Three murders. All the same or similar weapons. If someone else were telling me a story like this, I’d think serial killer too.

He’s at least partially right. Desiree and I had matching knives. I used one in the elevator and Reyes used the other on her. But I have no idea how they’re connecting the third murder, who I have to assume was Laura Brandon. Except Reyes slit her throat . . . which means she was killed with a knife too. *Hell.*

“You look awfully surprised by that, Ms. Maison,” Agent Pomeroy says.

My attention cuts to him. “Yeah, that’s surprising and alarming news to me. And I’m unsure what about it made you feel like you had to come tell me on the day I’m laying my great-aunt to rest. *At her funeral.*”

Pomeroy, at least, looks slightly abashed by my statement.

Cavender, it seems, couldn’t care less. “If you were easier to find, we wouldn’t have had to hunt you down here. Now, we’d like you to come back to the station to answer some questions for us—”

“Are you fucking kidding me, man?” Moses cuts him off. “What the fuck is wrong with you? She just said good-bye to her last living relative, and you want her to come down to the station. *Again?* No fucking way. You can wait until tomorrow or the day after, when she’s had some time to grieve. You hear me?”

“You’d better be careful how you talk to me, Mr. Gaspard. I’ve been digging into you, and I’ve gotta say, I don’t think everything in your background adds up either. I’m reaching out to some friends in other departments for a more thorough check.”

“Search away, Cavender. Go for it. But we’re done here.” Moses locks his arm around me and starts marching me around the two men.

“Ms. Maison?” Pomeroy calls, and we pause.

Slowly, I peek over my shoulder. “What?”

“If you fail to cooperate with Detective Cavender, the FBI would be more than happy to question you ourselves. I have quick access to a federal warrant, if you make this difficult.”

I have the urge to flip him off, but Moses’s touch on my arm stops me.

“Contact her lawyer. Cavender has the number,” he says as we turn and walk straight to the SUV.

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## THIRTY-FOUR

MOSES

**R**age thunders through my veins while Magnolia grips my arm as we walk to the car.

*How fucking dare they show up at a goddamn funeral to get to her?* I could tear them both limb from limb for causing her another moment of pain on this already fucking hard day.

I grit my teeth as I open the door and help her inside. *This is why you have a plan B already in place*, I remind myself. *Because I'm not letting them get to her. I don't give a fuck what their badges say.*

As soon as the driver closes the door to the car, I reach out to take Magnolia's hand and cover it with mine.

"You hanging in there, mama?"

She faces me, her whiskey eyes flaming with fire but also doused with sadness. "I'm surprised Bernie didn't assault them with lightning from the heavens," she says as she lifts her chin and inhales sharply. She's trying to pull herself together, and I hate that she has to fight to do it beside me.

"Hey, it's all right to cry. It's okay to be pissed. You feel whatever you need to feel right now. Don't worry about them. I'll handle everything. I fucking promise."

Her fingers tighten around my hand. I know she hears me, but Magnolia has depended on herself for so long that it takes work for her to trust me—no



matter how much she loves me.

She bobs her head and swallows, glancing out her window as we pull out into traffic. The rain has cleared away, and the sun is fighting to break through the clouds.

I say a prayer for Magnolia's great-aunt Bernie and hope the sunlight is a sign from her that she's made it where she needs to go and is watching over my woman. Because no matter what Magnolia thinks, I witnessed something in that house. Sure, I saw a crotchety old woman with lots of regrets, especially for the pain she caused, but I also observed one who *loved*.

It might be rolling the dice, but I think Magnolia needs to open the letter. She needs to hear what Bernie had to say to her. I just hope I'm not wrong.

"You got that note Norma gave you?"

Magnolia's chin jerks toward me as she palms her purse. "Yeah. Right in here."

"I'm not saying you should read it right now, but . . . maybe it'll give you something you're missing today."

Magnolia presses her lips together and bites the corner of her mouth. "Yeah. I mean, if it's what Bernie had to say to me, then I guess . . ." She pauses for a moment and takes a deep breath before slipping a hand into her purse, but as she searches for the letter, I hear the telltale vibration coming from her phone.

Magnolia rolls her eyes and retrieves her cell instead of what she started to do.

As soon as she looks at the screen, all color fades from her face.

Instantly, I'm on alert. "What's wrong?"

Magnolia's lower lip drops and fear fills her eyes as she turns the phone screen to face me. I read the name on the display.

*Desiree.*

"What the ever-loving fuck?"

Tears fill Magnolia's swollen eyes. "How is this possible? She's . . . Who

the fuck is playing a sick joke—”

Thoughts rip through my head, facts and conclusions snapping together to complete the pattern.

*Holy. Fuck.*

“Answer it,” I tell her. “On speaker.”

“What? Why?” She blinks and terror turns her movements jerky as she shifts in her seat, nearly dropping the phone. Then her eyes go wide as she realizes what I’m thinking. “Oh my God. It’s *him*. Isn’t it?”

I take the phone from her and tap the screen to take the call before it stops ringing.

“What do you want?” I demand.

“You already know what I want,” a rough voice replies. His words carry a hint of an accent.

My mind goes to exactly what he’s after—an eye for an eye. A life for a life. But there’s no fucking way that’s going to happen.

I play dumb instead. “You’ll have to fill me in here then.”

“Are you that stupid? I *want* my brother back from the dead, but since that won’t happen, I want the woman.”

“No.”

“Oh, you think not?”

And that’s when both Magnolia and I hear a sound that changes everything.

A baby crying.

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## THIRTY-FIVE

MAGNOLIA

**M**y heart freezes into a block of ice. Stone cold.  
*Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God.*  
One possibility races through my brain, but it's not possible.  
There's no fucking way. It couldn't be. Not a chance in hell.

But my certainty fades with every passing second as the cries turn to whimpers.

*Oh my God.*

*No.*

I beg the heavens for it not to be so.

As my mind protests what my heart already fears most, the man on the other end of the call laughs, and it's the most evil sound I've ever heard.

"I have something that your powerful friends will want back very badly. And I have no problem at all sending a piece of her for every hour my instructions are not followed."

"You son of a bitch!" I explode, unable to stay silent for another moment while he talks about maiming Aurora, because there's no other baby he could have possibly taken that would get him what he wants.

"Ah, there she is. *Put a*. I'm going to fillet you like I did your friend. But I will make it go much slower for you. Let you bleed out like you did my brother."

“You’re never getting your fucking hands on her,” Moses bites out, and I’m certain he believes what he’s saying.

But he’s wrong.

*A life for a life.*

Not mine for his brother’s.

Mine for Rory’s.

Because that sweet baby girl is innocent. She hasn’t even had a chance to live, and I won’t let some madman with a vendetta stain one moment of her life longer than it takes to get her back to her parents.

“You really think the infamous king of New Orleans will pick a whore over his own flesh and blood? Say good-bye to your woman, because he will deliver her to me in a second to get his child back. You know it, and I know it. I believe this is what you call *checkmate*.”

My throat is rough and raw, but somehow I manage to get the words out. “Where and when?” My voice breaks, and I’m not proud of it, but who walks to the gallows with a spring in their step?

*God*, not even the gallows. That would be a mercy compared to what this man will do to me.

Moses reaches out to grip my arm and shakes me with a look of rage on his face. I can read his thoughts in his eyes.

*Over my dead body. You are not making this trade.*

“Ah . . . so whores have honor too? That is a new lesson for me. I thought you were just a faithless bitch, but it doesn’t make a difference. Bring yourself, and I won’t”—he’s almost singing his vile words over the phone line—“chop off her precious, perfect pinky. They’re so little. But she doesn’t need ten fingers. She’ll only scream for a few hours when it’s gone.”

“*Where and when?*” This time I put force behind my voice, even as Moses looks like he wants to strangle me himself.

“The far end of the French Market, near Esplanade, at noon. You have forty minutes. Bring her mother. Walk the stalls. She finds the baby, and I

find you. If you try anything, I'll kill all three of you before the men in your life have a chance to stop me. Do not doubt that I will. I have no problem dealing out death."

"You sick fucking bastard." Moses's words are forced out through clenched teeth.

"Oh, I feel your rage, but it is out of your control now. Mr. Mount will hand the whore over to me, gift wrapped with a bow, and we all know it." He pauses, almost as if to give his words more effect. "Besides, would you really sacrifice a child? Because as you have seen, my blade is sharp and always ready. I'm not afraid to use it on the little girl. I don't like children anyway."

"Don't you fucking hurt her. I'll come, but don't you fucking dare hurt a hair on that girl's head. Do whatever you want to me, but she's innocent."

