

DreamCatcher
MOTORCYCLE CLUB



MERGING *Factions*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LIBERTY PARKER

MERGING FACTIONS

DREAMCATCHER MC

BOOK 11

LIBERTY PARKER



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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my family, readers, and tribe. Without any of you and your encouragement, my writing wouldn't be possible. To my readers, my words would mean nothing without your support. To my family, you've made sacrifices to ensure that my books get written.

Thank you, all of you.

Love you all to the moon and back.

~Lib

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MERGING FACTIONS
DREAMCATCHER MC NOVEL
BOOK ELEVEN
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There are so many people who should be acknowledged, and I know I'm going to miss several, but here we go.

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encouraging me.

Love forever and always,

~Lib

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I know that this series is set in the Eighties, but I have added a flare of present times to enhance the enjoyability of this storyline. Things will begin moving further along in years so that when I get to the next generation, they will be on our current timeline. Also, if you don't like cussing, provocative scenarios, fighting, rowdy and raunchy bikers, this book is *not* for you. But if you do... happy reading.

Unfortunately, the further I got into writing the book, the more it became a slow burn—as far as sexy times go. It wasn't intended to be this way, but you know what they say, shit happens and sometimes you just have to go with the flow.

I swear, it'll all be worth it if you have patience while getting to the steamy stuff.

XOXO

Lib

INTRODUCTION

Luca Alvarez rose into power when his older brother fell in love and fled the family organization, denouncing all ties that his class, status, and constitution supplied him from being the first born son, denying his birthright. Julius flipped the bird to their parents and rode off into the sunset with amour on the back of his motorcycle—never looking back. Luca envied his brother for that, but ended up betrothed to, and eventually married to the one who'd been contracted and promised to Julius. The union between the two governing organizations gave Luca respectability, rank, and designation. It ascertained their allies, it provided them strength, prestige and a superior hierarchy in the enterprise of criminals.

They were feared.

Despised by their enemies.

Loathed by those who wanted what they had... power.

He did it for his brother.

He did it for their family.

And he never regretted a minute of it, until now, until her, until Mera—his Curly Sue, because she deserved to have been his first wife, the only woman he stood at the altar for. But she'll have what no other ever has had... his heart, his devotion, his humanity.

BLURB

As the second-born son to the Alvarez family, Luca was content with his station in life. He figured it's what was expected of him, and being the loyal son that he was, he never sought anything more. With his hands coated in blood, he didn't expect to find the missing half of his soul, but once he did, once he felt his cold, dead heart beat for the first time, he vowed he'd do whatever it took to keep her. She showed him humility, gave him his humanity, and made him want... *more*. For the first time in his dreary life, he wasn't following orders, he wasn't being a good son, he was more than a formidable soldier—he was a man. A person. A protector. A provider. He was a man in love. But that gave him a weakness, something that could be held over his head. And when that became his reality, his world once again became a haze of red-hot anger. If it's a war the Crumleys want, it's a war they'll get. Luca will pave their streets in blood. After all, the tinge of blood's metallic-crimson flavoring on his tongue will be sugary sweet. He'll savor it. His palette will rejoice.

Tammera never felt the bonds of love. Sure, she felt friendship, loyalty, and understood the concept, but she believed she was dead inside. She put on a good poker face for the bystanders, but when her parents left her on the doorsteps of the convent, her entire psyche shattered. She felt disposable. Unwanted. Unloved. She was nothing. She existed. But when she locked eyes on Luca Alvarez for the first time, a spark of life ignited in her. Excitement swamped her, and she knew that she'd just found the sole reason for her birth. She was meant to find him, to support him, to be... his. They verbally touselled, they bantered to the point where you'd think they were enemies, but

it was nothing more than foreplay. Because at the end of the day, he was hers. And now that his enemy has taken them both, she'll have to mentally combat them in order to keep her and Luca alive. It'll be a battle of wills. She'll have to be smarter, more cunning, and manipulative than them. She was born a fighter and she'll die being one. Because everything is at stake.

CHARACTER BIBLE

MC MEMBERS

Gunner-President

Kruger-VP

Buster-Rd. Capt.

Country

Malice-Enforcer

Master-Sgt. At Arms

Shamus-Treasurer

Blaze

Tyson

Polo

Bull

Bear

Romeo

Tracker

Texas

Stinger

Zero

Kong

Powerhouse

PROSPECT

Beckett

OLD LADIES

Charlee

Cameron

Stella
Star
Jessia
Aspen
Salem
Dottie
Hemmingway

KIDS

Ella
Jaggar
Mane
Hunter
Judd
Oakley
Juniper
Nash
Honor & Haven

BUNNIES

Katy
Sabrina
Jackie

ALVAREZ ORGANIZATION

Julius - Pops
Luca
Shayne
Tammera (Mera)
Matteo
Leo
Marco

APPEARANCES

Garrick-Rick
Gideon-Deon
Graham-Hammer
Gavriel-Vriel



PROLOGUE

LUCA

MERA AND I HAVE RECENTLY COME TO AN UNDERSTANDING—SHE’S MINE.

She can try to run and hide from it, from me, but I’ll catch and find her every single time she tries to get away. I’ve grown tired of pussyfooting around the topic. Our version of foreplay has been exciting, new, and makes my dick harder than a steel pipe nine out of the ten times we’ve argued.

She riles me up like no other, and I get off on the fact that I do the same to her.

Her smart mouth and atypical comebacks let me know she’s made for me—the perfect life partner. From day one, she was cutthroat, always snapping at me, and I took that as a challenge.

And I hate to be defeated, so I was laid back, and enjoyed our back-and-forth bantering. She made things a competition, threw every obstacle at me she could think of, but that had the adverse effect than what she wanted to achieve.

I got more determined. I jumped every hurdle she put between us, and in the end, I was the winning contestant.

With Mera pressed securely to my side in our car as we leave the bunker and the meeting that just concluded with Mr. Fitzgerald, I’m more content than I’ve ever been. Even with the impending showdown we’ll face with the

Crumley brothers, the smile on my face is permanently sketched onto my face.

Nothing can bring me down.

After the joke of my prior marriage with that viper, who never shed her motherfucking skin, I didn't want to date outside of the random hookups. But Mera, she's changed my point of view and way of thinking on that, and I couldn't be happier that she's hooked me, reeled me in, and sunk me.

The car jerks, yanking me out of my reverie.

"What's happening!" Mera shouts.

"It's an ambush. We're under attack," Leo sedately remarks. His eyes stay steadily on the road, his voice may sound calm and all cool on the outside, but I know him, he's worked for us for twenty years, he's anything but.

"Prognosis?" I ask, leaning forward. My eyes widen when I notice that we're surrounded on all sides, and boxed in. One of two things is about to happen, and neither of them have a good outcome.

Rolling down the rear passenger side window, I pull my gun from its holster, and take aim. Mera does the same thing on her side, only she's pulling hers out from her stockings.

Confession time, and she's gonna flip.

"Yours won't do us any good. Leo, grab the spare out of the console and toss it back."

"What do you mean mine won't do me any good, Luca?" she growls, her shoulders are set stubbornly, and a stoney, calculated look crosses her face. "Why, Luca?" The grit of her teeth any other time would have me tackling her to the floor and tasting her scrumptious lips, but that compulsion will have to wait until I have her back home and in my space.

Without sparing her a glance, I answer, "Because you have blank cartridges in yours, and that won't do anything outside of pissing them off."

"Bastard!" A chuckle involuntarily releases from my thorax at her derogatory cussing, because these women, she and her bestie, Shayne, never say a foul

word that they'd have to eventually seek repentance for.

“Just take the damn gun, Curly Sue, and we'll deal with your irritation when it comes to me later,” I snap, my patience waning because we're being fucking shot at!

“I'm gonna kick you where the sun doesn't shine when we get out of this, Luca Alvarez,” she avows.

“Looking forward to it,” I retort, shooting at some twit that's trying to run Master off the road. Harrumphing, she takes the pistol handed to her, checks the magazine as I taught her, removes the safety, lines up her sight, and takes aim and fires. “Put on your seatbelt, Mera.”

“I can't get a good aim if I do that, Luca! I need to be able to move.”

“Take out what you can with your damn seatbelt on! Don't test me on this,” I grit out. My gut is telling me she needs it on, and I never question that second sense when it comes to instances such as this.

Angrily, she does as I ask but mumbles underneath her breath about stubborn men the entire time. My mouth wants to spew out apologies, but I'm not sorry, not in the least. I'd rather have her angry with me, than injured, or worse, dead.

My arm begins to burn from reloading and firing clip after clip of what feels like never-ending bullets, but I never let that deter me, our lives are clearly at stake. Tires are squealing, men are shouting, and the asphalt is pebbling, bouncing up at us from the road where it's been struck, and is pinging back up at my hand. The ache from the splintered tar should have me jerking my arm inside of the window and protecting it, but I let the pain from it fuel me.

Our car veers to the side after a pop that could only mean one thing, at least one of our tires has been lanced by a gunshot and has blown. A hideous boom sounds off, deafening me. Before I have the chance to secure myself by belting my body to the seat, we begin to roll. Trees pass by in a blur, I'm tossed from one side to the other, I can feel the roof of the car on my back as we land.

“Luca!” Mera sobs out my name. “Luca, answer me!” Her hysterical shouting has my instincts roaring. I want to answer her, tell her I'm okay, but the way

my head's ringing, and my mouth is frozen, I can't.

Nothing is working.

The world around me turns black and I fade into a bliss of unawareness.



I come to and try to move only to discover I'm tied to a chair, and that's when my memories play back like a movie projector.

I take stock of my injuries. Every motherfucking inch of me hurts.

A mercurial smile spreads from one cheek to the other. They made one crucial error when they stripped me down. Morons like my captors should do their research when they take a prisoner, because if they had, they'd know that they left me with one of my favorite weapons.

They took my suit jacket, they took my shoe strings, and my belt, but these dumbasses, they left my tie hanging around my neck in a loose noose.

Only, it won't be me my necktie chokes, no, it'll be theirs.

Hearing a whimper from the opposite side of my cell, my head tilts that way as my head swiftly rotates in that direction. And when I take stock of the scene that's playing out before me—I become enraged.

My vision is lost in a red fog and my hands tighten into fists. As a result, sweat beads on my forehead and trickles down my jaw from the effort of trying to escape my snug bindings.

A growl reverberates from me when I notice the terror in my woman's eyes.

“Touch her again, and I'll rip your fingers from your hands one digit at a time,” I threaten the guard who has a hard on for my girl.

He chuckles at me then taunts me, “What are you going to do from your cell, pretty boy? You can't touch me and you know it. So stop with the theatrics, huh?” Guard one continues antagonizing me.

It's what guard number two says that has my ire amping up to an all-time high. "You're going to make us a pretty penny at the auction, sweet thing."

"I'll kill you!" I roar, yanking on the chains that have me anchored to the cement block walls. "I'll kill you, your momma and your daddy, fuckface!"

"Aw, what did my folks ever do to you to warrant such threats?" Guard two inquires.

"They spawned you," I remark with no shits given.

"I've got a surprise for you," Guard one murmurs.

"Yeah? What's that motherfucker?" I grit out the question.

"You'll be sold in a different sort of auction. Bids are already coming in. Seems you've made yourself a list of enemies, Mr. Alvarez." Mera's continual whimpering has dreaded goosebumps pebbling my skin.

"If I don't end you, my brother will," I inform him, my eyes catching Mera's. I don't remove them from her, watching her, silently telling her with my look that neither of us will be sold, Julius and the boys will be coming for us. And if they don't make it on time, I will fight until my last dying breath to get us out of here.

"Ya think? Him and what army?" I don't see which one asks this, but it doesn't matter, because soon, they'll both be eternally silenced.

"Prepare to meet your makers, boys. Because your days are limited," I rage, harassing them.

"Is that a threat, Mr. Alvarez?"

"No. It's a damn promise," I fastidiously state, staring deeper into Mera's eyes, giving her an oath, "It's a fact. We're going home and you'll be dead."

The fuckfaces have the gall to laugh at me. They think they have the upper hand, but they don't know what I do. By taking me and my Curly Sue, they've pissed off my brother, and when he's salty, people die.

In order to press my point, I begin whistling the theme song to *Jaws*. I may not be a shark, but my teeth are just as sharp and deadly.

“You’re one crazy motherfucker, Alvarez,” one of the shithead guards declares. “Leave her be, Percy. We were ordered not to damage the goods.”

“Percy,” I snort. “Did your parents hate you that much?” My taunting does what I expected it to, it turns his attention to me.

“Watch your words, Alvarez,” he snaps. “I’m not the one that will see the end of his days at the hands of a mad man intent on skinning you alive.”

“Maybe not,” I say, attempting to shrug my shoulders. “But my death will be easier than yours.”

“Come on, Maribus, let’s see what the bosses want us to do next now that the prisoners have been detained and secured,” Percy suggests.

“Percy and Maribus,” I say, memorizing those ridiculous names.

“That’s us,” Maribus proudly states, rocking back and forth on his feet. “We’re your caretakers until bidding time runs out.”

“And when is that?” I inquire.

“When the bosses feel that they’ve acquired the top bid,” Maribus tells me.

“They’re expecting to get millions for you,” Percy conveys, a smirk plastered on his ugly mug.

“Proud of yourselves are you? Do you honestly think I’ll be leaving this place with one of your top contenders?” I ask, ruining their confidence as their happy mask slips.

“We do,” Percy admits.

“I’ve got some advice for you two,” I say, smirking.

“Yeah? What’s that?” Maribus demands.

Wanting to be a further pest and irk them to no end, I begin whispering so that they have to lean in so that they can hear what I’m saying, “Run. Get as far away as you can.” What I don’t say is that I want them to go on the lam. I want to chase them, hunt them, ruin them, and destroy them.

They snort and laugh as they leave, only I know that I’ll be the one to have

the last laugh.



CHAPTER 1

MERA

AS SOON AS THE HEAVY-STEEL DOORS SLAM SHUT BEHIND THE NUTSO guards, an eerie feeling cradles around me, suffocating me.

We're trapped, with no way out or an escape route in sight.

I'm petrified. I always have some sort of witty comeback on the tip of my tongue, but those two leering at me like two perverted A-holes, had my mouth sealed tightly shut, as if a powerful adhesive was smeared on my lips. I would've done anything to keep their slimy hands off of me.

Just the thought of them touching me has my stomach rolling and saliva gathering in my mouth.

Trying to gain my composure, I pant, "Luca. Are you alright?"

"I've had worse, Curly Sue. How are you? Anything broken? Is your vision clear?" He rapidly shoots off questions inquiring about my health.

"That doesn't answer my question, Luca. And I have a headache from all of the bouncing around in the car, but other than that, the seatbelt saved me." She mumbles the last part, not wanting to let me know that I was right about ordering her to snap it around her.

"I'm alright, baby doll. I promise. Nothing I won't survive," he swears.

"I've never been so scared in my life as I was when I saw you being flung

from one side of the car to the other. I thought you were dead,” I say, sobbing and shuddering. “You’ve been out for what seems to be hours.”

Even with those morons threatening me, and taunting me, my eyes wouldn’t stray from him for long, watching his chest rise and fall.

My biggest fear was that I would look away, and he’d stop breathing. My mind kept thinking that if I willed him to live, he would. Now, my eyes are dropping and I’m so damn tired that I’m having a hard time staying alert and awake.

“Mera, I think you’re going into shock, I need you to stay with me, okay?” Luca begs.

“I’m exhausted,” I tell him through chattering teeth, then, I begin babbling. “So sleepy. Can’t keep my eyes open. Cold, so cold.”

“The adrenaline is wearing off. Talk to me, gorgeous. Tell me what happened after I lost consciousness,” he implores. “Have you seen Leo?”

“No,” I groan. “The car blew up after they dragged us out. I didn’t see him get out! Luca, I think... I think he’s dead.”

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck,” he chants. “The others, Mera. What about the others? Julius? Shayne? The boys?”

“I heard gunshots, hollering, tires screeching, but I didn’t see anything as they dragged me away. I think we were the only ones they took. They weren’t happy to discover it was us in the car, Luca. We confused them when we split up.”

“Then we did the right thing. If Julius, Shayne, and the boys made it out, then they’ll be coming for us, Curly Sue. That I can guarantee you.”

“If we’re not sold first.” I begin to giggle uncontrollably, only to end with a sob. The situation isn’t funny, not in the least, I have no clue why I’m laughing hysterically like I am.

“Mera? Mera, look at me!” Luca thunders, and just like that, my laughter stops.

“What? What is it, Luca?” I ask. His voice is hard and unyielding as I begin

panting and twirling my head around for unseen threats.

My body begins rocking back-and-forth on this withered and threadbare cot I'm cuffed to. If this is the beginning of what my life is going to look like, I don't want any part of it. I'd rather them kill me and get it over with. Our eyes clash, and the blood flowing down the side of his face has tears welling in my eyes.

"You're hurt, Luca. You're bleeding. They... they wouldn't let me tend to your wounds. They laughed at me when I asked."

"They want me vulnerable, Mera. But I swear to you, I'm fine."

"You're not fine, Luca! Not even a little bit!" I boom, my voice ricocheting like a snare drum around this dungeon-style basement we're being held prisoner in.

"That's it, kitten, show me those claws." He heckles me.

Why does he want me angry, anyway? "We need to be plotting and planning a way out of this godforsaken predicament we're in, not arguing."

"Until my hands are untied, there's not much I can do about our current predicament, beautiful. But I know my family, and they won't rest until they've recovered us. But I am curious about what you think about one thing," he says, distracting me.

"What's that?" I ask, my body no longer quaking and my thoughts now my own, and not that of my trepidations.

"What's your opinion about the goon squad?" he questions, crooking an eyebrow at me. "They're something, aren't they?"

A baleful bark of laughter escapes me before I answer him, "You mean tweedle-dee and tweedle-dumb? They're egotistical—so dang enamored and full of themselves that it isn't even funny. They think they're God's gift to women, but they're disgusting. No better than swamp trash."

"Are they the touchy feely type of guys, Mera?" he quizzes. I have the feeling he's digging for information without being obvious about it.

"Not too bad," I remark. "They tried to take advantage of this situation and

cop a feel of the girls, but before they could grab me, some other guy snapped at them and told them to cut it out. Something about keeping me virginal and undefiled for my “buyers”.” My voice becomes sullen as I downcast my eyes, thinking about the fact that I wish I hadn’t kept my virtue so long only for it to be stolen.

I *should have* given in to my inhibitions earlier on, and I *should have* given myself to Luca like I’ve wanted to on so many different occasions. But when I give someone my virginity, I want it to be special and meaningful, not only a roll in the hay to get it done and over with. I’m just not wired that way.

“Do you have any regrets, Luca?”

“Why the sudden change in topic, Mera? What are you regretting, baby doll?”

“The fact that I saved myself for someone special to come into my life, and now, I may not have a choice in who takes that gift away from me,” I whisper.

“No one will ever take anything from you that you don’t willingly give freely, Tammaera. I swear to you, before that happens, we will be freed. I’d die before letting something like that happen to you,” he vows.

“Don’t say that, Luca.” That thought alone has me sobbing. “The idea of you not being around breaks my heart and shatters my soul.”

“I’ll never purposefully leave you, Curly Sue. I’ll fight tooth and nail before letting that happen. You and me, once this is through and these fucktards have been dealt with, we will be happening.”

“Just like that, huh? Don’t I get a say-so in who my life partner will be?” I snarkly reply.

Not because I’m angry at his proclamation, really, I’m not. Annoyed, yes. Angry, no. I’m thrilled, but I refuse to let him deem something as is and let him snap his meaty fingers and give in to his every demand and whim.

I wouldn’t be me if I didn’t fight him—somewhat. When we do eventually get together, and I’m choosing to believe his premonition that we will be together, I refuse to give up the small amount of independence I’ve recently

found and have been given. I need and desire the freedom to make choices of my own when it pertains to my life.

Do I want Luca? Absolutely. With a thirst that feels as if it will never be quenched no matter how large of a body of water is placed before me to drink from.

Will I let him mentally will us to be together? I'll only give him enough leeway with that before I go full steam crazy on him.

"Just like that," he growls, hunger for me evident in his gaze.

"We'll see," I saucily reply.

"We'll do more than see," he growls. It's impressive the way he does that. I love that when it comes to me, his animalistic side takes over and barrels its way to the forefront, it makes me feel—special and safe.

"If you say so," I harrumph, crossing my arms blatantly across my chest. Unlike Luca, I'm not bound to my chair. I do, however, have a chain shackled to my ankle that only allows me to move a few feet from where it's anchored to the wall, but I can still throw attitude by using my limbs.

"Keep running from me, Mera. I fuckin' love the chase," he threatens. His intimidating, gruff tone causes chill bumps to race up and down my flesh.

"Is that an imminent threat, Luca?" I ask, tilting my head while waiting for a response.

"Fuck, no. It's a goddamn guarantee," he hisses.

"We'll see," I banter.

"Stop using that phrase, Tammaera. You need to keep in mind, and not forget, Little Red Riding Hood, I'm the big bad wolf in this scenario. I'm the predator in this dilapidated situation, and once I have you securely out of this place, I'm going to sink my teeth into you, and mark you as my own."

My body shivers in response, because that was *hawt*, with a mother bleeping capital H.



CHAPTER 2

LUCA

EVEN WITH THIS HOVEL THAT WE'RE BEING DETAINED INSIDE OF BEING DAMP, it's not chilly, instead, it's sweltering hot. The boiling temperature is scorching enough that I feel as if I'm trapped inside of a heat box being baked alive. Sweat pours down my back in rivulets, pooling at the crease of my ass and waist.

I'm not even in the right mindset to give an accurate description of how my dick and balls are suffering. It's a *rashy* underpass that's under construction that should come with a warning, or at least a suggestion sign stating that you shouldn't be traveling down under without a full blast of air conditioning to cool your tunnel—no pun intended.

Okay, maybe a little pun because that shit's funny as hell. It'd be even funnier if I wasn't the intended audience that the shit was directed at.

On top of all of that, the perspiration is dripping in tandem from my forehead, sliding down my temples and burning my eyes, which is causing my vision to be somewhat blurry.

I've lost count of the many hours, days, weeks, or possible months that we've been stuck down here, waiting for the Crumleys to finalize their debauchorous, depraved auction plans where it pertains to us. I can't say with certainty what the right timespan has been since we were abducted, but it feels as if it's been several decades at minimum.

My throat has pus pockets from the lack of water that's been supplied to me, and my stomach feels like it's ulcerated from the lack of consistent sustenance. I'm bloated, lethargic, and weak. I'm only being provided enough nutrients to keep me alive. Granted, in my current state, the term 'alive' doesn't mean a helluva lot because I feel, look and smell like absolute shit.

"Come on, brother," I beg Julius in a low timbre so that Mera doesn't hear the concern in my tone, needing him and the boys to get their act together, and get here already.

The only bright side in this tragic and horrific event is that Mera gets fed three square meals a day, and the fact that they've left a full jug of water that they refill daily, plus a glass to replenish when she gets thirsty.

I hadn't lied before when I stated that I'd die for her. I abso-fucking-lutely will without any shadow of a doubt. But in my mind, I never predicted that it'd be due to a pitiful case of starvation, or severe dehydration. I have no way of refueling myself if it comes down to a fight of the fittest. At this point, I may as well flop over to my back, show my belly, and beg for a rub down.

We were so damn well protected that I still can't figure out how we were overpowered, caged in, and conquered the way we were.

I wanted to be the hero in her story. In the figment of my imagination, I was the one who took a bullet that'd save her life, pushed her out of the way of a speeding car, and stopped the hit meant for her. If I go out like this, I won't be wearing any damn cape, and it'll be anything but heroic.

I've become an empty shell of the man I was before being trapped, exiled, and imprisoned inside of a tiny as fuck, subsurface confinement cell. My trousers, without a belt to keep them upright, are barely staying on my hips, and even in my upright seated position, I can feel the lacerations of bedsores perforating on my ass end, plus my lower back from lack of active motion. I may not be a medical professional, but even I know that infection is no doubt running rampant throughout my body at this point. Should my brother and the boys persevere and find us in time, I can only hope I won't be too far gone to save.

My body droops, followed by my eyes, as I fall into a pit of oblivion.



“What are you doing? Keep your slimy hands off of him!” I rouse to hear Mera shrilling like a banshee. “Leave him alone! Go away! Shoo!”

My Curly Sue keeps things interesting and refreshing. I never know what’s going to come out of her mouth the next time she opens it. The last innuendo she used has me internally snorting. I wish it was going to be as easy as swatting flies away, but something tells me that I won’t be handed one of those nifty fly swatters once they drag me out of here.

“It’s going to be okay, sweetness,” I say, trying to reassure her. “It takes more than a love tap from these two to make me hurt.” I add a wink to show everybody that I’m not afraid.

As long as their attention is stuck on me, and she’s left alone, no amount of torture can faze me, and I won’t put up any resistance to their “punishments”.

“Where are you taking him?” she begs, her eyes imploring, attempting to coerce the two jackasses, the same lowlifes that have been subjugating her with their tawdry, highbrow taunting since our arrival, to give her an honest, and sincere answer.

I start to worry about her mental state of mind, hoping she’s not on the brink of breaking due to our entrapment as she growls, thrashes, and tosses her head around like she’s the leading character in *The Exorcist*, nearly the same way as the girl did as she was undergoing the demonic purging.

“Don’t worry, girl. We’re going to take good care of Luca here, aren’t we, Maribus?”

“Sure we will, Percy,” Maribus answers his partner in crime. It might’ve been more believable if he wasn’t snickering when he said it, however, and Mera obviously feels the same way because she snorts out her disbelief.

Mera narrows her eyes at them, and flings some pretty colorful language their

way, not so bad that she needs to make a pitstop at a Catholic church's confessional and ask for the almighty's forgiveness—yet, but it was close for a minute there. I swear, somewhere in those “criticisms” of their cowardice, and repugnant manhood, in which she used the correct terminology for said body parts mentioned using the dictionary's words such as penis, sphincter, and in those rambling slurs, there was a female sized eight foot going somewhere—unpleasant. A place that should be physically impossible for her foot to breach, like one of their rectums being stretched far and wide.

What has me grinning like a fool, even through my monumental agony, was her showstopper, the ending of her rant where she made “guaranteed” promises to smite them. I didn't hold back the chuckle, that line deserved it.

And it's sorta frightening to admit this to myself, seeing as I'm known as a badass who's never been one of those bosses who backs down from a fight and cowardly hides behind one of my soldiers, that I purposefully looked up toward the ceiling to assess things and reassure myself that a lightning bolt wasn't heading this way.

Because unfuckingfortunately, I'm in the direct path it would take in order to get to them, and since I'm being all kinds of honest with myself and shit, I would prefer not to be struck by my woman's newfound, wrathful vindictiveness. No matter what form that scorn takes as she dishes it out.

It's comical to me when I notice that they too have looked upward to see if one of the Greek Gods were going to listen to her plea and provide her with the swift justice she's asked for. I find myself in a peculiar, foreign position, one that has my brows lowering in complete bafflement—I'm conflicted, unsure if I should smugly clap for her like my normal, antagonistic self would, or plead with her to stop, and reason with her before she inadvertently hurts herself or draws their interest to her more than they already are.

What ends up having my jaw dropping in trepidation, however, is that I would swear under oath that I heard a bark, a real life, snarling woof. One that would stop me in my tracks on the streets to see if a sick hound, suffering from rabies, had made its way down south from the mountainous wilderness, happened to be in the midst of gearing up his attack to shred his teeth through my skin. Being ripped limb from limb is not on my bucket list of top ten things to experience in my lifetime.

Although, thinking back to the one time I was dared by a bunch of drunk idiots to watch the freakiest movie to ever be produced, one that I knew wasn't in my wheelhouse of things I wanted to see, because let's be frank, I knew that the damn mangy mutt would give me nightmares for weeks afterward—like it would any sane motherfucker that didn't want to look at every mongrel on the street and run screaming like a little bitch, Cujo was slightly less volatile in his temperament, and had far less foam frothing from his mouth than my woman does at this moment as she tries to break free from the framed box that's keeping her from reaching her utmost desire—me.

Mera ferociously clutches onto the unbending steel bars of her cell, shaking them with all of her might, gripping them with enough violence that her knuckles begin transforming to a more translucent shade.

Her wide, cowed-filled eyes have tears leaking out in flowing streams—freefalling from their frightened depths, trekking down her pinkened, swollen cheeks, and leaving a trail of tread marks in their wake.

As my sight zones in on her, examining her from top to bottom, I can tell she's been inconsolable, having fitful rounds of bawling her eyes out while I was passed out from the duress of my physical inadequacy. The inflammation that's flared up on her majestic, stunning face, has me deflating, because even if I'd go against a platoon of men in order to hold her in my arms one last time, to ease the pain I see in her heart, in my current state, I'm too damn frail to even put one foot in front of the other without faceplanting onto the hard floor.

If I was a better man, one that was a believer in the power of prayer, I'd be on bended knee, repenting for my sins and petitioning a higher being for this not to be the very last time that I get the chance to lay my eyes on her lustrous beauty. If it's not, and fuck, I hope with every fiber of my being that it isn't, I'll never again take for granted the gift of her gleaming smile, the way her eyes brightly glow when she's thrilled, the way she intoxicatingly licks her bottom lip when she's attempting to solve a metaphorical puzzle, or the way she leers at an item when it doesn't do what she's trying to mentally force it to do—as if her glaring irritation, alongside with the added dramatic sigh of exasperation with the inanimate object, believing that the act itself will entice her target to do her bidding.

Everything about her thrills me, even her pesky bantering only makes me want her that much more.

Mera is the best thing that's ever traipsed into my life.

There's so much about her I still want to explore, understand, and unravel. And if my family will get their shit together I'll have the chance to do all of those things.

"No! No!" she screams as I'm dragged out of my ten-by-ten jail cell. Unable to talk, because there are no words I haven't already spoken to appease her, I instead keep my eyes glued to her, making promises with a look that I'm not sure I'll be able to keep.

Once she's out of my sight, I lower my eyes that had stayed affixed to hers and lose my hardened resolve.

"Forgive me, my Mera," I whisperingly murmur underneath my breath so these bozos don't listen in and overhear my fractured voice as I apologize to the woman I've been fighting to make mine. "I promised to never lie to you, and I'm afraid I may have accidentally done just that, even if I were doing so with good intentions behind it."



CHAPTER 3

MERA

ANGER RADIATES THROUGH EVERY ONE OF MY PORES AND MY HAIR FOLLICLES are standing on their ends from that despair feeling. I don't like Luca being out of my eyesight. Not that I can do much in the way of protecting him, I'm powerless, but dang it, at least if we were sharing the same space, I'll witness and know what injuries are being inflicted upon him and the potential outcome of said injuries.

I've never felt so darn helpless in my entire life. And that's saying a lot considering I was basically at the mercy of the sisters for most of my life, and that's not something that leaves you with any say over your daily life nor routine. Everything was scheduled for you, down to meals, showers, bedtime, and extra-curricular outings.

The rattling of keys yanks me from my reverie and drags me back into the current time. Instinctually, I back myself into the corner of my prison cell, tucking my knees into my chest, and blending into the background.

"Please don't come in here. Please don't come in here," I chant, rocking back-and-forth on my hind end, squeezing my knees tighter to my chest.

But as my luck seems to be going these days, they don't pass me by, they don't go to Luca's cage and clean it up, they come directly to the door of my iron enclosed cubicle and stand there, leering at me. Only there's lust buried in with the malicious dark looks they're usually sporting.

“The Crumley brothers would like a word with you,” a man I’ve never seen tells me, and by the twinkle in his eyes, I’m not convinced this is a good thing for me.

“Why?” I ask, biding for time as I think of a way to get out of this so-called “meeting” that Shayne’s brothers have set up. “Shouldn’t I clean up or something first? I doubt they’d want to smell the stench that’s adhered to my skin from being locked up.”

Garrick, known as Rick, is the ringleader, the man in charge, and he’s not a kind person from what Shayne’s explained to me.

“Never fall for his nice guy routine, if you ever meet him, Mera,” she warned me once upon a time.

Gideon, also known as Deon, is his second-hand man. He picks up the job if Rick is ever away or is incapacitated for any reason.

Then there’s Graham, who’s referred to as the Hammer, his nickname leaves no need for further explanation in my opinion, it’s self-serving as it stands.

And finally, there’s Gavriel, who the family simply calls Vriel—virtually, a splinter of his name and nothing more. My understanding is this... he’s not *as* involved in the enforcement side of the family business, unless it’s warranted and he’s the last man standing so to speak, he’s more of their information man, their intel person.

But that doesn’t make him any less dangerous as his brothers are.

Shayne insists he’s just as ruthless, spiteful, and merciless as the other three are. This doesn’t bode well for me having a one-on-one get together with them. As a matter of fact, it makes my skin crawl and vomit inch its way up my throat.

“Don’t worry, we’ll hose you down before we take you in to see them,” the other man at his side snickers, and I guess by the sniggering between the two, they mean that quite literally.

“And what about clean clothes? Am I to meet them wearing the same clothes I was dressed in when I was taken? They’re pretty smelly, downright ripe, and should’ve been burned days ago. Will it offend them to be in my

presence in this state?” I ask, squaring my shoulders. I refuse to allow these mean men to get the better of me, make me quake, and cause my lips to quiver.

Not happening, fellas.

I know what game they’re playing, and I refuse to be a willing participant. They’re trying to make me squirm, and that isn’t happening, not in front of their faces anyhow. Maybe when I’m back here and alone without anyone to witness my fear, I’ll give into that and allow myself to have a mini breakdown.

Maybe.

But as ill-tempered as I’m feeling right now, I doubt that’ll be happening anytime soon. If I give into that desolate temptation, it’ll be later—much, much, later.

“Don’t worry. I’m sure we have a burlap sack around here somewhere,” the first one who previously spoke says, causing them both to bowl over and laugh like a couple of hysterical hyenas.

I. Am. Not—in the least. Impressed.

“I don’t care what I’m wearing as long as it’s clean,” I shoot back, keeping my voice as calm and collected as I possibly can. I’m sure that there was a little hissing included, but that’s the least they deserve.

“Wouldn’t mind helping her dress,” the second man snickers. “Too bad we don’t supply underwear and bras.” The two of them high-five each other as if their favored football team just scored a touchdown. I’ve seen this with Leo and Luca when they’ve been glued to a television set—again, another pastime event I was not impressed with.

But these guys make it seem skeevy. They make my skin crawl. They’re vile and have no moral compass.

They’re gross.

Perverts.

Misogynistic cretins.

Sexist pigs.

The two step into my cell, getting into my space, and my tummy turns. One grabs my left arm, and the other grabs my right, neither of them are polite about it. I'm sure my skin will be donning fingerprint sized bruises from the brash way they've taken hold of me.

"Stop manhandling me! There's no reason to be so rough," I shout before lowering my voice to a more manageable, lady-like tone as I try to remove their mitts from my flesh. It hurts and I'm tired of experiencing pain—no matter the level.

"We don't answer to you or take orders from you," one of them says. "We were told to deliver you, nobody said we had to wear kid gloves while doing it."

Not wanting my treatment to become even harsher, I choose to zip my lips, and stop fighting them as they lead me to wherever it is I'm being ruthlessly dragged to.



They didn't lie, there was no shower in my future, instead I'm tossed into a cold, concrete room with a drain in the center where they douse me in hand soap and spray me down with a water hose. The water slapping against me is rough, chilling, and my teeth begin to chatter immediately. Their treatment of me is brutal and cruel.

"C-c-cold," I manage to stammer out, wrapping my arms around my midsection and cradling myself in an attempt to insert some warmth back into my frozen body. Their only reaction to my chattering teeth is to laugh. I've lived through some maltreatment in my life, but in stating that to myself, I've never endured such mercilessness. I'm not sure how to take it nor how to respond to it.

"Good enough," one states. "She'll do, at least no one will hurl from the stench and being closed in the same room as she is."

“Yeah. She’ll do,” the other parrots, tossing me a tattered rag that I’m supposing is meant to be a towel. It’s hardly large enough to cover my breasts let alone my entire being. However, I decide to go with my prior choice and remain silent. Complete and utter silence is the better alternative in this warped instance than being argumentative.

The sisters did have good advice from time to time, and in this case, taking them up on said advice is my best outcome. I hope.

I become a zombie, going through the motions, following directions, but I do it all numbly. This is the first time any man has seen me unclothed, and I may not have been violated in a sexual way, but it still feels like a violation of my mental and emotional welfare. It has me gagging, and I don’t keep that a secret from them.

“What? We aren’t good enough for you? Looking for a holy man? Too bad you decided slumming it with Luca Alvarez was a good idea. Do you know what they call him on the streets? They call him the widow maker. Wanna know why?” One of them asks, which one, I’m not sure because I’m refusing to look their way.

“W-why?” I sputter out.

“Because he doesn’t give a shit if he leaves a woman a widow. A kid fatherless. If you cross him, he’ll kill your ass and not give a fuck what the repercussion of his actions are. You think we’re the monsters? Bitch, you don’t know what viper’s nest you’ve crawled your way into. And because you’ve joined the Alvarez brood, you’re just as disposable to us as they are.”

Not able to help myself because I’m feeling shady and pissed, I ask, “Are you a husband or a father? Either of you?”

“We both are,” one of them tells me.

I mean really? They’re both married men and have to quarrel about watching another woman in such a vulnerable predicament? And yet they don’t think they’re the monsters. I can’t imagine the lies they must tell themselves in order to sleep peacefully at night.

“Then I hope he makes your wives widows and your children fatherless. Lord knows they’ll be better off and have better lives.”

“You cunt!” One bellows as he backhands me. An instantaneous throb begins to circulate across my cheek as my own hand raises and covers the abused area. Being struck on the face is a lot more painful than they make it look in the movies.

“You would wish us dead?” goon two questions.

“Without a doubt,” I answer, my shoulders squaring with stubbornness.

“Better pray that the Crumleys don’t give us the thumbs up to do with you as we please. Because, lady,” he starts, bowing low and getting in my face before saying, “you’ve done fucked up.”

“So. Have. You.” I counter, boldly enunciating the words, and staring at him without looking away, our eyes penetrating the others. Neither one of us backing down. Both of us determined to make a point.

I’m tired of being a plaything for them.

I don’t deserve it.

None of it.