He tsk-tsks into the speaker. "She's a whore in the making. Don't be late. I enjoy spilling blood, and patience is not my virtue."

The call ends, and Moses and I stare at each other in the cabin of the car.

The driver speaks first. "Jesus fucking Christ. I'm calling Mount now. He needs to know. Good fucking God, this city is going to burn if he doesn't get his kid back. *Jesus fucking Christ.*"

Moses pulls out his own phone. "I've got it. You drive. We have no fucking time to waste. Get us back to Mount's, and then we'll go find the baby."

## THIRTY-SIX

### MOUNT

**T**he coppery scent of blood hits my nostrils first, and every single one of my senses goes on alert. Something isn't right. Every fiber of my body can attest to that.

I grab Keira and move her behind me, pushing her toward P, our driver. "Drop anyone you don't recognize. Keep her safe, or I'll kill you."

"Lachlan?" My wife says only two syllables, but I feel fear in each of them.

I spin and cup the side of her face. "I love you. Now stay here."

"What—" Keira cuts off her question because she knows better than to voice it. Our life is not without peril, but I haven't put her in danger in a long fucking time, and I'm not about to start now.

With the grip of my gun resting comfortably in my palm, I stalk down the hallway, determined to find out who the hell would dare breach my sanctuary. Who would be so fucking stupid and reckless.

They will die today.

When I round the corner, I immediately spot a blood trail and a body. A shaft of rage and loss pierces my heart like a jagged stake.

V. My brother in arms and second-in-command.

I drop to one knee beside him and the red pooling beneath him, forcing myself not to react.

*Find. Kill.* Those are the only two thoughts in my head as I confirm there's no pulse.

Not that I was expecting one with the number of holes in his chest and the amount of blood soaked into the carpet.

"I'm sorry, brother." With my fingers, I close his eyelids and keep moving. Four more bodies lead me like fucked-up bread crumbs to the one room that should never see anything but love.

A sledgehammer thunders in my chest where my heart should be, despite my iron-clad control, as I reach for the door handle that's smeared with blood.

Everything goes quiet, and I prepare for the worst.

Pain tears through me as I twist the knob and burst inside.

*I will burn this city to the ground. I will—*

My mind goes blank as I take in the scene in Rory's pink bedroom. Bethany, her nanny, lies motionless on the floor, her head twisted to an awkward angle. I charge to the crib, but it's empty.

I search the room for any sign of my baby girl, but there's nothing.

Her nanny's dead, and my baby is gone.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

## THIRTY-SEVEN

KEIRA

**M**y phone vibrates in my purse as I hear Lachlan's roar. It's fueled by an unholy rage that fills my heart with terror. The most horrendous fear that could ever strike a parent's soul takes hold of me.

"Where's my baby?" I scream as I charge down the hall, uncaring about the hands trying to hold me back. I don't give a fuck if they rip my arms from my body. I just need my baby.

When I turn the corner, I stumble to a halt as my stomach revolts at the sight and smell of death.

*Scar.* My friend. My quiet confidant.

"Lachlan!" I scream with all the force inside me, but I'm already stumbling drunkenly toward the next lifeless body.

It's like something out of a horror movie. So much blood and death. Dread chases me with every breath I'm scared to take.

"Rory!" I scream again, this time praying I'm not going to find what I fear most. My mind is filled with visions I will never recover from if they come true.

I see the blood on her door, and then I see Lachlan's ashen face.

I freeze in my tracks. All the blood drains from my limbs at the stricken horror etched on my husband's face.



“Oh God. Oh God.” Tears flood down my cheeks as my voice turns ragged and sobs are wrenched from the very depths of my soul. “Where is she? Where’s my baby? Is she—”

I can’t even get the word out.

My baby can’t be dead. *My baby can’t be dead.*

Lachlan rushes toward me and grips both my arms. His fingers are like iron manacles jerking me to a halt.

“Where is she?” I ask, but really, I’m begging for her to come back.

My heart stops when he finally speaks in a tortured tone I’ve never heard from his lips.

“She’s *gone.*”

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## THIRTY-EIGHT

MAGNOLIA

“Why aren’t they picking up?” Panic has set in as all of us try to reach Mount and Keira to relay the horrific news.

“Answer the fucking call, man!” Moses shouts at his phone as he tries Mount again.

“Come on, Keira! Pick up!” I shake my cell, like somehow that’s going to make her respond. Not that I have any fucking idea how to tell her that a bloodthirsty madman who wants me dead went after her helpless, innocent child instead. Tears spill down my cheeks in another wave of unrelenting guilt.

God, if it’s possible to regret an entire life, I’m doing it now.

Nothing—not grief, not love, not hate—could bring these emotions out of me. Nothing makes you realize every single way you’ve ever failed like an innocent suffering for your sins.

I try the call again, praying Keira’s going to pick up as much as I’m dreading the pain I’m going to cause.

And then it hits me.

I turn to Moses, who’s vibrating with unleashed fury beside me. “What if they already know? Oh my God! What if they’re already home?”

The driver punches it, laying on the horn as he blows through a red light. I grab the seat in front of me as he floors it through the crowded streets of the

French Quarter, pedestrians darting out of the way.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” Moses punches at his screen again, trying Mount, and finally . . . he picks up.

“Unless you know where my baby girl is, you’d better stop fucking calling me,” Mount says in the coldest, scariest tone I’ve ever heard.

Chills skitter across every inch of my body as I feel the pain and fear underlying his every word.

“Reyes has her. We’re going to get her back. Noon. The French Market. Far end near Esplanade. He wants to make a trade for Magnolia.”

The roar that comes through the phone turns my bowels to liquid.

Reyes was right. Mount will turn me over in a heartbeat to save his baby girl. Hell, if we all survive this, he might kill me anyway for even putting her in danger.

I wouldn’t blame him one single bit. Hell, I’d hand him the loaded gun myself.

“We’re coming to you,” Moses says, cutting through the terrifying silence that followed the pained roar. “Everyone’s getting out alive today but Reyes, and if you say that you don’t give a damn what happens to Magnolia, I’ll kill you myself before I save them both. You hear me, Mount? We play this *my way*.”

I stare at Moses, shock searing through me as his words penetrate. The threats he just made. The ultimatum he just laid down. *He just threatened to kill Mount for me.*

“Fuck you, Gaspard. This is my daughter we’re talking about here!”

“And we’re getting her back. No one is dying today but Reyes. You have my word.”

Several beats of silence pass, and no one in the SUV breathes. We’re all waiting for judgment to be handed down. Whatever Mount says next will change the course of our lives. Hell, it’ll change this city if he decides to bathe the streets in blood.

He's done it before, and that was over Keira.

*No one* will survive if something happens to Rory.

"You try to stop me from getting my kid back, and your life is forfeit, Gaspard."

"We'll get her back, but I won't hand Magnolia over to a madman who will butcher her. Promise me right now, on your wife's life, that you'll fucking work with me, or I don't bring Magnolia back to you. Understand me? He wants her, and you *know* I can make her disappear. Neither of you will *ever* find her again."

"Stop it! Both of you!"

Keira's voice comes over the phone next, and shame eats through me like battery acid from the pain I hear in her ragged words.

"I'm so sorry, Ke-ke. I didn't think— I would've never come to you— Oh my God, I'm so sorry." Sobs rip from my throat, and all I want to do is hit my knees and pray, because I'm not strong enough to handle this by myself.

"You come back, and we'll work it out. My baby will come home, and no one is killing my best friend. Period. You hear me, goddamn it?"

Like a fucking empress, Keira tells us all exactly how it's going to go. A flicker of hope ignites in my soul that I didn't just ruin the lives of the people who matter most to me.

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## THIRTY-NINE

MOSES

**W**e have no fucking time to waste, but I still walk into the lion's den with caution. Mount is a wild card right now—rightly so—and as much as I don't want to kill the man, I will do what I have to do to save that little girl *and* Magnolia.

I didn't just get her back to lose her all over again. Even though I understand exactly where Mount's coming from.

With Magnolia's hand clasped in mine, I'm one hundred percent certain she'll give herself up to Reyes to save Rory. *I know it* down to the depths of my soul. She would never choose to live if it meant that baby lost her life or endured a single bit of pain on her account.

But I'm not letting any of it happen today.

No fucking way.

Footsteps pound up the pavement from behind us as we walk into the door from the garage. I whip around, my gun in hand, ready for anything, but relax when I see Trey and Jules.

“On the way back from the funeral, our driver said Mount's kid was kidnapped. Is that for fucking real?” Jules asks, looking from me to Magnolia with wild eyes.