But I’ll never regret standing beside Shayne, Julius, Luca, or the boys of the DreamCatcher motorcycle club and their old ladies. Therefore, if that means I’m injured or killed during the process, so be it, but I won’t take these threatening words lying down. I’m nobody’s whipping boy. I’m a good person, a lady, and if they refuse to treat me as such, I’ll return the favor. I can be just as cruel as they are. I may ask for forgiveness afterward, but it’ll never be theirs I seek.



CHAPTER 4

LUCA

AS SOON AS I WAS ESCORTED INTO ANOTHER SECTION OF THIS—WHATEVER IT is, I’m not sure if it’s a warehouse, a building, or a home-like structure, I’m slapped onto a metal, medical slab, strapped in, and an IV needle was none too kindly inserted into my arm.

“You’ll be here for a day or two until you’re at the point where you can stand on your own two feet. Then the fun begins,” one of the motherfuckers who “escorted” me to this room tells me.

“And pray tell, what fun is it that will be beginning? What do I have to look forward to?” I ask, even though I’m ninety-nine-point nine percent sure what will be going down.

“We wouldn’t want to ruin the whole shebang for you, Mr. Alvarez,” the fucker giggles like a motherfucking teenage girl who’s just been asked to prom.

“You’ve already told me that I’ll be facing my enemies for a bidding session, what else could there be?” I dare to ask.

“Well,” the second asshole snickers before talking. “They do need an opportunity to test out the merchandise.” For fuck’s sake. I’m not a goddamn toy that they need to unbox and make sure all of the pieces have been included in the packing for use.

Tilting my head to the side, I decide to try and dig for more detailed information. Better to be prepared than caught with my dick hanging out and swinging in the wind. “And what does them “trying me out” entail?”

“Uh, uh, uh,” a man sitting in the dark shadows says, clicking his tongue, and flicking his finger back and forth in a not happening motion. “Don’t push your luck, Luca Alvarez. We’ve been very generous with you, that kindness doesn’t have to continue.”

“Step forward so I can see you,” I demand, squinting my eyes trying to get a better look at the man.

When he does, a growl emanates from my throat when I notice it’s Graham, the Hammer, Crumley. I see they sent in their enforcer of sorts to intimidate me. If he thinks his presence is going to have me pissing my pants, he’s sorely mistaken. I’m not some Joe Blow off the streets, this punk ass bitch doesn’t scare me. Yes, pain hurts, but I have enough scars that prove I can survive anything these dickheads toss my way.

“Graham, my man, how’s it going?” I question, my lips tilting upward surprising him.

“So it’s true. Luca Alvarez fears no man, huh?” he asks, mirth filling his eyes.

“Or woman, or beast. Should I carry on, or do you get the point I’m making?” I continue, then cackle with laughter when I see how my words have rocked him off-kilter. His normal, fearsome games won’t work on me.

“You’re awfully sure of yourself, only you aren’t the one holding all of the cards, we are,” he states, slowly prowling my way. “I figure, when you’re back on your feet again, we’ll try playing things your way. I’ve been studying your methods and can’t wait to put them to use. On you.”

“Yay,” I say, inserting some joy into my words because these fuckers have forgotten one thing, and haven’t studied me as well as they believe they have. I still have my motherfucking necktie strung around my neck, it’s always at my beck and call, and it’s one of my favorite tools to put to use. I’ve learned its many uses, and it’s become an extension of me.

I’m damn good at what I do, and throughout the years, I’ve learned to deal

with, as well as adjust to pain, and with that being acknowledged, I can say, without any hesitancy, that pain no longer fazes me. I don't succumb to it, I embrace it like a long, lost friend.

"Enjoy this time, Luca," Graham addresses me as if we've been acquainted on a personal level before this shit, which we have not.

"Only my friends or people I like call me Luca," I inform him.

"And what do the rest of us peons call you?" Graham asks, crossing his arms across his chest and leering at me with irritation.

"You can call me, Mister Widowmaker," I say, smirking.

"I don't have a wife to make a widow, *Luca*," he states, stressing my name.

"Don't you?" I ask, slanting my head the best I can in my reclined position.

Graham's body tightens, his breath quickens, and his voice becomes strained when he asks, "And what? You think I have a wife? Where have you been getting your false information?"

"Is it though? False information that is, *Graham*? Or do you have a sweet little thing holed up in the mountains of El Paso?" I taunt, rolling the questions out not giving a damn if they hurt his touchy sensibilities. We all hurt sometimes, and I can't find it in me to pussyfoot around his emotions, I need to trigger him. "The people I have at my disposal are very good at digging up data that others try to bury."

"I don't know what it is you think you know, *Luca*, but I'm here to tell you, whatever evidence you think you've uncovered, it's wrong," he says, trying hard to convince me.

However, his argument just reinforces what has been shared with me. He's protective of his petite Spanish mistress, they may have snuck across the border to legally tie the knot, but if you dig deep enough in the right places for concrete evidence, nothing is buried deep enough that it can't be unearthed.

And my guy, he struck gold when he went scooping for as much information as possible that could be used against the Crumley brothers. He discovered

this key piece of detail when we found out about Shayne. Julius knows all about her, I wouldn't keep him in the dark about her existence, but we've chosen to keep Graham's wife out of it unless he gives us no other choice. Hopefully, it doesn't come down to using this innocent woman as a way to bring the Hammer to his knees, but we aren't above doing just that if the circumstances warrant it, and I'm sure we're fixing to hit that unfortunate crossroad.

"I think, Luca." He pauses, canting his head to the side before bending at the waist, and getting into my face. "You talk too damn much, and what you're saying, it's gonna land you six feet under."

"We've all gotta go some time, *Graham*," I rebut, aggravating him because being tied up like a Thanksgiving turkey, using my mouth is the only way I can get to him—it's my only weapon.

"I'm going to tear you from limb to limb," Graham snarlingly threatens me.

"Untie me and I'll be your Huckleberry," I taunt, hoping he lets his ego get the better of him.

"You can't stand on your own two feet," he counters. "Maybe once you're a little steadier, my brothers will let you and me go a round."

"Name the time and place, and I'll be there, Graham."

"Looking forward to it, Luca." He raps his knuckles on my steel slab before walking out the door as if we'd never had this little confrontation.

I hate that asshole.



The psycho doc begins administering the saline drip into my IV, and as soon as the cold liquid hits my veins, a startled scream reverberates through the building. I'd know that voice anywhere, and the second I begin thrashing around, my onlookers begin chuckling.

"Sounds like our other guest is getting the hose," the dead fucker number one

says, mirth laced in his tone.

“I’d have thought they’d have gone with the sponge bath route,” dead fucker number two scoffs. “That’s the choice I would’ve gone with. Have you seen her body? She’s stacked like a brick shithouse. I’d have been the first in line to wash every square inch of her body.” He waggles his eyebrows, takes both of his hands, cups them, and jiggles them at his chest, pretending to have an abundance of tits.

Piece of shit.

Someone’s about to die.

I narrow my eyes and decide that he’s the first to walk the long green mile toward his death maker—me. His demise will be from my hands.

They’re going to die. Every goddamn last one of them. I’m done playing mister nice guy, Julius and the troops better get here before I have no other alternative than to take matters into my own hands.

Fuck the consequences.



CHAPTER 5

MERA

THIS SCRAP OF MATERIAL THEY SHOVED OVER MY HEAD ISN'T MODEST, IT'S threadbare and see through. Every piece of it. You can see every contour and curve of my body. The color difference of my areolas in contrast to my complexion. My natural olive tone is now a sickly, pasty color. I don't believe it's from lack of sunlight, I think it's due to the deficiency of iron handed to me through my meals.

However, in comparison to Luca, I've been served some five-star dishes.

Again, I find myself being dragged down the hallway by the scruff of my neck. My toes are hardly touching the ground as we march toward two large doors that expand from the left side of the door jamb to the right side, and it stretches in height from the carpet on the floor to the tile of the ceiling—they're intimidating, spooky, and remind me of the gloomy cathedral at the convent.

When the man standing station outside of them opens them up, I'm tossed inside, landing on my palms and knees, scraping them, but I don't cry out from the agony of my skin being shredded. Lifting my head, I evaluate my situation, and what I conclude is, I'm in trouble.

"Tammera, please, come in and have a seat," one of the Crumley brothers says, pushing the chair out with the sole of his foot. "Join us. We'd like to have a little chat." I don't know them personally to know which one is

speaking to me, but out of the four of them, he looks to be the eldest so I'm assuming this is Garrick.

Yeah. Sure they do. Just talk, as if I'd believe that sham of a line, while we're at it, let's pretend I can buy some oceanside property in Arizona too. Lies... it's all lies.

What they mean is that they'd like to interrogate me. Break me down. Decimate my soul. What they don't know is that they can berate me, torture me, murder me, but they'll never get their sister's whereabouts from me.

They can kick rocks! I'll never help them get their evil hands on my friend, my sister, she's too good for them to corrupt. She'll never bend to their will, she'll never bow down, she'll never submit, and neither will I.

With shaky limbs, I push myself up, and after a few tries, I get my feet planted on the floor and begin walking their way. Luckily, my fear and anxiety is veiled by my trembling limbs from the crash and fall earlier.

"Thank you, for coming and speaking with us, Tammera," one of the other brothers remarks, portraying the part of a good guy, and acting as if I had any other choice in the matter. Newsflash... I didn't, because if I did, neither Luca nor I would be in their company or in their presence—ever. Just being in the same proximity as them makes my tummy curdle. The vileness in the air sours their showmanship of being welcoming.

Still in a mood, I spit out, "I'd like nothing more than to say it is a pleasure, but we all know that's unfair, because it'd be a pretext."

"I'm sorry you feel that way," the third Crumley brother adds, his lips turned down in a frown, disruptively snarling at me. His face and body language are contrary to his words. "We've treated you better than we do most of our guests. Your relationship with our sister gave you that protection, but don't mistake our kindness to you thus far, because that can end here and now. Sit." His booming bark has me doing as he says, this guy by far wears his maliciousness on his shirt sleeve, he doesn't hide it behind a mask like the other two did.

"Graham," brother one snaps. "Cool it."

The two of them have an intrusive stare off, until the one I now know as

being Graham, *the Hammer*, concedes, and nods his head. “Fine.”

“Let me start off by properly introducing ourselves, I’m Garrick,” brother one rattles. Then he points to brother two, and says, “this is Gideon, the one who just snapped at you is Graham, and to his right is Gavriel.”

Not willing to push my luck by being rude, well, not any further unfriendly than I already have been, I bite my tongue, mimic Graham, and nod my head in acceptance, but don’t open my mouth to utter even a single sound.

“We need your help, Tammera,” Garrick continues. “And you’re in a position to do that.”

“And why would I? Help you that is?” I ask, grimacing because my posture may be amicable, but my tone isn’t. My words are downright inconsiderate, bitchy, and full of disrespect. I can’t seem to help myself, even though I’m pretty sure it won’t earn me any brownie points in my favor.

All four of them narrow their eyes at me, and I see the struggle they’re having maintaining their hospitable disposition. Since I’m already in hot water, and on a roll with my discourteous manners, I decide that keeping my trap shut now won’t matter when push comes to shove.

“Watch your tone,” Graham snaps, his brutal command makes me shiver. But I’m successful in hiding the way they affect me—barely.

As men, they should be ashamed of themselves. But I know they lack sentiment, and even though they give it their best shot, no matter how hard they try and mimic them, they don’t understand emotions, they’re psychotic, narcissistic sociopaths, so that’s one thing they’ll never grasp... *authentic feelings*.

Clearing my throat, I hold my shoulders back and my head high. I have a point to make. “Your accommodations so far have been lacking in their warmth, the invitation that I had no other choice but to accept hasn’t made me want to give in to your pleas and do your bidding. I’ve been taunted, bullied, manhandled, and my body has been invaded by leering eyes and wandering hands. I’m not feeling cooperative.” I end my tirade by folding my arms across my chest and harrumphing.

If they expect me to bend over backward for them, they’ve got a lot of

groveling and making up to do. Not that I'll truly give them what they want, but I can act the part and make them believe I'm aiming to please them. But in order for me to begin mastering this asinine game of theirs, I have a few concessions. And if I'm their last resort, it'll be them bending over backward for me.

"Sorry if the pea underneath your mattress is lumpy and isn't to your liking, *princess*," Graham sneers, his entire body coiled and ready to pounce. His sarcastic tone has me shivering inside, but outwardly, I'm as cool as the proverbial cucumber. That's one thing I'd prefer to be ten feet away from—his wrath. He's a scary man, and from what I've been told by Shayne, hitting a woman isn't beneath him. "But we have fed and watered you like the bitch you are."

"Yeah, still not feeling encouraged to help you out, big guy." What the holy bejesus has gotten into me? I know better than to provoke the beast. My mouth seems to be running away from me, and my only hope is that the other three won't let him enact the beating that's burning behind his retinas upon me. The sisters always warned us that there's a time and a place for everything, and right now, my smart elleck mouth isn't necessary. Needed? Absolutely, because if they think I'll just roll over and give them what they want, they've got another thing coming. I'll *never* give up Shayne and after being under their so-called care all this time, I can see why she was so afraid of them. They're scary as heck.

He wants to make me bleed.

Any idiot can see that, so why is it that I'm egging him on?

Why can't I control my tongue where he's concerned?

I've never been this belligerent in my life. But there's something about him that entices me to act this way. He brings a darkness out of me that I wasn't aware was there. Instead of putting that flame out, I need to stroke it, brighten it, evoke it.

Graham bangs his fist on the table, spittle flying from his mouth when he speaks, snarling out, "You will watch the way you're speaking to me, little girl."

“That’s disgusting,” I state, wiping my well-worn top free from the flying saliva that splattered the cloth. “Say it, don’t spray it.”

Antagonizing him seems to be the wrong move, because before I can move, he’s directly in front of me. He leaped over the table as if it were nothing more than a pesky hurdle. My eyes widen in shocked surprise as he grips my top, anchoring me to him from the tight grasp he has on me. Fear shoots through me, immobilizing me. Panic takes root as my breathing becomes erratic, my vision blurs, and the urge to pee myself becomes too realistic. Until this moment, the pathetic men in the movies who urinated on themselves was hilarious, I’m no longer finding the humor in it, now that I’m in the same darned position.

Graham brushes my nose with his, I can taste and feel his breath as he exhales. Bumps rise on my skin, and I feel like I’m being bathed in sinister shadows. “I’m no longer feeling... friendly. You think your accommodations are atrocious now, keep trying me, and it’ll feel like a resort in equivalence. Get me?”

“Graham, that’s enough, no need to subjugate our guest. She’s going to behave now, aren’t you?” Garrick asks, only there’s no execution of dominance behind the instruction or question. His mirth at watching me be at his brother’s mercy is hidden behind the outcry, but it’s there. I can hear it even though he doesn’t want me to. He’s still trying to be the good guy in this scenario. But that ship has sailed, none of the brothers have any redeeming qualities. I should know, I’ve tried my best to find a shred of decency among them, but sadly, it’s hopeless. I worry that they weren’t born by natural means, but were instead, spewed from the pits of Hades and Lucifer himself is their patriarch.

They’re barbaric pigs who I hope Luca spit roasts like they’re rotisserie pork.

Graham grins, it’s manic, and fear-filling. “I’ll stop when she agrees to be grateful for our hospitality and agrees to not only answer our questions but be our obedient little mouse.” His insult should grate on my nerves, but his hissed requirements have me shaking. For once, I can’t force words to leave my mouth, so I simply nod my head.

This is not the way I’ll win this endeavor. I need to find my backbone again,

and if he strikes me, I'll deal. They won't meet me in the middle if I become weak and meek.

"I'll be respectful and stop running my mouth if you agree to a few of my terms," I manage to wheeze out since he still has a tight grip on me. The material is twisted around my neck, choking and restricting my airway.

"You're not in any position to execute any negotiations or make any demands, little mouse," Graham growls, tightening his hold on me.

Gavriel, speaking up for the first time says, "Release your hands from her, Graham. Let's hear what the sheep has to say."

Great, first I'm a mouse, now I'm a sheep.

CHAPTER 6

LUCA

THE DRIP OF THE IV HELPS ME KEEP TRACK OF THE TIME AS IT PASSES. I'M ON bag two, which means I was more dehydrated than I thought. They may be gearing up to try and break me, but what they're doing is invigorating me.

Fools.

I would laugh, but with a man in a white lab coat looming over me, and guards stationed at the door, I won't take the chance of pissing them off. I'm not ready. I don't have the strength to go against them yet, but once I do, they'll understand their mistake. They've misjudged me, they always do. I may seem weak and feeble, but that's when I thrive. I don't like being the underdog, it's why I'm a warrior. When they least expect it, I'll pounce.

But first, hydration. As I wait on this cold, metal bed, my mind drifts to Mera. Why did she scream? Were they really hosing her down? If so, *why* were they doing so? All I know is once I'm able to wreak my vengeance on them, they'll pay for every single teardrop that's fallen from her beautiful eyes, and for every mark they've left on not only her body, but my own.



At some point, during my electrolyte infusion treatment, I must've fallen

asleep. When I come to, my eyes are gritty, my throat is raw, and my body is so damn depleted that I feel as if I've missed a month's worth of nightly rest. Which could be an actuality due to the fact that I have no clue how long I've been stuck at the Crumleys' mercy.

Time has evaded me in the darkness of their underground prison. As far as I know, I could have been here for days, weeks, or months and not have one damn clue how long has come to pass because everything since we were captured is a blurry mess. My brain is foggy when it comes to a timeframe—one hour, minute, and second is blending into the next.

A form leaning against the wall, steps out of the shadow and I recognize him immediately. His hands are haphazardly jingling the loose change in his pockets, a nervous twitch for others, but for him, it seems to be a way for him to harness his anger. "Your woman needs to learn her place." Graham's vocalization is harsh and incensed when he expresses this. "I had to put hands on her to teach her that lesson."

The temperature in my body rises, and my limbs begin to tremble with rage. My eyes become predatory, and my voice comes out animalistic as I growl, "You did what?"

A confident and satisfied smile smears across his face when he warns me, "She was out of line. You should've taught her how to speak to her betters. To those who hold her life in their hands. If she'd been anybody else I would've snapped her neck. Count your lucky stars that she has the in that we need, otherwise, she'd be swimming with the fish."

"What exactly did you do, Hammer?" I ask, needing to know what his actions were so I can repay them in kind.

"Don't worry, Widowmaker. I didn't get a chance to mark her porcelain skin before my brothers stepped in and saved the day. But I did give her a warning, one I hope she remembers the next time she decides to smart off."

Huffing, I say, "Damn good thing, too."

He chuckles before asking, "Why? What do you think you can do in *your* condition? You're not in any position to take me on, Mr. Alvarez."

"Release me from my bindings and let's see what type of threat I am to you,

Graham?” I challenge him, lifting my brow. While I know I’m weaker than a newborn foal, the sneer on his face combined with the fact he boldly admitted he put his hands on Mera has me taunting the bastard.

“I don’t take advantage of weaker opponents than me,” he simply states, but there’s something dark and barbaric in his eyes that says his statement is a complete and utter lie.

“Then why did you so much as lay a finger on Mera? Do you not consider her as being weaker than you are?” I mock him with his own words, throwing them back at him in order to get under his skin, because he and I both know that she weighs considerably less than he does, and we’re both aware of the fact that she doesn’t have the muscle mass to fight, dodge, and keep up with him and his meaty fists. “Your affirmations don’t hold any validity. You are a contradiction in comparison to your utterings, Hammer. Or is it that you’re generally a liar?”

“There are exceptions to every rule, Luca Alvarez.”

“Such as, Graham Crumley?”

His jaw snaps together and he grinds his teeth before answering me. “When a woman puts herself in a man’s position, she gets treated as such.”

“As far as excuses go—” I pause and let that thought linger before I continue, “that’s pretty pathetic. Women and children, they’ll never be as physically paralleled to a grown man who pumps iron and who grew up fighting his way through life.”

“I thought you Alvarez’s were all about women being capable of throwing a punch, shooting a gun, and trash talking? So now, who’s being the contradictory one?”

This fucker needs to be put in his place. If I weren’t tied up and restricted, I’d be more than happy to be the one who puts him there. But since I can’t punch him with my fists, I’ll do it with my words. “You’re right. We are all about teaching our women to take care of themselves. We instruct them how to survive, how to fight, and how to take someone down who’s using their size to terrorize them. However, we’d never maliciously or viciously attack a female just because we don’t like how she stands up for herself, others, or

puts a bully in their place. It's infuriating and shameful to us with morals how some men use their density as an intimidation tactic, isn't it?"

The uppercut to my chin doesn't come as a surprise to me after the way I antagonized and riled him. I suspected he'd react in this way. Once he takes two steps back, I raise my brow.

"And you just proved my point, Graham," I remark. "Your actions don't match your words. How would you react if I, my brother, or one of our men took a road trip to El Paso and did to your woman what you did to mine?"

"Don't talk about her!" he shouts, leveling his twitching finger my way. "Don't threaten what's mine."

"Then don't touch what's mine!" I thunder, my chest heaving. Being tied down and immobile is irritating and painful for my ego. All I can do is clench my fists and curl my toes. I can't retaliate using anything outside of issuing verbal threats. "And don't use her for your dirty deeds, either. Your beef is with me, Julius, and the DreamCatchers."

"Funny you should mention them. They're dead. We took them out, didn't we?" He tilts his head sideways, waiting on my response. When I nod my head, he smirks. The brothers didn't take them out, an explosion of our own design did. But if he wants to take culpability for our devious scheme, I'll let him. Makes no difference to me because he and I both know the truth. He rocks his head back and forth, the cogs turning ninety to nothing in his head. And whatever he's thinking about, has his face turning an agitated shade of red. "Our beef, as you say, is with you and Julius!" he roars. "You took something from us that wasn't yours to take."

"I wasn't aware that a person was another's possession," I argue, clicking my tongue. "Who do you belong to?"

"I'm my own person," he growls.

"Whose dick did you have to suck in order to earn that liberty?" I ask, "because according to your ideology, people aren't individuals, we're all in servitude to someone bigger than us until we earn our stripes and claim our freedom."

"Graham! Take a walk and cool off," Garrick says, issuing an order as the

Hammer's fist is raised to rein down another series of blows to my already battered and bruised body. As the eldest Crumley brother, he's the man in charge and the others follow his directives whether they want to or not, it's the way things work in our world.

"This isn't done, Widowmaker." Before he has the opportunity to swivel on his feet and exit this makeshift hospital room, I wiggle my eyebrows at him and blow him a kiss.

"Looking forward to our next debate," I provoke. "See you next time, buddy."

"Fucker," Graham ridicules, trying to belittle me, only his insults are subpar compared to what I'm sure he really wants to say. Garrick has his uses, at least he stopped the beating I'm sure was coming to me before it started.

"You really shouldn't wind him up," Rick suggests. "Out of us brothers, he has the worst temper and thinks with his fists and not his brain."

"You don't say," I snark, keeping up my smartass routine. "Maybe you should put a leash on him, Ricky boy."

"I see you're full of advice today, Mr. Alvarez. Should I bring your love interest in here so you can steer her in the right direction?"

"And what direction should I steer her toward, Garrick? Please, do share with the class."

"Toward what will keep her alive," he counsels, shrugging his shoulders as if that's a recommendation I should seriously consider. "It may be the only choice she has if she wants to see the light of day."

"And what does she need to do for you in order for that to happen?" I prompt, needing him to expand on that earlier tip he gave me.

"What she needs to do is help us get our sister back so she can marry the man we made a pact with. You have no idea what the repercussions will be to your family and allies if that doesn't happen," he answers.

"Enlighten me, Rick. Tell me what will happen to my brother and our extended family if this marriage contract is broken?"

Grinning, he leans over me and says, “I’ll sell your women to the most sadistic bastard I can find, and I’ll disembowel then filet your men before I chop them up into teeny tiny pieces and spread their fragments from one end of the earth to the other.”

Yawning, I goad him. “That’s a boring threat, Rick. It’s not one we haven’t heard from our enemies before. It’s very unoriginal of you, Garrick. As you can see, our women are still happily with their men living their best lives. My guys, they’re still out on the streets, nobody’s been able to touch them yet. They’ve received the best coaching there is when it comes to avoiding capture by our adversaries. They know every form of martial arts available and have had extensive combat training. Even the military can’t keep up with them. You need to come up with something original if you want to scare me.”

“You’re telling me y’all are the best in avoiding being captured, yet here you are. At my mercy. And don’t forget, we took out the entire DreamCatcher club. We have resources you haven’t even begun to uncover. We’re a bigger threat than you think we are, Luca.”

“Are you?” I ask, slanting my head, pretending to consider what he said. “I don’t think y’all are. And are they? Dead I mean. I’m pretty sure I saw Gunner recently, and he looked alive and well to me.” By now, I’m sure that my brother has lifted the men’s ban of being seen. If I know my nephew as well as I think I do, they’ve already been out there with their feet on the streets making sure their rise from the dead and presence has been spotted.

He raises from his crouched position and his face becomes blank. He’s blindlessly staring at the wall, not once blinking before shifting on his feet and without any emotion on his face, walks out the door.

“Good talk!” I yell at his back, a content smile on my face.

Aim.

Shoot.

Bullseye.

If you mess with the bull, you’ll get his horns, motherfucker.

Now who has the last laugh? I’m quite enjoying my time with the Crumleys.

But I'm tired of being bound, I'm done being trussed up like a turkey, it's time to make my escape. I've learned as much as I will from them, and I'm ready to go home.

"Feeling better?" the man in the white lab coat asks as he comes back into the room.

"I am. Much," I answer.

"Ready to get outta here, Luca?"

"As I'll ever be. Got my tie?" I ask him since they forced him to take it off me earlier.

"Of course," he snorts. "I've got some tranquilizers, a few pistols, and cuffs. And I got into their files, I have enough information to bury them. The Fitzgerald's won't be the only ones out for their blood by the time this information leaks."

"Damn good to see you, Matteo."

"Been a minute. But I'm happy that I was able to get inside before they got you, Luca."

"You have no idea," I laugh. "Wasn't too hard for you to infiltrate them, huh?"

As he undoes my bindings, he cackles, "It was the easiest job I've ever had."

"Where are the guards?" I question.

"I was supposed to give you a sedative, so they've been stationed somewhere else. There's an auction today, so I suppose that they'll be on crowd control," Matteo guesses.

Wishing I could save those poor souls, but knowing that Mera is my number one priority, I change the subject and try not to think about those who will be sold. "Have you heard anything about my brother?" I ask my old friend.

"They've rallied the troops and are heading here as we speak. If we want to assist them, we need to act now," Matteo advises.

"I'm ready whenever you are. I'm not sure what miracle drug you put in my

IV, Matteo, but I feel brand new.”

“Just some antibiotics and a little something-something I invented to energize you. Glad it worked.”

Shaking out my limbs to reawaken them, I reply, “Spectacularly. Makes me glad you’re on our side.”

“I’ll always be on your side. You saved my damn life when we were adolescents, I owe you everything, Luca.”

“Just help me get my woman out of here in one piece and we’ll call it even, Matt.”

“A life debt is never paid in full, Luca. Do you think your woman is up for the battle we’re fixing to face?”

“I know she is. I trained her, after all.”

“God help us all,” he states, his tone deadpan. “Let’s do this.”

“Take out everyone you see,” I tell him. “No survivors if possible.”

“You got it. It’d be my pleasure.” He grins at me as I toss my tie loosely over my shoulder and grab two guns, one for each hand. “We’re going to take the secret tunnels. I don’t think they know about them yet—they’ve been void of life ever since I located them. It’ll be easier to get Mera free before we take them out in a blaze of glory.”

“Sounds like a plan. Lead the way,” I say, sweeping my hand out in front of me.

I can’t wait to feel Garrick, Graham, Gavriel, and Gideon’s blood staining my hands.



CHAPTER 7

MERA

WHEN I'M THROWN BACK INTO MY CELL, I'M INSTRUCTED TO THINK ABOUT our conversation. But considering they weren't willing to meet me in the middle and give me any of my desired concessions, I told them they'd have to find themselves another patsy. It's not like I was planning on helping them in the long run, but I could've fooled them for a little bit and bid some time until Julius and the guys found us.

I just wanted to make things a little easier on Luca. He's not going to survive much longer under these conditions. Not with the injuries he sustained.

Maribus and Percy are leering at me, ogling me like two deviants. "What are you looking at?" I snap, sick and tired of the way they undress me with their eyes.

"Today's your doomsday," Persy says, smirking.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I query, a sudden sense of gloom towering over me.

"It means," Maribus begins, "that since you're unwilling to be helpful, you'll be up on the auction block in T minus five minutes."

"We're just waiting on your handler to make an appearance, and then we'll be watching the bidding war as it begins. Don't worry, we'll wave as you're driven away," Percy snickers.

“Yeah. We hope you enjoy your waiting fate. We’d hoped to get a sample of what you have to offer, but it seems the bosses are ready to use your destiny as a warning to their sister. You’re the first of the convent girls to undergo an auction, the rest will be taken later if she doesn’t turn herself over.” Maribus licks his lips, then asks, “Are the other girls as tasty as you are to look at?”

My skin crawls because some of those girls are as young as five. I knew these guys played in an entirely different ball field than normal people, but I never imagined they were as repugnant as they are.

“You’re disgusting,” I spew, trying to hold my gag in.

“And you’re a mouthy little thing,” a new voice states, entering the room. “Don’t worry, I was warned and know how to handle bitches like you.”

I’m not sure what shocks me more, the fact that it’s a woman who’s here to grab me and offer me up to a pit filled with vipers, or the fact that she has the gall to call me a bitch considering we’re the same gender.

Whatever happened to women empowerment, sticking together, and having a sister’s back? It’s almost as if we’ve turned back time and are living in the medieval era where men ruled and women bowed to their every demand.

Only catty, self-deprecated, and insecure females call other women a bitch. It’s hypocrisy. I detest being demeaned by imbeciles. Clearly, this woman wasn’t hugged enough growing up. Her heart is dead and her personality is sorely lacking.

“And you are?” I ask, crossing my arms regally across my chest. I’m not going to show her how her presence affects me. Because there’s something seriously wrong with this woman. It’s as if she’s dead on the inside, and the only reason she’s upright and moving is due to her skeletal flesh. It’s unnerving and terrifying.

“Not your place to know. It’s time,” she issues, snapping her fingers at dumb and dumber. “She’s up on the block in ten minutes. Let’s move.”

As soon as the two grab my arms, I have to get one last barb and insult in. I bark and say, “Good dogs.” I feel a pinch on my arm and the pain lets me know I’ll be sporting a bruise there. Jackholes.

“We may be dogs, but at least we’ll get treats for our obedience. You, however, will have to beg and perform for every scrap,” Maribus predicts, a radiant smile crossing his face.

“Your mother must be so proud,” I chide.

“She is,” the woman leading the brigade through the corridor says. “He’s my pride and joy. Aren’t you, Maribus?”

“Yes, Mama,” he answers, his shoulders squared and his chest puffed out arrogantly. “I’m the best thing that’s ever happened to her.”

I bet he is. How sad and pitiful is that? “You have got to be kidding me?” I squeak, appalled that this woman is A-okay with her son being in this type of detestable association. The only response I receive from my outburst is a sideways look. This time however, I’m not upset by the lack of rebuttal.

What could’ve happened in her life to make her so convoluted, calculated, and demented? And as that question streams through my mind, I can’t help but wonder what sort of debased values she instilled in her son.

Some women and men shouldn’t be allowed to procreate. As doors slam shut behind us as we keep going, a frigid, foreboding feeling follows me. I have a bad feeling about this. It feels eerie and my skin gets nippy. Goosebumps mar my flesh causing it to pebble. I’m not a fortune teller, but even I can identify a bad omen when I sense it... and sense it I do.

What’s the irony in that? It’s the same grim notion that went through me when we met the Fitzgerald’s at the warehouse. I just hope that I’m not the one who experiences the miasma heading our way. I need my luck to turn around.

Now that I’ve made up my mind about giving in, turning a new leaf, and exploring life, I’d like the chance to do so.

I want Luca.

I want my new family.

How could God let the carrot of elation be dangled in my face, only to rip it away? I have to believe there’s a reason I’ve gone through this, a lesson I

needed to learn, otherwise, it means I was only put on this earth to atone for a past life of transgressions, mistakes, and evilness. I refuse to accept that. No, I think this ordeal came about to teach me how to be tough, find my thicker skin, and speak my mind. It's the only way I'll successfully be the woman Luca deserves at his side.

Fine. If that's the lesson being taught to me, I'll consider myself schooled. I'll go onto that stage and show no fear. Even if I'm carted out of here, I know that Luca, Julius, and the boys will stop at nothing to find me. And when they do, I won't be the one crying, no, I'll be the one cheering and leading the charge. They may be able to break my body, but they'll never break my spirit.

Whomever the lucky winner is, will eventually become the biggest loser.



My earlier bravado tries to sink and swim away as I stand next to a dozen or so women as we're one by one shown to the spectators in the auditorium. The emcee announces our names, ages, and states whether or not we're untouched and innocent. It's embarrassing. My eyes continuously scan the crowd observing and looking for familiar-to-me faces, but either they're hiding and being incognito, or they aren't here. That thought has my chest deflating before my memory resurfaces and I recall the vow I made to myself and it reinflates.

They won't crack me—my foundation has been fortified and is unflinching. I won't beg for them to find their human decency and let me go, people like these have no compassion, they were born without the empathy gene. My resolve is strong, I've reinforced it. I will make it through this, I will be with Luca again. And when he and I reunite, we're going to get our vengeance and rid the biggest threat to Shayne—her brothers.

When the rope they'd bound us with upon entry is untied from our hands, I begin to believe that I can fight back, or at least maim my captors. But once it's unraveled, a dog collar and lead are placed around my neck. It acts like a barbiturate—suddenly, I can't force myself to move nor speak. I'm catatonic.

This isn't something I've ever experienced before, and I'm not sure how to break myself from this state.

The man who was charged with me, leans over and says, "If you try to escape, if you try to speak, I'll taser you with this." A wand catches my attention, and when he snaps his wrist, sparks alight from the tip. "Now, be a good girl, obey, and I won't have to use this on you."

My voice still isn't working, so all I'm capable of is nodding my head. Shivers, and not the good kind, surface on my skin when he rubs his palm on top of my head—petting me. I really have been downgraded to nothing more than a dog.

What happened to giving me time to make a decision?

Why did things change so drastically in the span of minutes?

I should've had time to plot and plan.

I should've been able to up the ante, use my ace, and bend them to my will.

What did I do?

What did I say that led them to know that I would've never given in and betrayed one of the only people in my life that means anything to me?

Where did I go wrong?

Where did everything go so terribly wrong?

Better yet—which one of these sadistic animals is going to be the highest bidder and take me home with them?

And when push comes to shove, will I have the will-power—the guts, to end their life?



CHAPTER 8

LUCA

THESE TUNNELS HAVE NO LIGHTING, BUT THANKFULLY, MATTEO GRABBED A couple of flashlights and they're bright enough that we can see a few feet in front of us. The stone walls glitter when hit with the light, and if this were any other circumstance than this, I'd take time to examine them.

"How much further, Matt?"

I've been away from Mera long enough. The fact that I heard her screams reverberating through this stone capsule of a building earlier, has me anxious to get to her and get her the hell out of this place. The entire facility is coated in blood and shrieks of pain from the past. The torture others have endured flows through my veins and settles in my bones. Innocent lives have been taken here. Those that've owed a blood debt to the Crumleys were brought here to repay those delinquent iou's.

At least we don't hurt those undeserving. When we make deals, we work with them when it comes to payment arrangements. There have been those who've come to us during hard times and asked for financial assistance. Neither Julius, nor me, are hard up. We don't tack on ridiculous interest rates, we don't give them a timeline, what we do is give them a chance to recuperate. We want to recover our funds, and when a man or woman is dead, they can't give you your money back. These four, they don't give a damn about how hard you're trying, or if you're living out of your car. They want it all in one lump sum, regardless of if you have food to feed your family or

not.

They're uncaring. Ruthless. And they know that those they play loan shark to, can't meet their demands in a timely manner.

"It's just around the bend here," Matteo answers, breaking me out of my incriminating loathing where I was remembering just how much I detest Shayne's brothers. "When we go through the door, it'll be lightly guarded since they have an auction taking place. It shouldn't be hard to get Mera out of her cell and take down her wardens."

"Remember our plan, Matt."

"Yeah. Yeah, Luca. I leave you to have all of the fun while I whisk your woman out of here and get her someplace safe until I hear from either you or Julius."

"You won't be hearing from Julius, Matt. I didn't get a chance to bring him into our plan if this situation became real. If you don't hear from me in forty-eight hours, reach out to him."

"Oh, he's gonna be pissed," Matteo sings, and there's far too much glee in his voice when he says this to me.

Sighing, I say, "You sound far too happy about that aspect, Matt."

Matteo chuckles before stating, "That's because I've only seen you bend for your brother, Luca. It's nice to see someone who doesn't tremble from your mere presence."

"You know how it is," I grumble, reminding him I'm not the only one with a big brother who is capable of making us feel like a small boy again. "How long has it been since you've seen Marco, anyway? Does he even know that you're working for me?"

"Absolutely fucking not," he moans, constricting his eyes as he sends me a broadened sneer. "You know how he is."

"I do," I remark, hiding my smirk. "He wants you to live the civilian life where you'll be free from the danger that comes with our lifestyle. It's why he put you through medical school after all. How's that going for you?"

Marco and Matteo's father worked for ours, and as is tradition, the position is passed down from father to son. But Marco, he fought tooth and nail to keep his sibling as far away from the ascension as possible, stating that only one post needed to be filled and that would be by him as the eldest son. It's admirable that he did this, and if Julius had stuck around instead of branching out and procuring a different sort of future for himself, Ma, Gunner, and Charlee, I'm sure he'd have tried to pull the same stunt when it came to me.

"He'll get over it," Matteo mumbles, knowing damn good and well that's not going to be how this goes down when Marco discovers that Matt is neck deep in our business.

"Will he? I'd think after he went through the hassle of changing your last name, wiping all the breadcrumbs that tie you to him and us, that's not how he's going to react, and you know it. You need a reality check, Matt, because he's going to lose his shit."

"Bite your tongue, fucker. We're here so therapy time is over," he grumbles, reaching out for the handle. "You sure you're up for this?"

"Stop stalling, pussy. It wouldn't matter if I was bleeding out, this is happening. Now, open that door and let's kick some ass."

"I bet I'll take out more men than you do," he barbers.

"Is that a challenge, Matteo? You know how much those make my dick hard."

"A stiff wind turns you on, Luca."

"Not anymore. Only my blonde haired, cork screwed, Curly Sue can do that."