“Yeah, it's for real. Come on. We don't have time. We gotta get a strategy together. We have barely thirty minutes before we gotta go.”

“It was Reyes?” Trey asks.

My head dips once.

“Fuck. He wants Magnolia bad,” Jules says with a shake of his head. “We can’t go in there. Mount will serve her up to get that kid back. No fucking way this ends well.”

“You try to run and you all fucking die,” Mount’s voice bellows from the darkness ahead of us. “Get in here before I end you all where you stand for bringing this to my door!”

“Stop it!” Keira says, tears coating the steel in her voice as the light flips on. “There are enough people we already have to bury after today. We’re not adding any more bodies to the count. Everyone in. We’re getting our baby girl back, and no one else is dying. Goddamn it, don’t make me say it again.”

“I’m so sorry, Keira.” Magnolia rushes her friend, wrapping her arms around her as she sobs. “I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. I’ll go. I’ll go. I won’t let anything happen to her. I swear. This is my penance. I’ll pay for my sins. Rory is coming home to you. I swear it.”

My heart cracks right down the middle to hear the despair and finality in Magnolia’s wrecked voice, but it doesn’t make a single dent in the stony expression on Mount’s face.

“We doing this my way? Or are we having it out right here?” I ask him, my finger resting alongside the trigger of my gun.

His fingers twitch, telling me he’s thinking about going for his piece too. We could all die right now. But I can read people. And this man wants to see his baby girl grow up, get married, and have babies of her own.

Mount releases a long breath. “We’re doing this the way that keeps the most people alive as possible. But if anything goes sideways, Rory is the only thing that I care about.”

Keira shoots him a glare as she rocks back and forth, holding on to Magnolia, but it doesn’t matter.

“I’ll take it,” I tell him with a sharp nod. “Now, he said Keira comes with

Magnolia—”

“Over my dead fucking body,” Mount bites out, interrupting me.

“That’s what he said. You want to call him back on the phone he took from a woman he filleted? You want to tell him it’s not going his way when he’s got a knife near your baby girl? When he’s already threatened that if we’re late, or don’t follow his rules, he’s going to start sending pieces of her to show he’s serious?”

If there was murderous rage on Mount’s face before, I don’t know what the fuck this expression is, but I’m surprised we’re not all dead from the sheer force behind it. Mount swings around and punches through the nearest plaster wall.

“Lachlan! I’m going! So help me God, he’s not cutting my baby!”

Mount spins back around, blood dripping from his knuckles. His jaw shifts from side to side. “What else did that dead motherfucker say?”

“They go to the far end of the market, near Esplanade. They walk the stalls. Keira finds Rory, and he finds Magnolia and takes her.”

“He ain’t getting out of there with her,” Jules says, incredulous. “How the fuck does he really think he’s getting away with her? Not a chance. We can do this.”

Mount doesn’t even bother to look at him as he speaks. “He has a plan. We need a better one.”

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## FORTY

### MAGNOLIA

“You know what to do? You got this?” Moses clasps my face between his hands as I stare into those brilliant green-gold eyes.

“I know what to do. I’ve got it,” I repeat back to him.

“And you know you’re coming back to me, and we’re gonna live an amazing fucking life after this asshole is dead, right?”

I nod because he needs to see me agree, but I’m not sure I believe him. If anything goes sideways, it’s my life for Rory’s.

I finally understand what the Hanged Man meant when Celeste drew the card for me.

The ultimate sacrifice.

I’ve been selfish my whole life. I’ve struggled and fought and tried to get what I thought I was owed. I’ve lied. Cheated. Stole. Betrayed people I loved, and committed more sins than I can possibly remember.

And it all comes down to this.

*I have a chance at redemption, and if my life is demanded to save Rory, I’ll give it up gladly.*

There’s no doubt in my mind, and not a drop of hate in my heart. This is the path my decisions have led me to, and I won’t let that baby suffer for a single moment longer if I can prevent it, no matter the cost to myself.

A calmness settles deep within me.



But I can't tell Moses because he'll never let me go. He'll find another way. I believe in him, but I also believe we don't have time to waste, and I refuse to be the reason Rory is missing a finger or an ear or something worse.

That child deserves a beautiful life.

And if I get through this, maybe I'll get to have one too. Maybe I'll even truly deserve it.

Moses studies my face, his eyes glowing with emotion. "Tell me you understand, mama. Tell me you trust me. I need to hear the words."

"I understand. I trust you. And . . ." I suck in a ragged breath. "And I fucking love you so much. You've always been it for me, Moses. From the beginning. I knew it then, but I was too scared. I was weak. A coward. And if this is all the time we get—"

Moses opens his mouth to stop me, but I shake my head and keep going.

"No, I have to say this. If this is all the time we get, these were truly the best days of my life. I love you, Moses. No matter what happens next. I always loved you. I always will."

"Goddamn it, mama." His hands shake as he pulls me closer to his face. "Don't you think those thoughts. This isn't all the time we get. I refuse to let that happen. So you get it through your stubborn head—you're coming back to me, and Rory is coming home safe. Understand? Don't let anything else into that mind of yours. Believe this."

Both of our bodies shake with the intensity of the emotions rolling off him.

"I believe you," I tell him. "And I love you. Now, let's save that baby."

When he crushes his mouth to mine, I taste everything I've ever needed in that kiss, because it's all Moses.

## FORTY-ONE

KEIRA

“I’m only doing this because you want it this way,” my husband, a merciless force of nature, says to me as he grips me by the shoulders.

I reach out and curl my palms around his arms. “I know you are. And we have to. Because how the hell am I supposed to live with myself if I traded my best friend’s life for my daughter’s?”

“It’s not even a fucking trade,” Lachlan says, his words coming out like a low growl. “And if it comes down to it, there’s no question whose life matters more to me.”

Tears spring to my eyes, and I blink them back, because he means it truly and completely. But I can’t think like that, because that’s not who I am.

It’s how we balance each other out. I’m Lachlan Mount’s humanity when he’s on the hunt for blood, and that’s a role I’m strong enough to play. But not when it comes to the man who took my child. To him, I will be lady justice, and I’ll make sure he dies for daring to lay a finger on her.

Because that’s what Lachlan Mount gave to me. Unbridled strength and power.

My voice is strong and even when I speak. “As soon as I have Rory and you see that motherfucker, you shoot him in the fucking face for daring to touch our girl. Swear it to me.”

Against all odds, a ghost of a smile flickers across his face. “My fierce

hellion. I knew you'd be a lioness for our children, and I was fucking right. Go get our baby girl. I've got a bullet with that son of a bitch's name on it." His eyes are black as coal, but promise burns within them.

"I love you, Lachlan."

He yanks me against him, wrapping his arms around me, pinning me against his body. "I fucking love you, Keira Mount. You are my life. And Rory is my heart. And, God fucking damn it, I have Magnolia to thank for all of it, despite how livid I am." He pulls away and glares down at me as he shakes his head. "I'll try my damndest to save both of them, but I make no promises. Rory comes first."

"Rory comes first, but I'm begging you to save them both." I don't plead often, but if there was ever a moment, it's now. "Please."

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## FORTY-TWO

### MAGNOLIA

**K**eira and I lock arms and thread our fingers together as we take our first steps across the sidewalk and into the French Market at five minutes to twelve. Sizzling sausage and sweet dough saturate the air with delicious scents, but at the moment, they turn my stomach.

“I’m so sorry,” I tell her for the thousandth time in the last thirty minutes.

“Stop it,” she says, her eyes more determined and wilder than I’ve ever seen. “This is the work of a sick, twisted madman. His fate is sealed. He’s a dead man walking now. But you didn’t deserve for that woman to hire his brother to try to kill you. You didn’t force his brother to take the job. You didn’t want to have to defend yourself the night you killed him. This is *not* your fault.” She stops and turns to me, her green eyes boring into mine.

“If I hadn’t lived the life I’ve lived, there wouldn’t be anyone paying someone to kill me.”

Keira drops my hand and grasps me by the shoulders. “For the last time, *you don’t get to be a martyr here*. This isn’t on you. I don’t blame you. I blame a fucking psycho who killed my friends—in my own home—and stole my flesh and blood. He’s going to die today because that’s what *he* deserves. You’re going to live a long and happy life. Trust *me*, Magnolia.”

Keira shakes me, like she’s not sure it’s getting through my thick skull, but it is.

“I want to believe you.”

“Fuck that *wanting* bullshit. I don’t have time for it today. We can argue about it later, if you like.”

She gives me a nod, and I can’t help but mirror her and give her one right back.