"Now who's the pussy, Luca?" he negotiates. "But if that's true, then our normal bet has to change. Instead of you becoming my wingman after I win, how about a year's worth of Jack instead?"

"If you beat me, which I don't see happening, I'll buy you a lifetime supply," I counter. "After *I* win." I emphasize and draw out the word *I*. "I want to be there when you explain to Marco that you came to me for work and not the other way around."

“Aw, Luca. Do you want to protect me from my big brother's wrath?”

“No, Matt. I want to kick back with a tub of popcorn and watch the fireworks explode. Now, are you satisfied I'm up to par so we can stop stalling and get the show on the road? Don't think I don't know that by you stopping to have this conversation you were checking in on me. And since I've passed this test of yours, and have had a small rest, I'm ready to stop verbally sparring with you and get my woman back.”

“You're not at your best, but you'll do. Fine, Luca. Just let me take the lead and reserve your energy as much as you possibly can. I have a feeling this will just be a small battle compared to the war we'll be facing.”

Instead of responding, I point to the door. “Now, Matteo.”

“Promise me, Luca.”

“Can't do that, Matteo.” I shrug. I don't make promises that I can't keep, and he knows this which is why he sighs, but moves forward and pushes the door outward. When we infiltrate the underground catacombs, it's quiet, and immediately we know the room is void of any occupants. She's not here. “What the fuck? Where is she, Matteo?”

“I don't know, Luca. She's supposed to be right here,” he adamantly asserts, jabbing his finger toward what's supposed to be her cell. Where she's been kept since day one. “They gave her a reprieve long enough to come to a decision on if she's willing to expose Shayne's whereabouts. She should be here.”

“But she's not, is she?” I stop to think, and that's when I see several sets of footprints leading away, instantaneously, I know where they've taken her. “Fuck. Matteo, do you think?”

“Think what?” he queries, canting his head sideways. “Oh. Oh, shit!”

“My sentiments exactly.” I blow out a heated breath.

“She's being auctioned,” he whispers.

“You think?” Of course, she is. “They played her, they never intended to give her time to reconsider her stance on where she stands. They knew she'd never

give in. They knew she'd never give up Shayne's location."

"But they already know where she is, so that doesn't make sense. Julius wouldn't let her be somewhere he's not. He'd want eyes on her personally."

"True," I theorize. "But they also are aware there's no way in unless you know where our weaknesses are."

He sighs, then says, "There aren't any."

"No. But we do have entrances that are monitored and surveilled by computers instead of being supervised by our men. They're fortified in steel, and the only way in or out of those doors is if you know the six-digit codes."

"And does Mera know these codes?" he asks.

"No. They're changed daily," I explain.

"They must've figured that out and realize that she's no good to them," he mentions.

"That'd be my guess." Now, we need to change our plan of action and think on the fly. "You have a choice, Matteo. I'm going after her. You can either come with me, or you can get the fuck out of here and make some calls to bring in the cavalry. The decision is yours. I won't pressure you or put you in any further danger than you're already in."

"Don't patronize me, Luca Alvarez. I'm not some wilting flower whose petals are gonna droop, shrivel, and wither away from a powerful gust of wind. Stop pussyfooting around and giving me ridiculous options. Let's go save your girl."

"Lead the way," I order, removing my neck tie from around my shoulders and letting it dangle from my left hand, my weapon clutched in my right. "No survivors."

"No survivors," he copies, his voice now lethal, reminding me of his brother when he's had enough of the bullshit and is ready to fuck some shit up.



Making it out of the lower level was easy, too fucking easy. Their lack of security and making sure all points of entry are protected is telling in itself. They're too confident, cocky, and they've let their guard down. This is how people get killed, but I can't complain seeing as I'm the one who's going to be doing the killing.

"They've put all of their men in one place. Their arrogance is going to be their downfall," Matteo tells me, shaking his head at their incompetence.

"They think they're invincible, and no one would dare come at them," I add. "They believe their reputation precedes them and everyone is either too stupid or scared to jack their operation up. It's going to be their undoing."

As soon as we make it around the long-stretched curve, a team of men come out of the darkened shadows. What has me pausing is that they're wearing leather cuts, only their emblems and lettering are different from our men, an MC I've never come across or heard of before. I recognize Gunner, Julius, and Master, but it's the two men accompanying them that wear a different logo that have me glued to my place.

"Luca," Julius whispers my name, his shoulders drooping. "Thank fuck, brother." He wraps his arms around my shoulders, and none too kindly, drags me in for a backbreaking hug.

Berating him, I harrumph, "Took you long enough to get your ass here, brother. You're getting slow in your old age."

I smirk when I notice that he's taken his retired cut out of the closet in the garage. His badge with his road name, Diablo, is still crisp, and crystal clear to read. I can't help but wonder why they're wearing their cuts to be identified. I know why we are, we have a point to make, but traditionally, when clubs go on rescue runs, they wear disguises.

"Who's this?" I ask, taking a minute to shake off the relieved look from my face, and step back from him to check the two newcomers out. Their tags mark them as the Hellions MC, and I have to admit, they're intimidating guys. Both of them oozing "*don't fuck with me*" scowls, but other than that, they show no outward emotions. I can tell they've had a rough life, and don't take shit off anyone.

He ignores my insult, and instead focuses on introducing me to his companions. “We ran into them outside and came to a truce of sorts. They’re here on a rescue mission as well. This is Roundman and Danza, they’re two of the higher ranked men in the Hellions.” If “higher ranked” is what he’s going with as an explanation of their club status instead of broadcasting the fact that they’re the pres and VP of the Hellions, there’s a reason for it, so I don’t press by asking any further questions and pushing my luck.

Instead, I nod my head, which they return, and shift my attention back to Julius. “They have Mera up for grabs, we were on our way to cause some irreparable damage. You in?”

“Of course, we’re in,” he says, narrowing his eyes at me as if I’ve lost my mind asking such a stupid question. “We just charging in there with guns blazing where innocent people, including Mera, can get dead, or do you two have a better plan? What the fuck are you doing here, Matteo?”

“That’s a long explanation, Julius,” Matteo answers.

“One, you’ll be telling me all about when we get out of here,” Julius demands, leaving him no room for argument.

Gunner interrupts Julius’ tirade before things get out of hand by ordering, “First, let’s take the men running detail around the perimeter out, then we’ll work our way inside. Our men are on standby and will be splitting up their duties after they’ve disabled the cars to come in here to help us out. In the meantime, we stay in groups of a minimum of two to have each other’s backs. Any questions?” I can’t imagine why he’s patronizingly staring at me and Julius but choose to keep my mouth quiet because now is not the time nor the place to quiz him on it.

Our groups are broken down to Gunner and Master. Roundman and Danza. Matteo, Julius, and me. Guess my brother’s not letting me out of his sight anytime soon. If the roles were reversed, I’d be the same way.



CHAPTER 9

MERA

MY KEEPER'S WORDS KEEP SWEEPING THROUGH MY MIND ON REPEAT. “*Now, be a good girl, obey, and I won't have to use this on you.*” As my eyes careen down, all I can envision is the spark activating at the tip. Being shocked is not on my top ten list of things to experience. Therefore, I keep my head down and follow along when he pulls me like a good girl. I know that right now, I don't have any other option than to play the obedient and docile role.

When there's a tug on the collar, my back snaps ramrod straight. “You're up,” my custodian tells me, a gleam of gratification shimmering behind his honey-hued irises. “Remember what I told you earlier.” Like I can help but remember, it's all that I can think about.

“O-okay. I w-will,” I stutter, sounding weak and unsure of myself. I can't let him see that, so I close my eyes and find my inner-strength. For some reason, Charlee enters my mind, and my mantra becomes, do what Charlee would do.

Be strong.

Unafraid.

Have faith in my family.

Never let them see you sweat.

“*I've got this. I can do this,*” I chant in my head. “*I'm strong. I'm resilient.*”

They'll never see me cower."

Finding my backbone, I tell the scoundrel, "You'll never take me alive."

He chuckles before informing me, "That's what they all say."

From the recess of my lungs, a puff of humor escapes me when he reveals this. "But they don't have an entire Motorcycle club and Italian clan of badasses behind them, do they?" I do a mental cross across my chest and repent for my foul language and letting my pettiness get the best of me. I know it's a sin to be crass and vindictive, however, if any situation could be forgiven for going against a couple of *His* mandates, this would be one of them.

He warily looks at me, then shakes his head. "They can't help you now, and neither can I. We all have a price to pay, and this is mine. For what it's worth, I am sorry this is happening to you. I hope that one day they do find you and you do escape, but trust me on this, it won't be occurring today. This place is fortified with snipers and men are nonstop walking the grounds to keep intruders out. Anyone without an invitation is shot on sight. Survive. Keep your head down and do as you're told. It won't lessen the hardships coming your way, but it'll keep you alive."

My entire being deflates, and for a slight moment, so fast I nearly missed it, a crestfallen look crosses his face. "I'll consider it."

"Do more than that if you believe they're coming for you, number twelve," he says, using the number assigned to me. We aren't people. We aren't women and children, we're nothing more than digits in a lineup. I look down at the big and bold *one* and *two* handwritten next to one another on the bidding sign I'm supposed to hold up in front of me as I'm paraded around in front of these purchasers. "If you're considering things, make your loved ones one of those things. They can't help you if you're dead," he chastises. "Trust me, if I could've given that advice to my sister, she may still be alive and there might've been a chance that I could've gotten her out of this mess."

"I'm sorry you lost your sister. But isn't that a reason to stand up for what's right and wrong?" I ask him. I feel sorry for him, his loss is a sizable one, but I also have a family out there that needs and wants me. Depends on me. I'll fight with every ounce of strength inside of me to get back to them. I don't

want to let them down by giving up and becoming a victim.

“It isn’t as easy as that. Not all of us have people we can count on,” he argues.

Over the sound system, I hear the emcee drone over the microphone as he begins describing my attributes. “Up next in our lineup, we have number twelve. Grew up in a convent, raised by nuns, and her hymen is intact.” When he announces that, I gag when I notice several men sit up straight in their seats, their interest in me growing substantially. “Natural blonde, toned and fit, and loves caring for kids.” How do they know that? I’ve never talked about the fact that I was one of the first ones to volunteer and help with the younger ones in the abbey since I’ve been here. They have insider information, a spy inside, which means the nuns aren’t as truehearted and trustworthy as we believed. Seems they are tempted by cash and can be bought just as much as those greedy communities of men and women they preach for us to avoid. “We’ll begin the bid at twenty thousand. Any takers?”

Paddles begin to rapidly elevate, one outdoing the other, and my jaw drops as the price for me skyrockets into unearthly amounts. I feel like I’ve fallen into the pits of hell, none of these men are honorable, they’re lascivious. They want to own me as if I’m a delicacy. They’re all about outdoing one another, proving who has the most money. They’re insatiable for me, acting as if I’m to be their last meal before they face eternal damnation. Revulsion runs through me. My stomach turns as putrid bile creeps up my esophagus, the acid burning as my mouth grows dry. I don’t understand what’s wrong with people. Why would they consider this entire ordeal as being acceptable? Does nobody have a conscience anymore?

My body jolts when I hear a gavel bang onto a wooden surface and it’s announced that I’ve been sold for one point two million dollars. When did the bid get so high? How long was I lambasting these sick freaks in my head? It’s critical that I pay attention now. Lifting my eyes, my body shudders when I meet the abominating black pools of pure evil. The man who’s won me is chilling, his entire demeanor speaks of inhumanity.

Whispering, I surmise, “Luca, if there was ever a time for you to pull a rabbit from its hat and get me out of this, it’d be now.”

“Good luck,” my jailer states, tugging on my lead and walking me over to the podium where money is exchanged.

The low said words of “prime meat” and “excellent choice” echo through my mind.

That’s all I am... beef to be devoured and a golden prize to be showcased.

I’ve been reduced to a price tag. I may as well be wearing an investment sticker with the amount charged to own me outright. I’m a mother fluffing profit. Extorted. Where’s my cheat sheet to show me how to act in a predicament such as this? I didn’t get a pamphlet with the dos and don’ts. Index cards with any sort of direction on how to circumvent my dilemma would work in this case. I’m utterly lost. Anger begins to emanate through me. Because honestly, all I want to do is kick him in the balls, feed them to him, and watch how far he falls from his accrued pedestal. I’m well aware that all that’d earn me is a beating, and I’m already psychologically drained, there’s nothing left of my neurosis to squash. Being mad is better than getting depressed and shutting down—I get intoxicated on my resentment and my vision clouds into a shade of red. I’m full of rage that needs an outlet, regardless of the context of my fate, and the fact that I can taste my ire on my tongue, I give into my senses and allow my crankiness to take over. I am no longer thinking, my brain has shut down and I’m reacting on my survival reflexes alone.

“You’re both pigs,” I screech. “You’re all going to burn in hell for this.” When they both begin to cackle at my warning, annoying me, my leg lifts of its own accord and strikes out.

My movements are lightning fast, and the emcee is my first target, followed by my contemptible acquirer. They both crouch over, but when I go to step away from them, my buyer reaches out and clamps his fingers around my ankle. My equilibrium gets thrown off kilter as I wobble and I end up falling to the ground. My knees and palms get scraped and start to bleed, my face barely misses touching the ground, but my brain rattles in my head. It takes me a slight moment to regain my bearings, but I’m too late. The man crawls on top of me, hovering, smiling down on me the way I’d presume Satan himself would.

“Where do you think you’re going? Nobody leaves me until I say they can. And the only escape you’ll ever get from me is in a body bag,” my buyer says in an odious tone. I’ve looked into the face of evil before, but none that are so shrewd and conniving.

I may have bitten off more than I can chew. In the background, chaos ensues, you can hear skin hitting skin, but I don’t trust this aberrant man long enough to remove my eyes from him. He’s demented, and I get the distinct impression that he wants me to claw his eyes out, to make him hurt, to make him feel pain. In my estimation, it must be the only way he feels anything. And I find myself stuck on the question of do I or don’t I. On one hand, it’d be a great pleasure to make him bleed. But on the other hand, I don’t want to give him anything he wants, I want him to suffer. I want him in agony, and the only way for me to accomplish that is by keeping my hands to myself.

“Anywhere you’re not,” I articulate, my tone seething. This man ignores the carnage taking place around us, his sight is set on me and that’s a vision he doesn’t plan on steering away from anytime soon. His hard member presses into my belly, and my lip curls in response. “Get off of me.”

“I’m the one in charge here, little rabbit.” What is up with these men and naming me animals that are preyed upon? I’m not going to be easily tamed and captured the way they assume I will be.

I’m not a mouse.

I’m not a lamb.

I’m not a rabbit.

I’m a lioness who’s fixing to take charge of her pride and chew her way through her enemies. Starting with him.



CHAPTER 10

LUCA

MATTEO, JULIUS, AND I SPLIT OFF FROM THE OTHERS AS WE COME TO THE entrance that is attached to this side of the hallway. There are two other entry points that the other groups will be coming in from. Roundman and Danza plan on taking the center doorway that's smack dab in the middle of the auditorium they're using for auctions, and Gunner and Master will be rounding things off by coming in through the entranceway on the opposite side of the one we'll be passing through.

We'll be taking them on separate escape routes giving them no way to flee.

As far as we are aware of, there are no other exits needing to be covered. However, seeing as there are tunnels that aren't on the blueprints, there could be secret passageways we know nothing about.

"What. The. Fuck?" A robust voice calls out, echoing through the corridor. I twist on the balls of my feet and my eyes connect with those of Graham.

"Hammer!" I cheerfully shout, snaking my tie through my fingers. "Just the man I was looking for. How kind of you to show yourself to me."

"Doc, the hell?" Looks like the cat's got the formidable Hammer's tongue, rendering him near speechlessness, he doesn't get the concept that anyone could double-cross them. "You a spy?"

"Graham, I'd like to introduce you to my brother, Matteo. We grew up

together, he's one of us," I state, cackling, because I love pulling the rug out from underneath someone's feet. Especially when they're unsuspecting chumps.

"Can we stop chatting, and dance already?" Julius asks, interrupting my shoot-the-shit gameplay. "Get outta the way and let me end this piece of shit. The others are waiting on us, we've stalled long enough."

"He put his fingers on Mera," I growl, clenching and unclenching my fists into balls. "He's admitted that to me, therefore, he's mine to deal with. I've got this, you and Matteo go and assist the others." The very second those last words are released from my mouth—all hell breaks loose from the venue. "Go."

Julius pauses for a minute, checking me over to make sure I'm still firm and steady on my feet—always the big brother. Showing him that I'm good, I start bouncing on my toes, my energy level isn't as hefty as it normally is, but I'm full of pent-up hostility that needs a conduit, and ol' Hammer is the perfect target for me to let that angst fly.

"Take him down quickly, Luca. Mera's gonna need you, you don't have time to draw it out like you normally do," Julius advises, raising his brow.

Staring at Graham, I ask, "Is Garrick as bossy to you as Julius is to me? Older brothers, am I right? Always ruining our fun."

"That's because we're older and wiser," Julius snorts as he and Matteo rush to the door and fling it open. "See you in a bit."

"I'll be there. Don't have too much fun without me," I call out.

"I make no promises," Julius retorts as he and Matteo disappear through the frame of the doorway.

"You heard the man," I tell Graham. "I've gotta make this quick." I careen my fingers back and forth at him in a come-hither motion. "Sorry, this may hurt... *a lot*." I tauntingly grin. Graham's breathing becomes labored, his face contorts to one of a challenger... good, I love a challenge and hate it when they simply roll over and play dead.

When he digs his feet into the tile floors and lunges my way, I bend my knees

and crook my elbows, getting into a defensive stance. He hits me like a battering ram, but I'm prepared so my body sways, but he doesn't take me down like he intended to. My brain shuts down and my years of training kick in. I get lost in the zone, as he throws punches, I block them. My forearms are stinging from the power behind his hits, but I ignore the pain and instead revel in it, letting it spur me on and empower me. Pain has always reinvigorated me, I'm able to tone it down and instead, draw it into me and use it against my opponent.

"Come on, you can do better than that," I tease, rallying his combativeness. Surely, with his reputation, this isn't all he has to offer. How boring. "You're hitting like a girl."

I'm still bouncing on the balls of my feet, swiping out with my palm and slapping him across his face as I circle around him. He becomes more surly, his eyes tracking my spirited pattern, which reminds me, it's time to switch things up a tad. I duck when his left arm swings outward, and then I weave when he rotates his body kicking his dominant leg through the air in an attempt to take my knees out from beneath me. In the meantime, his vision never stops tracing my steps and he continues oscillating his torso, following my upbeat lead. I've always had an extra spring in my step when I find something excitable, and it's no different when I'm fighting—it's my happy place, my slice of paradise.

As I'm dismally going through how uninspiring Hammer is, one of his hits lands on my jaw, forcing my head to turn sideways. He backs off, proud of himself. I spit blood out of my mouth from where the skin connected with my canine, landing at his feet. A thrill of enthusiasm strums through me, now, this has become a real fight and I'm all in. My tie loosens from my fingers and dangles flaccidly from the tips like a lasso.

A voice I'd know anywhere rings throughout the foyer. "Luca! Help." Mera's scream of terror captures my attention, and I know it's time to end this.

It's time to play hangman.

"Looks like your woman is going home with her new owner," Graham laughs, enjoying the fact that she's being dragged down the stairs that lead outside.

“Then it’s time to let my obstacle stop standing in my way, hm?” I quip, tapering my eyes into thin, narrow slants. I zone in on my archenemy and attack. My movements are swift, precise, and distorted. “Did you know that my favorite game to play is hangman?”

His sight takes in the suspended necktie as I begin to whirl it limply through the air, a tactic I use as a distraction. As he’s transfixed on the motion, I torpedo from my feet and tackle him. My best moves are on the ground, it’s easier to wind my silk weapon around their throat as I choke the breath out of them. He counteracts my move with fluidity, flipping around midair and descending on his belly so he can place his hands and knees beneath him to make it easier to lift upright. I predict what he has planned ahead of time and make sure they’re pinned securely underneath him by crash landing on him and not flaking my weight. I bear down on Graham, lifting his legs and anchoring them between mine. When I have a choke hold on them with my thighs and know he’s not going to get out of it, I start working on gaining control over his upper body. He’s like a damn wiggle worm, every time I think I’ve got a leg up on him, he slithers out of my hold.

Slimy bastard.

We struggle for what feels like hours, it’s like riding a bronco horse. Finally, I get my tie beneath his chin and grab the ends with my right hand. As I pull, his face turns molten red, and with his arms tethered he can’t get his hands up to give my lock on him any slack.

“You won’t get what you want here,” he wheezes. “I refuse to give you the pleasure of ending me.”

Graham’s breathing comes to a stuttering halt when Julius, Master, Gunner, and the Hellions stand over us with the lifeless bodies of Garrick, Gavriel, and Gideon. When they drop them beside Graham’s face, he goes ghostly white.

“No!” he bellows, “no!”

Bending low so that my mouth is directly next to his ear, I claim, “Three down, one to go.” Without looking at my brother and nephew, I inform them, “Someone took off with Mera. They went down the right staircase, do we know if one of our men intercepted them?”

“We got her,” Country apprises me. “She’s with Shamus and Texas. She’s safe, brother.”

Kruger elbows Tyson and asks him, “Did you hear him say his favorite game to play is hangman? That was epic.”

“How long have you fuckers been standing there?” I question as I tug on the contraption around Graham’s neck. This entire thing has been anticlimactic. I was hoping our battle with the Crumley brothers would’ve included some interrogating, mutilating, taunting, and slaughtering. I’m disappointed. This was a walk in the park compared to what I’ve been anticipating for years.

This hasn’t been adventurous, it’s been... bland. Drab. Lackluster. Very unsatisfactory. I give it zero stars and two thumbs down on the charts. My grandmother grappled better than this asshole. Leaning my body backward, I hear his airway snap, and his body falls limp.

“I hope his brothers gave y’all more run for your money than this jackass gave me,” I grumble. “He talked the talk, so I thought he’d give me more of a fight than what he did. How the hell did he get the reputation he had? He was a motherfucking pussy.”

“He usually has utensils ready and available. Just then, he only had his brawn and brains, and we know he was lacking in both,” Julius returns.

“Again, Kruger. How long were you and Tyson standing there for? Did you enjoy the show?” I ask, falling back on my ass, a mirthful smile blanketing my face. “The girls and our boys are safe.”

“We’ve been here a hot minute. Took you long enough, we thought we’d have to step in at one point. You’ve been put through the wringer, huh? Usually, you would’ve had him down a lot sooner than you did,” Kruger answers, then puts in his two cents—which no one asked him for, most certainly not me.

“Fuck off, Kruger,” I snap. “I wanted to prolong it just a little.” My fingers widen just a fraction from touching one another, demonstrating to them that I would’ve preferred more roughhousing and antagonizing than I dished out. Especially after what he and his brothers put Mera through.

“We’ve got some stragglers to take back and question. Maybe we’ll be able

to locate some other missing people and reunite them with their families,” Julius informs me.

“Take me to my woman,” I insist, my body now lagging since the adrenaline is wearing off. I want my woman, a long hot shower, a few shots of top shelf whiskey, and my bed. Not necessarily in that order. “Tomorrow we’ll interrogate them, tonight, I’m loving Mera.”

With the Crumleys now decimated, save for Shayne, I plan to focus all of my undivided attention on Mera and help her overcome any difficulties she may experience in dealing with the aftermath of our ordeal. I know how verbally cruel they were to her, but I haven’t seen her since her interrogation so I’m not sure how she’s dealing. However, Graham stated he had put his hands on her, so I mentally prepare myself. She doesn’t need to see me physically react and lash out when I put my eyes on her. She better not have one single mark on her.



CHAPTER 11

MERA

I PUNCHED, CLAWED, KICKED, AND BIT. NO MATTER HOW HARD I FOUGHT, MY new owner overpowered me. My pride took a hit, but the moment that Shamus ripped me from the despicable man's arms, I went wild. A crazed look swamped my face. I was feral. Rabid. Savage. Bloodthirsty. Berserk. Unobtainable—and I won't ever say I'm sorry for doing what I did next.

While they had him incapacitated on the ground, I drew back my leg and let it soar, shoving his balls up into his throat and making him croak on them. The men surrounding me made sounds of protest. They weren't gurgling in sympathy for the man who deserved what he got, but noises that said loud and clear that they were glad that they weren't on the receiving end of my comeuppance.

That maniacal smile he'd been wearing since towering over me vanished, the mask he'd cloaked himself with slipped free, and for once, I saw his unguarded vulnerability. I was no longer his hostage and he was no longer my sadistic tormentor. But there are others who are still stuck with theirs, and I'm going to make it my life's mission to find them and unbind them from their abductors.

"Vindictive little thing. Isn't she?" Shamus asks Texas.

"Yeah, she is. I love it," Tex answers, rubbing his hands together. He bends down low and starts digging through the man's pockets and yanks out a

wallet. “Let’s see who we’ve got here, shall we?” He directs that question toward me and I nod because I’d like to know who had the money he had to spend that type of money on me.

Shamus bends over Texas’ shoulder and reads. “Elvin Carmichael. Damn, your parents must’ve hated you. That name probably got you bullied in school. No wonder you’re such an asshole.”

“Makes sense that he’d need to see himself as entitled enough to own another person. Gotta make yourself feel big after being chopped down to nothing for most of your life. Got news for you,” Shamus says as he raises his tone’s volume, “you should’ve let it make you stronger instead of weaker. Now, instead of a survivor, you’ve taken their place. You’re a bully, a pathetic pipsqueak. Know what we like to do to men like you, Elvin?”

“W-what?” he sputters.

“It’s usually classified information shared only with those in our inner circle and we trust, but I don’t think Pres would mind me disclosing it to you. Do you, Texas?” Shamus asks as my head volleys between the two of them. They seem to be in their element, and I don’t want to do anything that’ll interrupt whatever mind game they’re playing.

“Nah, man. Give it to him straight, Texas replies in an encouraging tone. Almost as if they’re best friends and he’s letting him in on a deep, dark mysterious secret.

Licking his lips, Shamus shares, “We won’t cut you off at the knees, instead, we’ll remove a certain appendage and make you suck it like a lollipop. Doesn’t that sound like fun?” When he and Texas laugh, I gag, visualizing what my former owner is about to endure. He may deserve their torture for what he attempted to do to me, but still... it’s gross.

When Texas tacks on, “Maybe we’ll shove it up your ass first and turn it into a poop pop. We’ll let you lick it until it’s clean of your shit and blood. Then, maybe Gunner will let me clip your balls and make you suck out your cum through a straw. It’d be poetic justice if I do say so myself.”

Turning my head to the side, I lose the minuscule contents of my stomach. I continue purging my guts out until I’m to the point of dry heaving. It burns,

and the stench has my stomach rolling all over again. That description was unnecessary, and a bit too explicit for my liking. I've always been able to use words and turn them into virtual illustrations in my mind, and that was a picture I could've lived the rest of my life without envisioning.

A bottle of water is brought to me by Malice. I use it to swish and rinse my mouth out before gulping down the remaining contents. Acid is still stuck on my taste buds, but it's tolerable now that I've flushed the aftertaste as best as I can. I could use an entire tube of toothpaste and mouthwash, which will be the first thing I do when we make it home.

Suddenly afraid we won't be heading back to the compound, I ask, "We're going home after this, aren't we?" My fingers are crossed, and I'm praying that we are because my king-sized, luxurious bed that feels like I'm lying on a cushy cloud, is calling my name. It feels like centuries have passed since I've gotten a good night's rest. Lately, I've slept with one eye open—every clatter, creak, buzz, and ruckus woke me, no matter how minor or insignificant it was.

"Yeah, baby," Luca answers, walking out from the depth of the shadows. He's being assisted by Julius and Gunner, acting as his crutches. "We're going home."

"Thank the maker," I moan. Then I take in his appearance, and I become worried. He's not steady on his feet, and his normal endurance looks peckish. His clothes are disheveled, as if he had to fight his way to freedom but lost all his steam once he won. "Are you okay?" My brows pull downward as I carry on scanning him over from head to toe. His complexion is pale and his skin sags like he's lethargic. He has darkened bags under his eyes, they are saggy, dull, and so black that they resemble bruises. I don't like it, not one bit.

"I will be," he promises. "Nothing a few good meals and nights of sleep won't cure, Curly Sue." His fingers raise up and he pulls on one of my corkscrews. My hair is horrendously tangled from not being able to brush my long, blonde tresses to unthread the knots, that the action tugs my hair from the roots, and causes me to wince. "And a bottle of conditioner for you, it seems."

A snicker bursts free from my mouth. Out of all the things to pop free from

him, that was the last thing I'd been expecting. "Possibly two," I joke. "You've got a lot to learn when it comes to women and their hair, Luca. Especially a mane as curly and thick as mine."

"Is the danger gone, Luca? Will we and our family be bringing danger to the house if we go back?" I couldn't live with myself if something were to happen to any of them. "Should we find somewhere to lay low for a little bit? Should we bide some time and be one hundred percent certain that nobody's going to come after us due to the carnage we caused tonight?"

"We'll be safe, Mera. No one will ever lay a finger on you again," he implies, and now I'm the one being inspected. "Graham told me he touched you. What did he do? Did he hurt you?"

Sighing, I shake my head negatively, I can't believe that jackhole threw it in Luca's face that he got a little handsy with me. I bet he made it seem a lot worse than what it really was. "It wasn't that bad, Luca. Garrick made him stop before things got out of hand. He was trying to put me in my place and show me that I had no room to be making any demands. Graham was throwing his weight around, trying to prove to me that he was the big man, and I was on his turf, therefore, at his mercy. Seriously, it wasn't a big deal."

"No man, no, scratch that, no *person* has the right to put their hands on you, ever, Mera. If I hadn't already killed him, I'd make him pay for the transaction a lot more than what he did. I had to make it quick, so he hardly suffered." He pouts, his bottom lip sticking out and everything. Unable to help myself, I poke it which causes a smile to split on his lips.

"Luca, let's get you and Mera home," Julius suggests. "The boys can take care of this. I want to get home to my temptress."

I have a thousand questions running through my head where it pertains to my best friend. Instead of asking every single one of them, I decide to wait until I can ask Shayne those questions myself.

I miss her terribly. She was the first person I ever cared about, and now, I'd die for her if a situation called for it. Not many people get that extreme level of loyalty from me, but she, Luca, Julius, and their family have earned that in every way that counts.

They may be outlaws, but they're my outlaws, and if I have to do things that seem unimaginable to those who know me, which let's face it aren't many because I don't trust anyone to show my true self to, they'd have me committed.

"Let's go home," I say to Luca, holding my hand out for him to take.

He laces his fingers through mine and agrees, "Let's go home."



Luca and I both passed out on the ride home. The ride in the sedan was soothing, I didn't feel any bumps or rough patches in the road. Either that, or it was how virtually drained I was that nothing could've kept me from finding some relaxing peace, especially now, knowing that I was unconditionally protected and guarded by these honorable men that would ensure my safety—even at the risk of their own.

I don't hear the creaking of the gate as it opens to allow us entrance, I don't feel the rock of the car as we pull into the driveway, it's the sound of Shayne's voice that has me perking up, miraculously wide awake, and alert.

"Tammera!" she screams.

"Shayne!" I holler.

Both of us shouting for the other one as my door is yanked open and she all but crawls into my lap. "Don't you ever put me through that again," she cries.

"Yes, ma'am. I'll make it my life's mission to never be dragged from a car wreck after being attacked, held against my will, sold in a human auction, and kicking a man's balls into his throat."

"Good," she snaps.

"Good," I mirror.

"Love you, bitch," she whispers.

"Forever and always. You're my sister, my best friend, my do or die,

Shayne.”

“Soul sisters,” she states.

I sniffle, then say, “Sisters for life.”



CHAPTER 12

LUCA

FOR THE LAST WEEK, MERA AND I HAVE BEEN IN AND OUT OF IT. WE'VE done nothing outside of eating and sleeping. But the more down time our bodies have gotten, the more we've medically healed. The only time I was alert for more than thirty minutes at a time is when I woke up to a shouting match going on between Marco and Matteo.

I didn't have the energy to go out and watch, but I did have Leo leave the door cracked when he left after delivering us lunch. I warned Matt that Marco was going to lose his ever-loving mind, and wouldn't you know it, I was right, he did. Julius stepped in when things got physical and stopped it before it got out of hand.

That's the problem with being smart, people underestimate you and perceive you as being wimpy. They think you're an easy target. And since Matteo has the biggest set of brains I've ever come across, he's portrayed as being weak—when he's anything but. My brother and Marco need to step back and remember he's just as lethal and deadly as the rest of us.

"You ready to stop being lazy, uncle, and get your ass back to work?" Gunner asks as he barges into my bedroom.

Snorting, I banter, "I'm not weak, you pipsqueak. Meet me in the ring and I'll spank your ass. Fuck knows you need a good ass whooping."

"You'd have to catch me first, old man," he taunts, knowing damn good and

well that I hate the term “old” when it comes to me and my capabilities. I may be his elder, but I can still take on men half my age and come out the victor.

“Figuring out who’s the bigger man may be easier if you whip out your dicks and compare sizes,” Mera states, shocking the hell outta me and Gunner.

I’m too stunned to say anything and keep staring at her. Did my woman really just say dick? Without blushing? Without any qualms? For fuck’s sake, the first time she uses profanity and we’re not alone, we need to be because my cock just went rock hard.

His jaw drops before he picks it up off the floor and asks, “Did you just cuss?”

“Don’t look so shocked, Gunner,” she harrumphs. “I’ve been through some shit; it changes a person and puts things into perspective. A few foulmouthed words won’t have me knocking on the devil’s door.”

“Holy mother of pearl! Did my sister just use foul language?” Shayne questions as she walks through the door with a tray in her hand. “What has gotten into you, Mera?”

My woman winks at me, knowing how she’s affected me, the minx, then shifts in the bed to where she’s facing them instead of me. “I figured out during my little chat with my abductors that the nuns aren’t who they seem to be. Did you know that they take bribes? They’re nowhere as innocent and godly as you think they are, Shaynie.”

“What?” Shayne asks, tears wetting her lashes. “Th-they really did that?”

“Yep,” Mera answers, dramatically popping her P. “And probably a lot more than that. They knew about the girls and were especially interested in the youngest.”

“No! They’re just babies,” Shayne cries. “We have to protect them, Mera. If the nuns are compromised, and just as dirty as my brothers were, they’re not safe at the convent.”

“I’ve been thinking about it,” Mera states. “And you’re right, they aren’t safe, but what can we do about it? Legally, we don’t have a leg to stand on.

They're untouchable, protected by the government and the church. Other than me being told, there's no evidence to turn in so the kids can be removed from their custody."

"We may have to go around the legal system," I insert. "Fake an explosion like we did with the clubhouse?" I ask Gunner, wanting his input and suggestion.

"That won't do if we're coming back from the dead," he denies. "We'll have eyes on us for a long time. We won't be able to pull something big like that off without being caught."

"What are you thinking, Gun?" The way his eyes have glassed over, and how his head is tilted, I know an idea is percolating.

"Before we can do anything like what I'm thinking, let's have our guys go through their finances. If they are taking bribes, I doubt the Crumleys were the only ones dishing out some dough. There has to be a paper trail."

"And if there's not?" I counter. I'm only asking him this because if I were wearing their shoes, I'd be burying that cash somewhere so deep that there's no money trail linked back to the monastery.

"We go in using brute force and find some well-connected families who can change the kids' identities and give them the chance to start over," Gunner answers.

"Lord knows some of those kids could use a fresh start," Shayne comments. "That's the option I'd go with, some of their beginnings weren't all that nice. The abandoned and abused stigma following them throughout life will damage them in the long run."

"I agree. Some of their stories are heartbreaking whether they remember them or not. A do-over would help them wipe the slate clean and give them parents who want them, chose them, and would cherish them for the gifts they are," Mera concludes.

"I know a few couples who have been struggling to have kids," I confess. "I know they'd do just about anything to have a kid or two of their own. Due to their lifestyle, they aren't candidates for adoption."

Mera wipes a tear from her cheek and says, “That’s a good thing because we have several sets of siblings that I couldn’t bear to split up.”

“Don’t forget about Tala, Trayton, and Tanner,” Shayne tosses in. “Those three would ignite the world on fire if they were separated. They’re cousins but they’re closer than any siblings out there. I doubt they’d be happy without the other in their lives.”

“True. Those three are loyal to each other and would run away if they don’t end up staying together,” Mera warns.

“Gunner. Let’s get a list compiled of the residents and let our women go through it. That way, we know who needs to be kept together, and who can be on their own,” I direct.

“Pops has a friend who works in the child services department. We can have them make a surprise visit and get a list of their past and present intakes,” Gunner states.

“Make sure they get a headcount and the numbers match, I don’t trust that they won’t be trying to hide someone from being detected,” I tell him. “If they’re shady, they won’t want everyone accounted for.”

“If you have him talk to a boy named Cortland, he’ll open up and tell you if everyone is accounted for. He knows all of the hiding places,” Shayne adds.

“He’s nosy, nothing happens in that place that he doesn’t know about,” Mera informs us. “If someone is there that’s not on paper or has a folder, he’ll tell you.”

Reaching over and squeezing Mera’s hand, I say, “I’ll go talk to Julius and let him in on our plan. Gunner, take care of things on your end and we can get together later this evening to compare notes.”

Gun nods his head in agreement. “Sounds good. Let’s plan on meeting in Pops’ office after dinner. I think we’re all eating together tonight.”

“I hope our kitchen staff doesn’t quit after that,” I mumble, which has the girls giggling.

“Give them a bonus,” Mera suggests. “You know they’ll have earned it after

dealing with all of us.”

“Then that’s what I’ll do,” I tell her, leaning over and giving her a light kiss on her lips. “See you later, Curly Sue.” Her cheeks are molten red. Cursing didn’t make her blush, but me giving her a quick breeze of a kiss did. Interesting. I file that away to use at a later date and time. Embarrassing her makes her mouthy, and I love bickering with her.



“How many kids do you think we’re talking about here?” Julius asks, leaning back in his office chair, steepling his fingers beneath his chin. “It may take some time to rehome them. We don’t want to just give them to the first person who shows an interest.”

“Fuck no. Shayne and Mera would have our balls if we did that. My conscience would eat me alive if I didn’t know that they’d be loved and taken care of,” I surmise. “And neither would you.”

“Things are going to be more emotional around here, Luca,” Julius says around a sigh.