“Okay.”

“Good. Now I’m going to get my baby back.”

We walk into the market, united in more ways than we’ve ever been before. I scan every person I see, searching for Rory’s untamed auburn hair and sweet face—and the face of a killer.

An ambulance is parked at the road, but I don’t see any EMTs anywhere. A cop car is parked in front of it, but I don’t see them either.

“What was she wearing again?” I ask, making sure I have it right and my riotous brain didn’t somehow decide I was looking for something different.

Keira’s head is on a swivel when she replies. “Pink leggings. White-and-pink striped shirt.”

I rake my gaze across every face in every booth and every customer, looking everywhere for our girl.

*Goddamn it, couldn’t he have given us better instructions? A fucking stall number?*

No, of course not. That would make it too easy, and this is a man who’s way fucking smarter than we realized when this nightmare began.

“We don’t see him or Rory.” Moses’s voice comes into my ear through the wireless comm earbud that Mount’s people produced. “But keep walking. Keep looking. If you see *anything*, you know what to do.”

He means I make the gesture we all agreed upon in the few minutes we had to come up with a haphazard strategy to save Rory and not get me killed in the process.

If Moses is terrified right now, he’s not letting it show. He’s aware I won’t hesitate to sacrifice myself if that’s what it comes down to.

“I think I see—” Keira’s chin jerks toward a stall with knitted goods, and then her whole body deflates with disappointment. “No. Not her.”

“We’re still a few minutes early. Let’s keep walking.”

We weave our way through the stands and the busy Saturday crowd, looking at everyone. Everywhere.

Someone bumps into me, and I whip around, expecting to see a man with a knife, but I stare into the eyes of the same damn kid who tried to steal my purse the day I was walking through the Quarter. The day Moses returned.

“Not today, kid. No fucking time today.”

“I’m not trying to steal anything. Some dude gave me money to bring you a note.” He offers it up, and I unlock arms with Keira to rip it out of his hand.

“Did he have a baby? Pink pants? Did you see a little girl?” she asks him as I flip the note open at the same time.

“No. Just a dude in a hat and sunglasses. He told me to come to you.”

His words fade away as I read what’s scrawled on the page.

### *Stall 202*

I look up to ask the kid another question, but he’s gone, already melted into the crowd.

“What does it say?”

I show it to her, and her eyes light up as she reads it out loud, which is what I should have done because I need Moses to know where we’re headed.

“Go straight and then turn left. Head down the row. It’s the second to last from the end, according to the map,” Trey says in my ear.

I nod in the right direction, showing Keira where we need to go.

“Oh God. My baby’s here. I can feel it,” she whispers.

I pray she's right. Hope floods my soul, but with each step we take toward stall 202, I worry it's one step closer to the end for me.

I want to believe this is going to work out, but I have to prepare myself for the alternative. The blood-encrusted murder weapon Cavender tossed on the table flashes through my brain.

*Please don't let them show Moses the murder weapon if this goes south. Please don't let him be the one to find me. And, God, why didn't I just read that damn letter from Bernie? Will I ever get a chance?*

That's when we see her. Rory bounces in the arms of a woman behind a stall who is scanning the area, looking confused.

"There she is!" I almost forget to make the gesture, but I do it as Keira breaks into a run.

"Rory! Baby! Mommy's right here!"

The woman's head jerks up as Keira flies toward her, and then she shifts her body like she's trying to protect the little girl.

I rush forward only to ram into a group of tourists who seemingly came out of nowhere. I push through them, shoving bodies out of my way as they jostle me.

And then I feel a fiery stab of pain, right in my lower back, that stops me in my tracks and takes me to my knees. *Oh my God, that fucking hurts.*

"Stupid *puta*. You don't get off so easy."

His face is hidden by sunglasses and a hat, just like the kid said, but I would know it was him from the hate dripping from each word spewing from his cruel mouth. The group of tourists acts like a wall, blocking us so no one can see what's happening.

The pain is so sharp and severe, it steals my breath and I can't even speak.

*Oh my God. He stabbed me. Jesus Christ. Did he hit something vital? Because. Fuck. That. Hurts. So. Bad.*

He puts an arm under my shoulder and lifts me up into . . . *a wheelchair?*

Moses's voice roars in my ear, but the static drowns him out so I can't understand a word he's saying.

He had to have heard Reyes. He must know he has me. Already, I'm so weak that I'm slumping to the side as Reyes pushes me to the curb, rolls me right up a handicap ramp into a van, flips it up, and slams the door.

The whole thing took less than thirty seconds.

The yelling in my ear goes quiet as the earbud falls out when my head lolls to the side.

*I'm bleeding out.*

I know this because it's not the first time I've faced death. It's also not the first time I've deserved it. Sparks flash in my vision as it fades until everything goes black.

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## FORTY-THREE

KEIRA

“You can’t have her. He told me he’d be right back for her,” the woman behind the booth says as I reach for my girl.

“Like hell. That’s my daughter! She was kidnapped. Give her to me right now, or I swear to God, I can’t be held responsible for what happens to you next.”

I don’t know if it’s the tone of my voice or the way Rory is reaching for me, but I finally get through to the woman and she hands Rory over.

As soon as my arms lock around my baby girl, relief floods my entire system. “Oh, baby. Mama missed you. Oh my God.”

I check every inch of her first as the woman explains how she didn’t know someone had taken her, insisting that she didn’t do anything wrong. But I barely hear a word she says because I’m already turning around to tell Magnolia it’s all going to be okay.

But Magnolia’s not there.

I hear Moses yell, and my blood runs cold.

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## FORTY-FOUR

MOSES

“N<sup>o</sup>!”

People near us whip around to find the source of the roar echoing through the French Market, but I don't give a fuck. Mount is already halfway to Keira and the baby as the van tears away from the curb with Magnolia inside.

“Get him!” I yell, feeling helpless in my position across the street from where I've been keeping watch in the doorway of a souvenir shop. Jules better be in the SUV already, charging toward him, because it wasn't supposed to fucking happen like this.

*I need another vehicle.* I gotta get her back. I won't let that crazy fucker hurt Magnolia again. I heard her cry out in pain. He did something to her.

I stare at the ambulance. *Fuck it.* I rush to the door and whip it open before jumping in the driver's seat. The keys are still in the ignition.

Whoever the paramedics came here to help can find another ride to the hospital, because my woman's life is at stake.

As soon as the engine fires up, a cop runs toward me, waving his arms.

*Sorry, motherfucker. I got more important shit than you to worry about.*

Instead of backing up, I yank the wheel hard and floor it, not giving a single fuck that I ram the bumper of the cop car parked ahead of me.

He can arrest me when this is all over.

I dodge pedestrians and fumble around, looking for the fucking switch for the sirens so I can light this bitch up and clear the way. As I'm barreling toward Esplanade, the sirens finally wail. Traffic slows and then comes to a complete halt as I maneuver the big bitch through the smallest opening and turn the corner, desperately trying to get a visual on the van.

*Where the fuck did he go?* I blow through intersection after intersection, my head whipping in either direction as I search for him.

I fly toward another cross street and lay on the horn, nearly T-boning a car as I crank the wheel, turning the ambulance hard to the right to miss it.

That's when I see it. The van. Straight ahead of me.

"Not today, motherfucker. *Not today.*"

"You got him?" Trey's voice in my ear reminds me I'm wearing a comm. *How the fuck could I forget that?*

Oh yeah, I'm chasing after the love of my fucking life and my entire future.

"Yeah, just turned on—" I scan for a street sign. "Henriette Delille. He's up ahead. *Fuck.* He's gotta be heading for the highway."

"I'm coming," another voice says, and it takes me a second to realize it's Mount. "You get Magnolia. I get *him.*" He sounds eerily excited.

"You got the baby. She's all right?"

"Rory's good, but he's as good as dead."

I can't help but argue, because my thirst for vigilante justice is just as strong as his. "Then you'd better hurry, because if I get the shot, I'm taking it."

"On my way."

Sirens blare in the distance. That cop at the market probably called in the cavalry after I stole the ambulance.

*Fuck. This is going to be messy. Then again, it doesn't fucking matter as long as I get to Magnolia in time.*

Reyes must realize the ambulance on his ass isn't heading to the hospital,

because the van whips to the left without slowing down, cutting off traffic.

*Oh, fuck no!*

A truck slams into the side of the van, sending it spinning out of control. The vehicle wobbles on two wheels.

*God, don't tip. Don't tip.*

But my prayers go unanswered and the van goes over on its side, slamming into the pavement.