“Why? What’s going on?” I ask, worried that I’ve missed something through my recovery.

“Shayne’s expecting,” he cautiously tells me. Why he’s apprehensive to let me know this information is confusing.

“Are you unsure about the baby, Julius? Do you not want it or something?”

“Fucking hell, Luca! What kind of question is that? Have you lost your goddamn mind? Of course, I want my baby.”

“Then what’s going on, brother?” I ask.

“I’m not sure how you’re going to take what I have to say next,” he grumbles.

“Whatever it is, it can't be that bad. Talk to me,” I implore.

“I want to retire,” he blurts out, rendering me speechless. I didn’t think this day would come for years, not until we figured out who would step into our places once we made this decision. “Which means that as the oldest living heir, you’ll become the head again. How do you feel about that?”

“I’m not sure how I’m feeling or what to say if I’m being honest with you, Julius. Before I agree to anything, I think I need to talk to Mera and get her opinion on this.”

“So it’s like that, huh?” he asks me.

“Yeah, it’s like that,” I answer, not ashamed in the least that I want her two cents on this. After all, she’s going to be an intricate part of my future and should have a voice and some say-so about what road our life will be led down.

“I’m happy for you, brother. You deserve your own slice of happiness after everything you sacrificed for me so that I could marry Ma and have a few babies,” he chuckles.

“How are you doing with all of that?” I inquire.

“All of what, Luca?”

“Moving forward. Loving someone that’s not Ma? Having a baby? Building another family? All of the above,” I state, wanting to know where his head is, if he’s okay, and how he’s withstanding and handling all of the changes. It’s a lot to deal with all at once, and now he’s wanting to add his retirement onto the list? That’s got to be a doozy. Fuck knows my head is spinning.

“It’s an adjustment, but I’m handling it well enough. I’m not gonna lie, I’m scared shitless, but having the love of a good woman makes it all worthwhile. I love her, Luca.”

“I know you do, Julius. She’s perfect for you, and I’m glad you’re getting this second chance. If anyone deserves it, you do.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Charlee says, leaning against the door jamb.

“Girl! What is it with you coming into my office without knocking first? Your mother and I didn’t raise you like that. Find your manners, daughter,”

Julius scolds.

Ignoring her father, my niece comes over and gives me a hug. “It’s good to see you and have you back home, uncle.”

“It’s good to be home, Charlee girl. There’s no place like it in the world.”

“I came to get you because it’s time for dinner,” she says. Looking down at my wristwatch I notice how much time has passed since I came into Julius’ office and told him about the kids and what we want to do about it.

“Damn, time flies,” I announce. “May I escort you to the dining room?” My elbow shoots out and Charlee giggles as she wraps her fingers around the bend of my arm.

My family is amazing, and I’m glad they’re mine.



CHAPTER 13

MERA

SITTING AROUND A TABLE DESIGNED FOR FORMAL PARTIES IS INTERESTING, TO say the least. Julius sits at one end with Shaynie at his side, and Luca is at the other end, with me seated to his right. In between us are all of the DreamCatcher men, their women, and children. The room is chaotic, loud, and boisterous. You won't hear me complaining, this is something I always dreamed about having as a youthful young woman—a big, extended family.

“How's it feel to be out of the dark?” Luca teases the women. “Are y'all ready to face the land of the living and come back from the dead?”

“Sooo ready,” Cameron answers, eagerly drawing out the word, so. “I'm ready to go into a store and pick out my own damn underwear.” Gunner spits out the beer he just took a swig of, shaking his head, his face turning beet red from his redacted, bronchitic laughter.

“I bet that's something you never thought you'd hear yourself say,” Stella snickers. “I don't mean to bitch, but seriously, cotton should breathe, and if we can't feel the material, how do we know that our hoo-ha's are getting enough air?”

Kruger's spoon drops to the table as he bends over, banging his fists on it causing the dishware along the table to clatter, hysterically laughing.

“Babe, seriously? Don't suffocate yourself, it wasn't that funny,” Stella says, scolding him. “Not all of us have the luxury of going commando.”

This time, most of the women are the ones choking on their soup. “Commando?” I ask, my cheeks turning a crimson shade of red. “You mean,” I start, leaning over to whisper, “he doesn’t wear... anything? Doesn’t that chafe, Kruger?”

“Naw, darlin’, my balls don’t like being confined. They prefer swinging in the breeze,” Kruger answers, shooting me a wink.

“What he means is, his beans and wiener sweat, and they need to be aired out so they don’t smell,” Stella counters, smirking at me.

“I guess your whispering was for nothing, Curly Sue,” Luca teases me. “It seems, our rowdy men and women don’t try to censor things for their little ones.”

“Apparently not,” I mutter underneath my breath. They aren’t my children, and if they want to raise them to think freely and more conventional, then so be it. With the way the world is changing, it’s not necessarily a bad thing that they won’t be as sheltered as most children are.

“You’ll get used to it, Mera,” Charlee announces from her end of the table. “From what I hear, you already let a few words that you’d normally not use fly. We’re growing on you.”

“What you meant to say is that y’all are a bad influence on her,” Luca rebuts. Gravitating toward me, he says in a hushed voice, “But I like it. Don’t get me wrong, I liked you before, but I love this new version of you too.”

“You do?” I ask, feeling astounded because I was worried it’d be a complete turn off for him. When we met, I was mouthy, stood up for myself and Shaynie... always, but I never said what are considered in *today’s* standards as being bad words, in that aspect, I was a good girl. The operative word being good. I always spoke as the nuns commanded, tried to do things the way they brought us up believing was right, but I’ve started seeing the error of their ways, deciding to forge my own path and thoughts on life and what’s right and wrong.

He grabs my hand on top of the table and laces our fingers together. Squeezing it enough to let me know he wants my sole attention on him and nothing else. “No matter how you’re packaged, or acting at the time, Mera,

you're the best most attractive person I know. You're a goddess in my eyes. Everything you do makes me hard as steel. Whether you're being a goodie, two shoes, or a bad, bad girl, I want you. I'll always want you. You make me a better man."

"Whatever he wants, Mer, say yes," Shayne demands, waving her hand in front of her face to dry the tears gathering in them. "How can a woman resist either one of you Alvarez men?" she asks, directing her attention to Julius.

"There's only one woman I want saying yes to me, Temptress, and that's you," Julius tells her, leaning forward and capturing her lips with his.

"Whatever he wants, Shaynie, say yes," I say to her, mirroring her words.

"Yes," she states, cupping his cheek with her hand and swiping her finger across the apple of his cheek. "Forever, and always, yes."

"For fuck's sake, ladies!" Star sighs, cupping her face in her hands. "Never, and I mean never, say yes to one of these men unless you know the question first. That's how things like this happen," she informs us, pointing at Judd who has a face and lap full of his supper.

"Too late," Shayne singsongs. "Been there, done that, have a baby in the belly to prove it."

"What?" I shout, pushing my chair back and standing. "Repeat that, sister?"

"We're going to have a baby, sis," she states, those tears she'd been holding back now freely flowing down her face. "You're going to be an aunt."

"I'm going to be an aunt," I whisper, before yelling, "I'm going to be an aunt!" Leaping over Luca, I rush to her side and plant my palm on her belly. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You were recovering and I didn't want to add any more stress to your plate," she remarks, begging me with her look to forgive her for holding back this important information from me. "Don't be mad, Mer. I didn't keep this from you to hurt you, I just wanted you to feel better and be up and about before telling you the news."

"I'm not mad, Shaynie," I answer. "I'm shocked and happy. So very, very

happy for you. You're going to be an amazing mother."

Shayne places her hand over mine where it's stationed over her developing baby. It's only now that I notice the small bump, and a smile blooms on my face. "Do you really think so? We didn't have the best role models growing up. I don't want my child thinking that he or she is to be seen but not heard. I want them to make up their own minds about things and believe in stuff that's meaningful to them. What if I screw up?"

"All parents screw up, Shayne. It'd be unnatural if you didn't. Nobody's perfect, no matter how much they think they are. It's how you handle those mistakes and correct them that matters," I respond. "We all have faults, but you have a village of people behind you that will help you along the way."

"Thank you for the reminder. You're right, I do have a group of amazing people that'll help me along the way," she utters. "This is why you're my beam of sunshine on a gloomy day. You never let me drown in the darkness."

"Never. If I can't swim to you without sinking, I'll toss you a life preserver until I can find a way to rescue you," I state, my tone resolved.

"Can the rest of us get in there for a celebratory hug?" Jessia asks, Texas and Malice surrounding her, holding her tightly between them. I hope everything is okay with them. I don't know Jessia well enough to know if there is something wrong or not. Looking sideways, I catch Aspen's eyes and she lets me know with a look that she'll get down to the bottom of what's going on with Jessia. Nodding back, I step away and let everyone else hug the momma-to-be.



After everyone settled, and food was consumed, the dishes cleared and washed, the kids were packed into the media room with blankets, pillows, and snacks so the adults could get together and talk. Us women had our own silent discussion, and without any verbal communication between us, we decided that being excluded with how we proceed in regard to coming out of the woodwork and disabling the convent, wasn't going to work for us... at

all. The men begrudgingly gave in, after some intense arguing and a few threats regarding bedroom proclivities, but in the end, they saw things our way.

We're sitting in the living room, going over blueprints and structuring, staffing, and the best entrance and exit points that'll get us in and out quicker from the building if crap hits the fan.

"Have we discovered how many little ones and preadolescent teenagers we're talking about here?" Luca asks, strumming his fingers on the arm of the couch. "Will we need to call in some backup, or do we have enough numbers on our side to accommodate an operation like this ourselves?"

"I think we're good doing this on our own. We'll have Leo, Marco, and Matteo at these three spots being our lookout," Country answers, leaning around Charlee to point at the areas he's talking about. Country has become the DreamCatchers coordinator when it comes to infiltrations. Master and Tyson have been training him so that they can take on other responsibilities in the club.

Changes are coming, I can feel it in my gut. We're all getting older, and the guys are all looking for different paths to take in life. At least that's what I overheard. Most of them are ready for retirement, but that means they'll have to do a lot of restructuring when it comes to the MC and Alvarez organization.

"I agree," Gunner inserts. "The less hands in the pot the easier this thing will be."

"Gunner's right," Julius adds. "There's more room for miscommunication if we bring in outsiders. We're better off doing everything ourselves since we have a working rapport built amongst us already. There's not enough time to teach our hand and head signals. We're going to have to act soon, preferably before we yank the guys out from hiding, and let the law know they're alive."

While everyone is talking, my eyes are drawn to the photographs of the school age kids. They'll be the ones that'll be harder to find placements for. Everyone wants to adopt babies, toddlers, and elementary school aged children. But the older ones are always forgotten and viewed as troubled. They don't know these teens the way I do. They're good kids who deserve a

chance to prove themselves.

“What is it?” Shayne asks, nudging my shoulder with hers.

“Duncan, Sheraton, and Winter are going to be pushed to the bottom of the list. I don’t like it,” I murmur. Dottie, having overheard us, stands up from the chair she and Bull are tangled together in, and comes our way.

“I’ve seen this happen one too many times,” she grumbles. “How old are these two girls and the boy?”

“Duncan is sixteen. Sheraton and Winter are between the ages of twelve to fourteen,” I reply, uttermost sadness enveloping me on behalf of these misunderstood preteens and young adult.

“Let me see what I can do for them,” Dottie says, patting my hand in sympathy. “We won’t leave them behind.”

“Thank you, Dottie,” I say, knowing that if there’s anyone who can make it happen, it’d be her.



CHAPTER 14

LUCA

AFTER COMING UP WITH A PRE-PLAN, ONE WE STILL NEED TO GLOSS OVER, THE men all went into the lounge and are presently drinking our top-grade liquor. I need to remember to have Leo restock our bar and stash so that when we want to sit back with a cigar and tumbler of our finest whiskey, it's at our disposal.

“Polka Dot wants us to adopt the oldest three of the brood. Think you can make that happen for us, Luca? What my Dot wants, my Dot gets, so I'm hoping we can do this your way before I have to step in and do it mine,” Bull contends, lifting the crystal glass that has a double shot of scotch tucked inside to his lips, and taking a small sip. “Damn, that goes down smooth.”

“You know we'll do whatever it takes to get them to you, Bull. We take care of our own first,” I promise, then swear, “If you and Dottie want Duncan, Sheraton, and Winter with you, then that's what's gonna happen.”

“Appreciate it, brother,” he states, patting me on the shoulder.

“You know I've got you. Hell, we all have your back, no questions asked. Those kids are lucky that you two want to take them in. It's me who's appreciative that you've made them a priority. It was messing with Mera. She was worried nobody would take an interest in them seeing as they're the oldest girls and boy in the nunnery.”

Texas sits down beside us and announces, “Jessia has taken an interest in this

Cortland kid. Tammera and Shayne were talking to her about him. He's in the older group, but not as old as the other three. I remember being eleven and understanding that if there was something nefarious going on around me, I needed to be in the know. I think I'll be able to connect with him and help him out."

"Heaven help that kid," Bull snorts. "You as a role model? We haven't even gotten the kids out of that hellhole and he's already doomed."

"Fuck you, asshole. I'm a goddamn angel and you know it. That kid would be lucky to have me as a dad," Texas argues.

Powerhouse saunters up to us, plopping down and joining our conversation. "Salem is a big advocate for keeping kids together. She wants me to consider taking the cousins, Tala, Trayton, and Tanner into our home... when we get one," he mutters. "Her place is okay, but it won't be big enough for us if we do this."

"What are you saying, Powerhouse?" I ask, wanting him to clarify it so I'm not jumping to conclusions and taking action if it's just a passing thought. "Are you offering to parent these kids?"

"That's what I'm telling ya," he states, his eyes boring into mine.

"Then consider them yours," I avow, glancing up and noticing that Julius is honed in on our conversation. He nods his head in approval letting me know he's onboard with my promises. I return the gesture with a bob of my own, thankful that he's not upset that I'm making certain assurances that I won't have to go to bat for. Because I would have, with my Louisville slugger swinging if it was needed.

We're all about family, and with us taking in some of these tossed away kids, we're strengthening ours. Just the idea of kids being easily discarded, has me stumped. The convent has spread the word that you can drop kids off at their doorstep, no questions asked, and they'll take them in without contacting social services. Now, we know why that is and it makes my blood boil.

No more. This is the end of their duplicity, they just don't know it yet, but I can't wait until I watch the walls crumble around them. That'll make my day.



Julius is currently on an international call with Shayne's Nonno. He's giving the Fitzgerald patriarch the low down on our situation, and future mission, he's given us his family's support. He's going to chip in some funds to help our men create homes big enough to house these kids, and he has a few members that would be willing to take in some of the children too... as long as they don't have any issues relocating to Italy.

Julius has promised that if some of them are willing, he and Shayne will escort them overseas. We'll have to get crafty since they don't have passports, but with our and his connections, it shouldn't be as hard as if it'd be if we had to get them through the black market—that shits a bitch.

“Shayne's Nonno is going to send over his private jet. His men are loyal to a fault and won't report unsanctioned passengers. Since he has his own private hangar not too far from here, where he keeps his plane, all he has to do is log the flight, and he'll manipulate the passenger list. He has twelve families that've been turned down through various adoption agencies, he knows they'll pitch in financially, as well as donating materials such as clothing and furniture. Now, we just have to get all of our ducks in a row and take that goddamn monastery down to its concrete slab. I'm thinking about purchasing the property myself and turning it into a school for our club kids.”

“They'd all be safer out of the public school system,” I say, agreeing, and stroking my chin while thinking over his plan. “We could keep them protected better if we were in charge of things. Security and administration wouldn't need an overhaul if we were the ones constructing it from the ground up.”

Julius straightens in his chair and insinuates, “And it'd be a ‘forewarning’ of sorts to others of the same likeminded as the nuns are that we're the ones that ended their little operative and decimated it. I want it known worldwide that if word gets to us that someone else has started something like this up, we will destroy it.”

“I'll make sure it gets told to the right people so it can be spread around,” I

inform him, knowing exactly who I'll go to in order to get the word broadcasted on the streets. I've been helping out a street rat, one who's too damn headstrong for his own good, who refuses to accept financial help from me unless he's doing a job. This is something that's right up his alley and I know he'll get it out where I need it to be. "I've got someone who can take care of that for us."

"Good to know," Julius chuckles, then says, "at tomorrow's meeting, we'll pick a day of attack, then you get your person on it. I want it spread like wildfire to all of the criminal groups by the end of the week."

"That won't be an issue, Julius."

"Knock, knock," Charlee calls through the closed door before twisting the knob and coming in without waiting on her dad to call her in. When Julius gives her a scathing look, she gets a confused one on her face. "What? I knocked this time."

"Did I say you could come in?" Julius questions, harrumphing. "Knocking does no good if my meeting was one that didn't call for prying ears."

Charlee seems perplexed. She doesn't understand the scruples behind our business. She's been spoiled and hasn't been put in her place by her brother. Gunner's gonna need to step up his game where his sister is concerned.

"You're wound up too tight, Pops. Should I go run you a bubble bath so you can relax a bit?" With a girlish pep in her step, Charlee skips through Julius' office without a care in the world, and comes up behind him, wrapping her arms around his shoulders, pecking him on his cheek. "Missed you, Pops."

Julius sighs, but a pleased smile spreads across his cheeks even though he's irked with her. She's his baby, his pride and joy even if she drives him to drinking nine-tenths of the time. "Missed you too, baby girl."

Feeling like a third-wheel, I clear my throat and interrupt them. "Was there a reason for your intrusion, Charlee girl?"

"Oh, yeah," she says with a teasing smile aimed my way. "We've compiled a list of kids and connected the ones that've been claimed with the intended parents. It should make things easier to find the others that're unclaimed homes."

“Do y’all have any indication of what kids would blend and fit in best with which potential candidates?” I ask, leaning over intrigued about what she and the other women came up with.

“Kinda. There are still a few kids we’re up in the air about. Mostly, because they’ve been adopted and returned to the monastery for one reason or another. Nearly all of them are bullshit excuses for why they couldn’t keep them, but nonetheless, several of them have abandonment issues,” Charlee explains.

“What type of excuses could a parent have for giving up on their kid?” Julius asks, his brows drawn down in exasperation. I’m encountering the same sort of distaste—my mouth is soured with it.

Charlee snorts then begins speaking, “When I say stupid shit, I mean stupid shit. The list is ridiculous. Here are the claims; they don’t clean their rooms as soon as they’re asked to. They’re argumentative. They lock doors behind them so the adults can’t get to them. They steal food between meal times. They go outside and get dirty then track mud into the house. Those are the only ones I memorized because they’re reminiscent of mine and Gunner’s childhood.”

“What the actual fuck? Please say you’re joking with me, Charlee girl,” I growl, my body temperature rising.

“Wish I was, uncle dearest. But it’s marked in their charts as the reason they aren’t allowed to meet future candidates. It basically makes them unadoptable, and they’ve been placed in that column.”

“Bullshit. It’s complete, and utter bullshit,” Julius says, glowering. “We need to get them out of that shithole sooner rather than later.”

“We may have to move up our timeline,” I add, wishing I could save all of the children experiencing such disgust. As adults, we’re supposed to teach and mold our youth, not make them angry, and distrustful. How will they ever become productive members of society if they don’t feel as if their lives are important?

Because they are. Children are a gift that not all people are fortunate enough to get for themselves. Those are the ones who should be raising tomorrow’s

leaders.