*Hold on, mama. I'm coming for you.*

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## FORTY-FIVE

MAGNOLIA

**I** push my way through the darkness to consciousness as the wheelchair flies across the van from one side to the other, knocking the shit out of me and throwing me to the floor. I grasp for something to hold on to, but there's nothing I can reach. As soon as we turn, I start rolling again, and then . . . *impact.*

I'm flung through the back, and my head cracks against the side.

My vision is hazy, and I know my system is shutting down as my body takes a beating from the ride. But there's only one thought in my mind.

*I have to say good-bye to Moses. I can't leave before I tell him I love him again. Tell him I'm sorry we didn't have more time.*

Sounds come from the front of the van, but I can't focus on them. I don't have enough energy.

Sirens pierce the fog I'm swimming through.

*Help for me? But no one helps girls like me.*

It's the old lie I told myself. The one that kept me from asking for help for far too long. But I know it's not true anymore.

*Because Moses is coming for me.*

*Moses loves me.*

*Moses won't let me go without a fight.*

*I have to fight for him.*

Spots scatter in my vision, and pain radiates from every inch of me, but still, *I hold on.*

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## FORTY-SIX

MOSES

“I’m going for her!” I yell as I jump out of the ambulance and run toward the van, pistol in hand. I don’t see Reyes crawling out of the wreckage yet, but he’s my second priority.

“Mags!” I scream as I go to the back door of the battered van and try to open it.

*Locked.*

“Goddamn it!”

Sirens scream in the distance, and I don’t have much time. Magnolia needs me, and we have to get the fuck out of here as fast as humanly possible. I’m not taking a chance that they’ll cuff me and let her die right here.

I take the butt of my gun and smash the back window, reaching through it to unlock the door from inside.

As I yank it free, tires screech to a halt behind me. The sirens are still blocks away, though.

“I’m behind you. I’ve got your back.”

Jules is on me as I lay eyes on Magnolia. She’s curled into a ball on the floor of the wrecked van, and there’s blood fucking everywhere.

“I’m here, mama. Hang in there just a little longer. You’re okay.” Even as I say the words, I fear I’m lying. She’s not okay. She’s far from fucking okay.

“We gotta get her out of here.”

“Put her in the ambulance and take her back to my place,” Mount barks from beside me, appearing like a demon from hell. “Have someone ditch the bus and lead the cops off. I have a top medical team on standby. They’re better than any hospital. Go!”

I lift Magnolia out of the van, and Mount charges inside. For Reyes.

But I don’t give a fuck about him anymore. I have the woman who matters more than life itself in my arms, and she needs my help.

I jog to the back of the ambulance and yell at Jules, “Drive! I’m staying in the back with her. Fucking haul ass like your life depends on it.”

He gives me a nod, and I put Magnolia in the back, hating the gray cast of her skin and the cold clamminess of her hands.

“Stay with me, mama. You gotta stay here with me. *Please*. Please, Mags. We’re taking you where you need to go. You’ll be just fine.”

Her bloodied lips open, and she croaks out one word. “Rory?”

“She’s safe. Keira has her. Mount’s taking out Reyes. Don’t you worry about a thing, baby. I love you. We’re going to make it.”

The ambulance rolls forward as the sirens get closer, but I don’t fucking care about those either.

All that matters is Magnolia.

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## FORTY-SEVEN

### MOUNT

**G**lass crunches beneath my shoes as I grab the driver by the collar and drag him out of the van. He looks exactly like the photo the hacker showed me.

“Reyes.”

The man’s eyes glint with recognition. “Fuck you, Mount.”

“You fucked with the wrong man. You touched my daughter—my blood—and killed one of my best friends. For that, you pay with your life.”

Sunlight beats down on us as we emerge from the wreck, and I toss him on the pavement. Blood spouts from his head, and his clothes are soaked with red.

*Good.* That’s what he fucking deserves.

Sirens come closer with every second, and as much as I want to draw it out and torture the motherfucker for killing my people and touching my daughter, I don’t have time.

I squat down, and he spits blood at my face.

“I should have killed your kid.”

I don’t need time. He doesn’t get to breathe the same air as my little girl for another second.

I shove the barrel of my gun in his mouth. “You deserve worse, you piece of shit motherfucker.”

And then I squeeze the trigger.

For Rory.

For Keira.

For Magnolia.

For Bethany.

And for V—who I know, without a shadow of a doubt—died trying to save my daughter.

*This is for them.*

His head explodes, and I stand up and walk the fuck away.

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## FORTY-EIGHT

MOSES

**M**y life hangs in the balance for hours. One by one, each person who was affected by today comes into the small sitting room where I'm waiting.

Trey, Jules, Mount, Keira and the baby, and a few others whose names I don't know and honestly don't care about right now.

Magnolia is all I care about.

The silence grows louder with each passing moment. I hope like hell every single one of these people are praying their asses off.

She has to pull through.

Reyes knew exactly what he was doing when he stabbed her. Right in the fucking kidney, and she lost too much goddamned blood. Not to mention, the accident could have killed her on its own.

Rory wakes up in her mother's arms, and Keira coos to her. I'm so fucking glad she's safe.

Then I begin the cycle of my prayers again.

*God, please don't take Magnolia away from me. She deserves to live. She's a fighter. She deserves another chance. Whatever you want, I'll give it to you.*

As I make another bargain with God, one of the doctors finally comes into the room.

I'm on my feet in half a second. "Please. Tell me she's okay."

He removes the mask from his face. "We had a really tough decision, but —"

I rush forward. "Tell me she's *okay*."

The doctor takes a breath and nods. "She's made it this far, and she's by no means out of the woods yet, but we're very hopeful. Especially, as I was going to say, because we decided not to remove the kidney."

"What?" I blink and look at him. "But she got fucking stabbed."

He scratches the side of his head and stretches his neck. "Yes, and research at the top hospitals has shown the incredible power of the kidney to heal, and that the patient is better off with it, even in its damaged state, rather than removing it. She'll need lots of rest and care, because her injuries are extensive. But, as I said, we're very hopeful she'll pull through."

Mount rises and comes to stand beside me. "You already know this, but spare no expense. Whatever it takes, do it."

My jaw trembles with gratitude for the man I was willing to kill only hours before.

"Thank you," I whisper as I turn to look at him. "Thank. You."

Mount's eyes are black as sin as they meet mine. "No one else is dying today. Not on my fucking watch."

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## FORTY-NINE

### MAGNOLIA

I've been swimming through a fog for what seems like forever when I finally manage to surface and open my eyes. Blinking a few times, I take in the dim light of the room as I try to make out anything familiar. It takes a few more seconds for my vision to clear, and I lock onto the only thing that matters.

*Moses.*

He's asleep in a chair beside the bed, but in the most awkward position imaginable—leaning forward so he's resting a hand on my leg and using his other elbow to prop himself up.

A rush of gratitude fills me as I stare at that hand. *Thank God.* He's here. I blink faster as emotion fills my tired eyes.

*We're both alive. Together.*

I don't know what shape I'm in, and frankly, as long as I'm not dead, it doesn't really matter. *Because we made it.*

I shift under the soft white sheets, and Moses sits up immediately, like he's attuned to my every move.

"Mama?" The word comes out sleep-roughened and husky as his eyes come into focus on my face.

"It's all over," I say, even though I'm stating the obvious.

The smile that stretches across Moses's face brightens the room and

overfills my heart with joy. “It sure as hell is. How’re you feeling?”

I lift my arm, but Moses’s hand on my leg lightly squeezes.

“Don’t move too much. You’re gonna be pretty sore, even with the meds they’ve got you on.”

Memories of the pain come flooding back with random scattered fragments of what happened. Reyes stabbing me. The van crashing. Being tossed around like a rag doll. *Rory*.

“Oh God. *Rory*. Did Keira get her? Is she—”

“She’s perfect. Totally and completely fine. Reyes didn’t hurt her. She’s laughing and smiling like nothing ever happened. *Rory* won’t remember a thing.”

Tension drains out of me as I drop my head back onto the pillow. “Thank you, God,” I whisper.

But Moses isn’t done. “But you . . . *Jesus*. You took years off my life when he grabbed you. I couldn’t stop him. I knew you were hurt, and I couldn’t get to you fast enough.” His smile is completely gone now as the haunting memories take him away from me.

I reach out, grab his strong hand, and give it a hard squeeze. “Hey, I’m still here, and I love you so much. I promise I’m not trading myself for anyone else’s kid. We made it, *Moby*. It’s okay.”

He chuckles at the bit about someone else’s kid, but his hand flips and he threads his fingers through mine. He meets my gaze with those green-gold eyes of his I love so much.

“God, I fucking love you too. More than you know. This all put things in perspective, that’s for damn sure. So I’m gonna tell you what I’ve been thinking about since the moment it all went down, especially while I’ve been sitting by your bed, waiting for you to wake up and give me hell.”

“Okay,” I reply, wondering what he’s working up to.

Moses leans down and presses a kiss to our joined hands before meeting my gaze once more. “I want my ring on your finger. Fast. As soon as we can.

I want to belong to you for as many days as there are left in my life.”

“Moses . . .” I whisper his name, my heart bursting with joy.

He leans closer. “And I want you to belong to me. I need you to know, without a shadow of a doubt, you are loved beyond anything. I want you to look down at that ring every fucking day and be reminded of it.”

Tears gather in my eyes, and I don’t even care that I’ve cried more since he came back in my life than in the past two decades combined. I open my mouth to reply, but he keeps going.

“You were fucking noble about this whole kidnapping thing. I understand why. I would’ve done the same. But I also don’t like you thinking your life is somehow worth less because of who you are and what you’ve done. Because nothing could be further from the truth. You are worth everything, Magnolia. And I’m not gonna stop until you realize exactly how fucking much you’re worth. You’re fucking priceless. Don’t you ever take chances like that again with your life. Fucking never. I can’t take it, and I’m not having it.” His voice is rough and strained by the time he finishes.

“Yes, sir,” I say as the tears tip over and slide down my face.

Moses is out of his chair at the first drop, catching it with his thumbs. “God, I love when you call me that, but no more crying, mama. Not today. Today is a good fucking day because we’ve got the rest of our lives ahead of us. We’re free, and Reyes is fucking dead.”

The news about Reyes stops the tears faster than anything else could. “He is? He’s . . . gone?”

“Forever. Which means all those plans I’ve got for you are about to unfold. I hope you’re ready.”

“Do I get a say in those plans?”

Moses leans down to press a kiss to my forehead. “The cops want to question you, and so does the FBI. They think they’re gonna pin all three murders on you.”

My mouth drops open. “What? *All three?*”

“Hey, hush. It’s okay. They’re not getting to you. Mount’s lawyer has them so twisted up in paperwork right now, it’ll take some time for them to wade through it.”

“But all three?” I whisper.

“Yeah. Reyes’s brother, Desiree, and Brandon’s wife.”

“But I didn’t—”

“I know, and we can prove the two of them for sure, but I’m not having you sit through a trial to determine you killed Ortiz in self-defense. So . . . you gotta answer one question for me.”

“What?” I ask, drowning in those pools of light green.

“Do you trust me?”

“Yes. Absolutely,” I reply without hesitation.

“Good, because I’m not gonna sit around and wait for them to finally connect Reyes to the murders instead. We’re gonna free you from all of this, and we’re starting a brand-new life. Don’t worry, you’re gonna love the ocean breeze and picking pineapples out of our yard.”

My brain puts together what he’s saying. *He’s going to fake my death and erase me . . . and we’re running away to a tropical paradise.* Maybe another girl would have questions, but after everything we’ve been through, my answer is simple.

“How soon do we leave?”

I can tell by the smile on his face that my answer is everything he needed.

“As soon as you’re healed up, mama. I’ve got your girls coming back from the beach right now. Trey set up an online scheduling program for them, and they’ve been letting all the clients know.”

Appreciation fills me. “Thank you. Thank you so much for taking care of them. The house . . .”

“It’s already been cleaned by a crew. The girls will never see anything.”

I get quiet, thinking about things that will never be the same, and say a silent prayer for Desiree.



“I want Taylor to have the house now. Free and clear. Desiree’s girls can stay for a couple of months while they make other arrangements, but Taylor has always wanted to turn it into a spa.” I laugh quietly and shake my head. “I think she’s a little crazy, thinking a warehouse can become something else, but I’m willing to let her try.”

“Mama, anyone and anything can change. All it takes is a decision. You tell me how you want it done, and I’ll get someone working on it.”

“Thank you,” I tell him, not sure I could love him more than I do right now.

“Good to see you awake.”

Mount’s voice comes from the doorway, interrupting our moment, and my entire body tenses.

I cost him. Him and Keira. They invited us into their home, and I brought Reyes to them.

The guilt of that weighs on my soul.

I meet his black gaze and speak from the heart. “I’m sorry, Mount. I’m so sorry for bringing this to your home and for what it cost you. I wish I could make it right, but I can’t. I’m so sorry.”

Moses tenses beside me, as though he’s ready to jump between me and the king if he says something Moses doesn’t want me to hear. But I can take it.

Mount’s expression stays even and calm. “Whatever guilt you’re carrying because of this—let it go.”

My head jerks back against the pillow. “But you . . .” I start and trail off before I can even form a complete sentence.

Mount steps farther into the room. “I would’ve handed the pope over to Hannibal Lecter if it meant getting Aurora back. It wasn’t personal. And you can’t be held responsible for what Reyes did. You were swept up into something that had nothing to do with you. You’ve got no fault in this.”

“What do you mean? I killed his brother.”

“This was all caused by a cheating husband and a scorned wife. They’re responsible for every drop of blood Reyes spilled. And when I find Alberto Brandon, he’s going to pay the consequences for what he caused. In fact, I was just walking out a friend of yours who is going to find him for me. He was particularly motivated when he learned how Brandon’s actions affected you.”

“A friend?” I’m blanking.

“I believe you played chess together.”

My gaze cuts to Moses as I realize Mount is talking about Rhodes—who Moses met at the club under less-than-ideal circumstances, but he doesn’t look remotely affected by the information.

“It’s okay, mama. It doesn’t bother me none. This Rhodes dude seems like he might be useful in the future. Probably could’ve used his help before.”

“He says he’s the best at what he does.”

“I am *the best* at what I do,” the man himself says, stepping around Mount. “Sorry for intruding, but it was worth it.”

Mount looks at him, his eyes darkening with unpleasant surprise. “You shouldn’t have been able to get back in.”

Rhodes smirks. “And you’ve got security issues that need handling if you want this place impenetrable. Don’t worry. I’ll get you sorted out. No one will be breaching this place when I’m done. Call it a favor. You can owe me one.”

Moses and I lock eyes, and I can see he’s just as shocked as I am that Rhodes doesn’t bow down to the king.

He steps around a stunned, but surprisingly amused Mount, and comes toward me. Before he reaches the bed, he glances at Moses.

“You mind, brother? Promise I think of her like a sister.”

Moses just grins. “You’ve got balls of steel, man. Say what you want to say. You don’t need my permission. Magnolia’s her own woman.”

He’s definitely getting a blow job for that comment—when I’m feeling

better.

Rhodes closes the distance between us and drops down on one knee. “Glad you’re okay, Mags. The world would’ve been a hell of a lot less bright without you in it.”

“Thank you.”

He presses a kiss to my hands and squeezes them before turning back to Moses. “She’s all yours, man. Just let me borrow her for a chess game every now and then. She’s *that* good.”

Moses’s lips curve up in a smile. “If you can find us, you can play her anytime you want.”

“Challenge accepted,” Rhodes says with a wink at me. Then he turns back to Mount. “Now I’ll show myself out—and send you a detailed list of all the shit I’d change for your security. You need my help implementing, you let me know.”

And with that, he’s gone, and I’m left shaking my head.

Mount stares after him. “He’s going to be trouble.”

I can’t help but giggle. “Yeah, he is. But he’s good trouble.”

Moses shoots me a look.

“What? You know I only want you and that Moby Dick of yours.”

“And I think it’s time for me to excuse myself,” Mount says, and Moses’s laughter and mine chases him out of the room.

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## EPILOGUE

MAGNOLIA

*One year later*

“**S**hhh . . . If you keep crying like that, you’re gonna wake Mama, big man. And you know she was already up twice with you last night.”

The sound of Moses’s voice comes through the baby monitor on our dresser.

A warm, humid breeze blows through the wall of open sliding glass doors and the sheer white mosquito netting hanging around our bed, carrying the salty tang of the ocean with it.

I stretch and roll out of bed, reaching for the red silk robe I tossed over the bench at the foot last night.

I pad silently into the nursery next door to see my entire world bathed in the light of the brilliant orange sunrise turning the morning into a work of art.

Moses coos to our son as he walks him around the room, cradling him in his arms.

It’s the most beautiful sight I’ve ever seen.

Then again, I think that every single day when I wake up here, in our tropical paradise where no one knows my name as anything but Magnolia Gray. I have no past, and the future is as bright as the sky. Even Bernie would have approved. Her letter to me, asking my forgiveness for what she’d done

when I was sixteen, and telling me she loved me and wished she'd had a chance to redo it all, rests in a place of honor in my bedside table.

Moses turns when he hears me, and the brilliant smile on his face melts my heart.

A woman has never been this loved before. I'm certain of it.

"Ah . . . see, bud? You got her up."

"I don't mind at all," I say, coming toward them with my arms outstretched. "I don't want to miss a minute."

Moses hands Abraham to me, and I settle into the rocker to get my hungry boy fed.

My husband stands by the window, looking out at the beach, and says, "I've got a surprise for you. It's coming today."

I look up as Abraham latches on. "What kind of surprise this time?"

Moses just grins. "You'll see."

Three hours later, Abraham and I are settled on a lounge near the pool, an umbrella shading us from the bright Caribbean sun. Jules rolls a crate down the concrete walkway that stops at the beach that serves as our front yard.

Jules and Trey take turns rotating between our guest house and my place in the Quarter—which legally belongs to Jules now. Both men have been invaluable in helping the girls, especially after news of my "death" reached them. Taylor's business is thriving, especially since all of the girls who were still turning tricks for Desiree have either moved on or joined her. The old house where Moses and I met is now a day spa, and I couldn't be prouder.

I just wish I could tell her.

But after the elaborate operation Moses pulled off to fake both of our deaths, that's just not possible.

According to Trey, with his camera feeds and phone hacks, when

Cavender got news of our demise, he didn't believe it. He demanded to see the wreckage of our car-bombed vehicle and what was left of the bodies, and was shocked when his investigation led back to a bank transfer to a known hit man hired by Laura Brandon, dated *before* her death. That's when the whole case came together for Cavender and the FBI.

With the help of Trey's digitally planted bread crumbs, law enforcement came to the exact conclusions we hoped. Reyes was linked to Laura Brandon and Desiree's murders, and the cases are considered permanently closed. Well, except for the case of Reyes's death in the street. Mount was never implicated, and I'm willing to bet he never will be. That's just how Mount rolls. As for Ortiz's death in my old condo building, from what Trey can tell, Cavender has left it alone in favor of counting the days until his retirement at the end of the year.

Only Mount and Keira know for certain that we're still alive and kicking. Well, them and Rhodes. God only knows how he found us, but he's been down twice to play chess. Moses welcomed him with open arms—after interrogating him about how he did it. Rhodes told him that every loose end has been tied up, and no one else could possibly find us now—which is a damn good thing, considering Mount and Keira will be meeting us on a neighboring island for a clandestine vacation soon.

It's my fondest hope that our babies become even better friends than we are. They'll see each other at least every few months, if Keira and I get our way. Which means it's a foregone conclusion. Good thing our men have the skills and the cash to make that happen without exposing any of us to danger.

Then there's Celeste. She still calls and leaves voice mails of readings every few weeks on my old number—which has never been shut off. I don't know how she knows, but she does. And thanks to Trey, it looks like the messages are never checked so as not to raise suspicion.

"What's in there?" I ask Jules.

"Boss'll tell you. Or show you. I got a shit-ton more of these. They took

up half our container.”

More curious than ever, I pick up a smiling Abraham and walk over to the crate. Jules slides the dolly out from under it and heads back up the path, presumably to get the next one.

“What in the world did your daddy get us now?”

“If you’ll give him five minutes, he’ll show you,” the man himself says as he steps out of the house onto the patio with a crowbar in hand.

“Oh Lord, it’s going to be a hell of a day if crowbars are required.”

The laughter that springs from his lips is a sound I hear all the time, and it makes life sweeter than I could have ever imagined.

A few minutes later, the crate’s sides fall open and Moses unwraps what looks like a black statue.

“What is . . .” I trail off when I see the crown carved at the top. My mouth drops open, and I look at Moses. “Oh my God. Please tell me that’s a chess piece.”

His grin stretches from ear to ear as he comes toward me. “You’re damn right it’s a chess piece. I had them made for us so they’d be big, but still light enough that we can move them easily on the sand.”

My excitement is off the charts. “We’re turning our beach into a chess board?”

“You okay with that?”

“As long as you’re okay losing almost every game to me.”

Moses’s arms wrap around me and Abraham, bringing us both close. He lowers his head to whisper in my ear.

“Mama, I win every day I wake up beside you. I call that the ultimate checkmate.”

THE END

What's coming next from me? Be the first to find out by signing up for my

newsletter by [tapping here](#)! If you're already on the list, make sure you're following me on social media too!

Now that you've finished Moses and Magnolia's story, go back to the beginning with [Ruthless King](#) (FREE on all platforms right now!!). It's the perfect time to binge read both Keira and Temperance's stories in the Mount and Savage Trilogies (Warning: they are HOT and TWISTY). There's a sneak peek of [Ruthless King](#) coming next if you need more convincing! After that, I've included a taste of [The Fall of Legend](#), where you can meet Moses in the Legend Trilogy before he made his way back to New Orleans to claim Magnolia. It is an EPIC love story that will give you all the feels. It's time to get your binge-read on! xoxo, Meghan

Do you want your very own SIGNED paperbacks or a beautiful *Creole Kingpin* mug? Now you can get them! [Tap here to check out Meghan March Merch](#) and stock up on paperbacks, Runaway gear, Seven Sinners, and other book lover merch!

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## SNEAK PEEK OF RUTHLESS KING

### ABOUT THIS BOOK

New Orleans belongs to me.

You don't know my name, but I control everything you see—and all the things you don't. My reach knows no bounds, and my demands are always met.

I don't need to lend money to a failing family distillery, but it amuses me to have them in my debt. To have *her* in my debt.

She doesn't know she caught my attention.

She should have been more careful.

I'm going to own her. Consume her. Maybe even keep her.

It's time to collect what I'm owed.

Keira Kilgore, you're now the property of Lachlan Mount.

[\*Ruthless King\*](#) is available for FREE by tapping on the title.

### *Chapter One*

*Keira*

*Are those footsteps?*

I freeze outside the door to my *locked* office and stare at the handle like it's tainted with anthrax.

My employees wouldn't dare. They know my office is off-limits. And my parents are seven hundred miles away in Florida, living it up as retirees on the monthly payments I send them from the dismal profits of the distillery. It's barely hanging on, even after four generations of clinging to life making Irish whiskey in New Orleans.

*This basement isn't haunted. This basement isn't haunted.*

I repeat that truth like a chant until my heart slows to a semi-normal pace. My dead husband's ghost better not be inside, or heaven help me, I'll kill Brett again myself.

Summoning the same iron will it has taken to dig this company out of the trenches, I grasp the handle, yank the door open, and fling myself inside, attempting the element of surprise. Or false courage. Or . . . something.

"Trying to make an entrance?"

The deep voice that comes out of the dark chills me to the very marrow of my bones.

I've only heard it once before, through the battered wood of the same locked door I just barged past, but it was delivering threats I didn't understand, not asking a question in that cool, controlled manner.

There's no way I want to be in the dark with this voice.

He's not a ghost. He's worse.

He's the frigging boogeyman, whispered about in the shadows but never mentioned in polite company, almost as if saying his name will make him appear. And no one wants that.

I've never said it. I don't even want to think it now, but my brain conjures it anyway.

*Lachlan Mount.*

I fumble around, slapping the concrete wall to find the light switch, but

when I flip it, nothing happens.

*Oh, sweet Jesus. I'm going to die and I won't even see it coming.*

My antique desk chair creaks just before the dim glow of my desk lamp clicks on.

I see his massive hands first, then darkly tanned forearms with white cuffs rolled up. The light doesn't reach his face.

"Shut the door, Ms. Kilgore."

Swallowing back the saliva pooling in my mouth at the fact that *he knows my name*, I move my hand as though directly responding to his command. I grope for the handle behind me, when all I really want to do is turn around and run.

To the police.

Maybe they could . . . I don't know. Save me?

I glance over my shoulder, clutching the knob as the door creaks shut, the urge to flee growing as the dim light of the hallway disappears from sight.

"Take a step in that direction and you'll lose everything."

My feet freeze to the cracked cement floor as a bead of sweat rolls down my chest. Normally I would attribute it to the sauna-like conditions produced by the whiskey stills, but not tonight.

"What do you want?" I whisper. "Why are you here?"

The chair groans as he rises to his feet, those wide fingers refastening the button on his suit coat, but his face never comes into the light.

"You owe me a debt, Ms. Kilgore, and I'm here to collect."

"A debt?"

My mind scrambles to think of how in the hell I could owe him money. I've never met him before. Hell, I've never seen him before, only heard his voice while I eavesdropped. My kind doesn't mingle with his—well, at least, most of my kind. A few rumors circulated that he kept Richelle LaFleur, a girl from our church, as a mistress until she went missing a year ago. I shut that path of thinking down completely.

“What are you talking about?” Somehow, I manage to form the question.

Two fingers push a document titled PROMISSORY NOTE across the scarred wood of my desk into the watery pool of light. My eyes lock on the papers, but I’m too terrified to step any closer.

*Oh, sweet Jesus, Brett. What did you do?* My heart slams against my ribs.

“Don’t you want to know how much your husband borrowed with this place as collateral?”

“How much?” I ask, inching toward him against my will.

“A half million dollars.”

I suck in a shocked breath. “You’re lying.”

With both hands on the desk, he leans down, exposing his face in the dim light. Hard features carved from granite, piercing dark eyes, and an unrelenting stare contrast with the relative civility of the suit that fits him to perfection.

“I never lie.”

*A half million dollars? No way.* “I would’ve known if Brett had borrowed that kind of money, and let me tell you—he didn’t.”

He shrugs as if the information means nothing to him. And maybe it doesn’t.

“His signature says that he did, and this debt is overdue.”

My eyes zero in on the papers on the desk. *If he really did this . . .* The effects would be catastrophic.

Four generations of Kilgores have dedicated their hopes, dreams, and fortunes to keeping this legacy alive. It can’t end with me.

“I don’t have the money.”

“I know.”

His response throws me back on my heels. “Then why—”

He moves out of the light and comes toward me. I shrink back against the wall as he advances, blocking my escape route to the door. There’s nowhere to run. He has me trapped.

“Because there’s something I might be willing to take in trade.”

It takes everything I have to keep my voice steady as my heart threatens to burst from my chest. “What?”

He stops a foot from me, and his full lips form a single word.

“You.”

**[You don't want to miss the rest of Keira and Mount's story. Tap here to download \*Ruthless King\* for FREE!](#)**

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## SNEAK PEEK OF THE FALL OF LEGEND

### ABOUT THIS BOOK

We come from two different worlds.  
I'm from the streets. She may as well live in an ivory tower.  
I made my living with my fists. I doubt she could even throw a punch.  
Our paths never should have crossed. We never should have met.  
That doesn't change the facts.  
I would sell my soul to taste those red lips.  
Fight the devil himself to hear her laugh.  
Burn in hell to have a single night.  
Scarlett Priest shouldn't even know men like me exist, but sometimes  
temptation is stronger than will.  
If this is how I go down, it'll be worth every second of the fall.

[\*The Fall of Legend\*](#) is available by tapping on the title.

### CHAPTER ONE SCARLETT

My body hits the floor with a thump. When my eyes flick open, darkness

greet me.

*What the hell?*

Wait. No. There's some gray mixed with the pitch black. Maybe even a glow coming from above my head?

*Did I fall asleep? Roll off my bed?*

I try to sit up, but I can't move. *Why can't I move?* Fear creeps down my spine because I'm 99.99% sure I didn't fall asleep. I don't take naps. I don't have time.

Plus, if I'd been taking a nap, the sound of the Proclaimers' "500 Miles" wouldn't be blasting in my earbuds.

Wait. I was running. Not napping. *So, why the hell can't I move?* I wiggle, but something that feels like carpet nap rubs against my bare arms.

*What in the actual fuck is going on?*

The Proclaimers go quiet for a moment before the song starts again. In that precious beat of silence, puzzle pieces snap together, and the blood chugging through my body slows like icy water in a nearly frozen river.

Oh. No. No. Just . . . no. This isn't happening. The threats weren't real. They didn't get me. Even as I try to deny it, my inner voice pops into my head, contradicting everything I want to believe.

*They got me. The threats were real. They're going to kill me. I should have listened to Ryan and Christine. Why didn't I listen?*

That's right, because I never take stuff like that seriously. *And now . . .* I flex my hands with my heart thundering, and my fingertips brush against what feels like . . . a rug?

My stomach plummets as reality crashes through my confusion.

*I'm rolled up in a rug. Oh. My. Fucking. God. This can't be happening.*

As the Proclaimers wail in my ears, vibrations shiver across my skin. *What was that? A door shutting? Are those footsteps?*

The murmur of voices comes next. I try to listen, but I can't make out the words over the music, until . . .

Something knocks into my side, and thankfully, the rug blunts the impact.  
*Did someone just freaking kick me?*

I'm a smart woman. Savvy. I've lived in Manhattan my whole life and survived three mugging attempts. I'm not a shrinking violet, but neither of the two women's self-defense seminars I've attended for charity covered what to do when you wake up rolled in a rug after being *kidnapped by someone who has probably made repeated death threats against you.*

The song's volume dips for some more chanting about all the things the Proclaimers would do for the woman they loved, and that's when I hear the roar.

*"You did what?"* a man bellows loud enough to suck the breath out of my lungs. He sounds furious—and powerful.

Fear unleashes a cold sweat over my skin.

*"You said she could fix it!"* Another voice, this one higher pitched, breaks through the Proclaimers' voices before the song picks up intensity again, drowning them out.

*Who said I could fix something? Fix what? Where?* My brain races, but it's more sluggish than normal, given the fact it's weighted down with a billion tons of dread and the urge to shrink and run.

More murmuring. More confusion rioting in my head.

*Fix what? For whom? Does this mean they're not going to kill me? Because I would really like not to be killed today. Or tomorrow. Or really ever.*

Then I start rolling. Literally. Like a rock thumping over on its side when kicked.

*Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God!*

*Think! Think!*

My body tumbles until I'm discombobulated and the earbuds fall from my ears. Bright light blinds me as I'm freed from the rug and land on my back, staring up at the ceiling.



The scents of leather and carpet cleaner hit my nostrils as I bolt to my feet, tilting to one side like I've had too much to drink. I spin around, searching for an exit, but a big hand lands on the bare skin of my shoulder.

His palm is hot, like it was just yanked from a pocket or clenched in a fist. His touch sends tingles racing down to my fingertips.

*Whoa. That's never happened before.*

I jerk away, stumbling forward to catch myself on the arm of a leather chair. "Please don't kill me. Whatever you need me to fix, I'll fix it."

My head bowed, I say the words to the ripped-jean-covered legs of a man standing a few feet from me, even though I have no idea when I decided trying to reason with him was a good idea. With self-preservation running the show right now, all bets are off on me behaving rationally.

I brace for a blow or some form of verbal assault, but none comes. Other than the faint sound of the Proclaimers drifting up from my earbuds on the floor, a heavy silence blankets the room.

I wait for the man in the ripped jeans to move. To come toward me. To kill me. But he doesn't.

"*Fuck.*" It comes out softly, like he's speaking under his breath and doesn't mean for me to hear it.

"Please," I whisper, finally finding the courage to look up at the rest of the body connected to the pair of massive denim-clad legs. "Please don't hurt \_\_\_"

My voice goes silent as I stare into the bluest eyes I've ever seen. He could make a fortune off those eyes alone. Mostly because they're set in a ridiculously attractive face that shouldn't be attractive at all due to a slight crook in the nose and the faint white line of a scar stretching across one of his sharp cheekbones. Shaggy dark blond hair hangs in his face as his lips press into a harsh line.

*This beast, albeit a gorgeous one, is going to kill me.*

The voice in my head delivers the final verdict, a conclusion it reached

because somehow, to the bottom of my soul, I know this man isn't afraid to cause another person pain. Raw, savage energy flows off his body in waves, and my teeth threaten to chatter at its intensity.

Beautiful and brutal. That's what I'd caption the shot I'm mentally taking right now of the last face I may ever see.

*This is it. I should have listened. But I didn't. This is all my own damned fault.*

I bite down on my quivering lip and straighten my shoulders as tears well in my eyes, tears I won't allow to fall.

Not yet.

First, I'm going to bargain with the grim reaper.

**[You don't want to miss the rest of Scarlett and Legend's epic story. Tap here to purchase \*The Fall of Legend\*.](#)**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Making the jump from corporate lawyer to romance author was a leap of faith that *New York Times*, #1 *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* bestselling author Meghan March will never regret. With over thirty titles published, she has sold millions of books in nearly a dozen languages to fellow romance-lovers around the world. A nomad at heart, she can currently be found in the woods of the Pacific Northwest, living her happily ever after with her real-life alpha hero.

She'd love to hear from you. Connect with her at:

[www.meghanmarch.com](http://www.meghanmarch.com)



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