It's fucked up.



CHAPTER 15

MERA

“I’M GOING,” I INSIST, STOMPING MY FOOT WHILE LUCA IS GETTING IN HIS blackout gear.

“You’re not,” he argues. “This is not something I’m going to waiver on, Curly Sue. It’s too damn dangerous and you’ve just recovered from the whole ordeal with the Crumleys. You’re staying home.”

“Your argument holds no merit, Luca. You’re recovering too,” I debate.

“Women don’t go on missions, Mera,” he contends.

“Liar,” I say in an accusatory tone. “Charlee and Hemmingway came to the convent to get me and Shayne.”

“That was different, Mera.”

“How, Luca? Please explain to me how this is any different? It’s the same place, only these kids you’re going after don’t know you, but they do know me and Shaynie!”

“Because men wouldn’t have been allowed to get close to you. That was a special circumstance, Mera. Why are you making this harder than it needs to be? You’re being a pain in my ass.”

“Why aren’t you being reasonable?” I counter, widening my eyes at him. “You aren’t considering all of the distrust these children have for adults they

don't know. Think about it, Luca."

He sighs then leaves the room without talking this out with me. That angers me, how dare he dismiss me as if I'm not making any sense and am being a nuisance to him! I'm not being irrational. Everything I'm saying isn't meant to make things harder for him and the guys, if anything, it's to make it easier on them. They don't know how protective the youth are of the younger ones. They'll fight to the death if it means keeping the littles safe and sound. They won't listen to complete strangers, let alone leave with them.

"Luca!" I holler his name as I fall behind him. "They won't let you take them away. Listen to me!"

"Enough, Mera." His gruff voice may work on most, but it won't work on me.

"You're being a fool and childish, Luca Alvarez." My footsteps become harsher, and they echo through the corridor.

"I'm a childish fool, huh? Good to know that me having your welfare at heart is asinine. I'm not acting immature, Mera, I'm thinking like a man who wants his woman to live to see another day."

"You said I was a pain in the ass, Luca. If you can call me names, I have no problems returning the favor, jackass."

"Jesus fuck," he hisses as we meet at the bottom step. He turns to me, and I can see the conflict in his eyes. That look alone makes me feel like an asshole. I should've known better, because in actuality, this decision isn't his alone to make. Men! Everything has to be voted on in their world.

It's ludicrous.

"I'm not trying to be a pain, Luca. Really, I'm not. However, think about what I said. I wasn't lying, those kids will never trust you enough to leave with you."

"I know, but what do you want me to do, Curly Sue? We don't know what we're walking in on. Things could be business as usual, or they could have a buyer there. It's a crapshoot, and I'm trying to be ambivalent, I'm trying to be realistic, and I can't, no, I won't, take chances when it comes to you and your

safety.”

“I. Am. Going!” I hear Shayne holler. Luca and I both turn around to see her at a standoff with Julius.”

“No. You. Are. Not.” Julius’ entire body is vibrating from their vociferous disagreement. “You’re pregnant, Shayne. No way in hell are you going with us. It isn’t happening!”

“Um,” I hum, tapping my finger to my puckered lips, then I cup my hand, and ask, “do you think someone should stop them before this gets out of hand?” I ask Luca, pointing between the controversial couple. Oh, boy. I’ve never seen Shayne go toe-to-toe with anyone, it’s a sight to see. Damn, I think Julius has bitten off more than he can chew when it comes to my hard headed best friend.

“I’m not getting between a pregnant female and her target. I like my balls exactly where they are... attached to my body. You do it,” he suggests, backing away and looking at me with wide, panic-struck eyes.

“What? Why me? I’m not doing it. She’s my best friend, I won’t take sides. Nope. Not me. I refuse,” I parry.

“Well, that’s my brother and my future sister-in-law, I’m not getting between them. Fuck that. I’ve been around expecting mama’s,” he says, canting his head to the side where the old ladies are lined up watching the showdown. “I know how brutal and vicious they can be.”

“It can’t be that bad,” I snort. “Right?”

“*Suure* it's not,” he answers, stretching the word out. “If you think so. Be my guest and have at it.”

Why do I feel like I’m being set up for failure? As soon as that question floats through my mind, I’m in a shocked state, speechless, when Shayne draws back her right leg and kicks Julius as hard as she can in the shin. When he bellows and lifts his leg up to rub it, she goes in for the kill. My jaw hangs when Shaynie uses all of her might and shoves both of his shoulders, causing him to topple to the ground.

“Wow,” I praise, then whistle. “I’ve never seen her do anything like that

before. She's usually so mild-tempered and has never physically attacked anyone as far as I'm aware. Ever."

"See what I mean?" Luca whispers, making sure I'm the only one who hears him. "Brutal, with a capital B. Her hormones are spiking and she's at that stage where she's not going to take shit from anyone, including her man."

"I see this. I'm still surprised by what she just did," I admit. "A little in awe as well. And if I'm being completely honest with you, I'm traumatized too. I may have post-traumatic stress disorder and am scared from watching that tantrum unfold. I never want to open my mouth around her again... at least not until she pops that baby out."

His head bobbles. "Definitely. What are her favorite snacks? I have the urge to be her favorite person on the planet and stock her up," he confesses. Then, words I never thought I'd hear leave Shayne's mouth, cause me to gasp. "Did, uh, did she just call him a sexist motherfucker?"

"Yep," I answer, bobbing my head. "Are we in another dimension? Someone's snatched my sister's body and has taken over. She's a pod person. We need to have Matteo do a scan of her brain, immediately! She may have a flesh-eating amoeba in there, eating her brain cells, and filling it with bacteria. We have to save her before it's too late." In a way, I'm joking. But in another, I'm being one hundred percent honest. With every ounce of scrutiny in my body, I think she needs a brain scan before she has a complete personality change.

"Oh, shit. Now, things are getting dicey, she called him a prick. Maybe we should give them some privacy to hash this out," Luca suggests.

"Good idea. I'm onboard with that," I say. "I'm ready to get out of here, as quickly as possible, before I somehow get dragged into it."

"Mera! Tell him I'm right about this!" Shayne yells.

"Dammit," I mutter before twisting my body and asking her, "Right about what, sweetie?" Acting dumb is better than her knowing I was here and didn't step behind her back and help her argue her points.

"We have to go with them. Tell him," she rumbles. "Go on. He needs to know he's being pig-headed and the only two people those kids will trust is

you and me.”

“Uh. She’s right?” I state more as a question than an answer, fearing for the sanctity of my shins and ass. I don’t want to be shoved down and land on my tushy like Julius was.

I’ve just gotten rid of my bumps and bruises—I’m not looking to add new ones on my flesh. But the way she’s placed me in the middle, and the fact that she’s right, has me squaring my shoulders.

“Wish me luck,” I utter to Luca as I put one foot in front of the other, heading their way.

“Luck,” he murmurs, and I nearly giggle when I notice that instead of walking with me, he’s trying to be nondescript by slowly stepping backward to put as much distance between himself and Shayne as he can. When I lift my eyebrows in question, he shrugs his shoulders and whispers the words, *brutal* and *vicious*.

“Julius. When she told you that the kids would never leave with you, she was right. They won’t. For one, they don’t know you, any of you. And for two, their fight or flight instincts will kick in, and my money is on them hauling ass. There are hiding places in that mausoleum that you’ll never locate. They could stay hidden for weeks without any trace of them being detected. We should know, we taught them. However,” I pause, knowing I’m fixing to upset Shayne, I continue, “Shayne should stay back. I can handle them. They trust me, and they’ll come with me if I ask them to.”

“Traitor,” Shayne harrumphs. Turning her head as a tear falls, ignoring me.

“I’m sorry, sis. I am. I’m not trying to go against you and your wishes, but you’re carrying my future niece or nephew, and he or she is more important to me than you getting to come along because you want to. Forgive me?” I ask, sending her my best puppy dog eyes. Imploring her to understand where my logic is coming from. Not from a place of malice, but from a place of love. For her. I’d do anything to keep her and that baby protected. Even place myself in the line of fire.

Just like she’d do for me if our roles were reversed.

“Fine,” she says, tossing her arms up into the air. “Do whatever you want to

do. I'll just sit here and be pregnant.”

Well, hell. It seems a knocked-up Shayne is a smartass. Good to know.



CHAPTER 16

LUCA

AS WE MEET EVERYONE OUTSIDE IN THE DRIVEWAY, I'M PULLED ASIDE BY Julius, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with him, but Gunner is the one that holds my steadfast attention. "Before we head out, we have a surprise for you, uncle."

"Yeah?" I ask, getting choked up by the sincerity in his eyes. He and I have had a rocky relationship in the past, but the way he's looking at me now has me feeling... foreign things. "What'cha got for me, nephew?"

"We voted and have decided that you may not have bid for a place in the club, but you're a member, our family, nonetheless. So, Charlee had this made for you."

As Gunner reaches his hand out, Charlee girl holds out a brand-new leather cut. It's crisp and I can smell the oil from the cowhide from here. As she takes the shoulders and holds it flat out for me to see, I laugh. "Hangman, huh?"

"It was fitting, wouldn't you say?" Kruger asks, his lips tilted upward in a facetious smirk. "It's not every day that a member gives himself his own road name, but it was too good to pass up. We voted, and we all decided it's perfect for ya. What do you think?"

"I'm honored," I reply as Charlee passes over my cut to Mera so she can slide it over my shoulders. With prideful tears in her eyes, she plucks it from

Charlee with a gracious smile and holds it like it's made of the finest silk as she treks toward me. "This will change a lot of things for us, Curly Sue. You up for it?"

She shoots a beaming smile my way before stating, "Like sand through the hourglass. I don't expect the grain to fill the basin until it's flipped back over, and time resets itself. Things have never been predictable or traditional when it comes to us. Any adventures you're up for, I'll be by your side, Luca. If you want to do this, then I'm ready."

"Damn, Mera. How'd I get so lucky with you?"

"Who knows? Maybe I'm Irish," she jokes, lifting up on her feet and planting a chaste kiss to my jaw. "You're my four-leaf clover, Luca."

"Alright." Shamus claps his hands together, "enough of that sappy shit. We've got kids to rescue, nuns to de-cross, and a monastery to tear down."

"De-cross?" Star asks, snickering. "So loquacious, babe." Shamus winks at her, causing her cheeks to pinken.

"Oohrah," Master storms out his Marine war whoop, and it's echoed by everyone surrounding us, even the women toss their heads back and ululate the battle cry. The acceptance of the brotherhood swims through me, so I tilt my head back, my neck touching my shoulder blades, and magnify their preening howl. Damn, that feels good.

"Ride safe brothers and sisters," Gunner announces, as the women get into their groups and crawl inside one of the four vans we have lined up, and the men all walk to their bikes and straddle them.

Seeing as I don't own a bike of my own, I begin walking toward one of the vans until Julius grabs my arm and steers me to the bay. "Got you something the second I knew you were being inducted. It was delivered this morning."

I've always admired Harley Davidson's steel and chrome machines. They're beautifully built and designed. I've even contemplated purchasing one for myself as a way to hit the pavement on the weekends and let the week's stress melt away. I even had my top pick's edge folded and marked in the magazine that's been sitting on my nightstand for the last four months.

“Julius! Is that for me? It’s a Harley Davidson FXDWG Wide Glide. It’s exactly like the one I’ve been thinking about getting.” And it is, the paint job is whack, it’s blacked out on the top half, and the engine as well as the lower half is steel plated, the tank is painted black with red and orange flames flowing from the seat and outstretched toward the base of the motorcycle, with a group of skulls floating through the blaze, embedded and obscured in the background—vapor shadowing each one. It looks as if smaller ones are being exhaled in rings of smoke through the biggest one’s mouth.

Julius smiles at me, and answers, “It is. We’ve decided that all new patched members, from here moving forward, will be getting a bike gifted to them from the club. I knew you had been admiring this one for a while now, so I called the dealership and ordered this one for you. It was delivered late last night.”

“Here’s your helmet. Texas, by law, doesn’t require you to wear one in order to ride, but it’s a rule for all of my men.” Gunner tosses it through the air to me and I catch it like it’s made of glass. One rule of the MC world, you don’t let your shit touch the ground—it’s disrespectful to the things that protect you, this includes a biker’s cut. And if you do, may God have mercy on your soul and may your brothers never witness the affront, or your ass will be grass. “Protect your skull, uncle.”

I place it on my head and strap it on. The men look at me with pride—affirmation that I’m now one of theirs on a level that I’ve never experienced. Julius and I are close, as siblings should be. My men and I have a great work and personal relationship too, but this feels different somehow.

It’s deeper.

It’s brotherhood.

The women grow impatient and horns begin to blare throughout the courtyard. Gunner lifts his arm and aims his finger toward his old lady and sister, silently mouthing the words, “*Cool it.*”

An uproarious and amusing chuckle escapes several of us when Charlee flips him off, then Cameron follows that up by tossing him a puckered air kiss in response to his order. My eyes automatically zone in on Mera, she’s laughing but shoots me a wink when she realizes that I’m watching her. Pounding my

fist twice to my chest over my heart, I shoot it outward, holding it out to her.

“*Mine*,” I mouth.

“*Yours*,” she responds.

“Round ‘em up. Keep the skies above your head and the pavement beneath your feet,” Gunner requests as we unanimously swing our legs over our machines as a cohesive unit and mount our motorcycles.

My balls are cushioned by the leather on my seat as I settle in, my eyes close in pleasure as my hands automatically and instinctually settle themselves on the handlebars as if I’ve done this a million times before.

It feels natural, as if I were born for this branch of organized crime—because let’s face it, that’s what I am... a lawbreaking criminal mastermind. I was born into this world and I’ll die still living it. It’s who I am.

The garage and driveway rumbles, the tarmac vibrates in droves as we rev our engines and throttle our bikes. Before I get a chance to enjoy the moment, our wheels begin to roll and I’m lost in the leisure of the way my bike rumbles on the asphalt and the feeling of brotherly comradeship. I don’t notice nor pay attention to the way I’m corralled toward the front of the unified brigade, because that’s inconsequential to me. I know that being in the front line is important as far as your ranking goes, but I don’t have one, so I presume it’s their way of keeping an eye on me since this is my first time traveling with them.

It’s not until later—much later, that I notice the Freestone division patch that tags me as the VP of that correlating branch. It escapes me that even though the DreamCatcher logo, designed by Ma, is stitched on my back, the bottom rocker is different from that of the boys. Only slightly, still similar, but nevertheless, it’s not an *exact* match to theirs.



A menacing smirk spreads across my face when we roll into the convent. We don’t go in incognito—we aren’t in disguise—we want them and the town to

know who's laying down the law and dismantling this loathsome syndicate operation. It may be veiled by those who claim they work through the hand of God, but it's a ruse, and they're going to pay and be unmasked. *Today*.

They won't be able to mimic themselves as being good people. They won't be able to hide behind the cloak of the Midwest's bible belt congregation. They may conceal their evildoings by masquerading as a charity, under the guise of doing good things for the community, but they're vile and sinister—nothing good ever comes from that mind frame and disposition.

After we're through, they will be publicly crucified, we'll remove their camouflage and wave away the smokescreen they've shrouded themselves inside of.

They are done.

Lifting my lid from my head, I hang it on my handlebars by the straps, and stretch my limbs.

"I got something for you that I forgot to give you since I was already in the van when Gunner handed you your helmet," Mera tells me as she comes up next to me.

"What's that, baby?" I pull her into my arms, cradling her, and placing a kiss on top of her head.

"These," she shyly says, handing me a small box with a bow on top with squiggly ribbon curled beneath it. "Open it before everyone gets restless and leaves us behind."

Canvassing the area, I notice that all of the men have pulled the women into their arms the same way I have Mera, only they're ogling us, waiting on me to open the present so we can get on with things.

Tearing into it, I'm pleasantly surprised to find a set of fingerless gloves tucked inside the cardboard. "You knew about this?" I ask, clarifying my question by tugging on my cut.

Nodding her head, she admits, "I knew, but I was sworn to secrecy. Do you like them? According to the guys, you'll need them, at least in the beginning, so that you don't get any blisters."

“I love them, baby. They’re perfect, just like you.” Jerking her closer to me, I claim her lips in a scorching kiss.

One that will lead to places I’m not sure she’s ready for until after we say our VOWS.

Apathetically, I nudge her back so that I don’t follow my instincts and defile her in a parking lot. A satisfactory smile unfolds on my face when I see how puffy her luscious lips are from my onslaught.

Stumbling over her words, she says to me, “I’m, uh, I’m glad you like them.” Her hand lifts up to her mouth where she uses the tip of her finger to trace her lips.

“Very glad,” I mumble, reaching down and lacing our fingers together. “Y’all ready?”

“We were waiting on you, brother,” Julius remarks, a sheen of happiness for me dancing in his eyes.

“Lead the way, pres,” I state, flashing my arm out in front of Gunner.

“Sure thing, VP,” he replies, causing me to rear back.

“What?” I ask, confused.

“Read your label, uncle,” Gunner relays, directing my sight to my right, upper chest.

“I’ll be damned,” I murmur, looking over at Kruger who smirks at me.

“Look at Pops’ back, Hangman,” Kruger suggests, as my brother spins around. It’s then that I see the Freestone town emboldened on his bottom rocker.

“What’s that mean?” I ask no one in particular.

“We’ll hold church tomorrow and explain it all to you,” Julius advises, “I told you retirement was in the cards for me. You’ll have two jobs now, brother.”

“I told you, Luca. Sands through the hourglass, you never know which way the sand is going to flow,” Mera giggles.

“Can we stop standing around scratching our balls now?” Texas pipes up and asks. “I’m ready to shed some blood.”

Powerhouse smacks him on the back and asserts, “In due time, Tex. I promise you’ll be bathing in it. Right, pres?”

“Damn fucking straight!” Gunner roars. “It begins now.”



CHAPTER 17

MERA

I HAVE THREE TARGETS IN MIND AS I MARCH MY WAY THROUGH THE CONVENT doors. Sisters Agnes, Magna, and Ann. These were the pioneers behind shoveling their horseshit down mine and Shayne’s throats. I plan to force feed my revenge down their throats—the lying bitches.

“Why do you look like you’re on a mission?” Charlee inquires as she and Country stride up beside Luca and me.

“Because I am,” I answer nonchalantly. No reason to hide my intent.

“Who are we targeting, Mera?” Charlee looks energized over the fact that I have three nuns in my crosshair.

Turning my head in her direction, I confess, “There are three of them. The ones who belittled and shamed me and Shayne anytime we got out of line, spoke up for ourselves, or did things they deemed as unholy in nature. They not only silenced us, but they made us complacent. Seen but not heard.”

“Well then. Let’s show them the error of their ways,” she implies, shaking her hips. “Show me who they are when they cross our paths, and I’ll give them some dental work by removing their teeth from their gums. Free of charge.”

“Ferocious, I like it,” I tell her, bumping her hip with mine.

“Glad you approve,” she states, smiling at me.

“You have your jobs. Do those first, and if they happen to cross your paths, take care of business,” Gunner reminds us. “Don’t steer off course unless that chance encounter transpires.”

“Aye, aye, boss,” Charlee rebuts, mockingly saluting him.

“Stay on task, Charlee girl,” Julius cites, tersely looking at her, singling her out.

“Yes, Pops,” she returns, appearing to be dejected, her shoulders falling slightly.

I understand his stern tone, she can sometimes be too much, but I wish they wouldn’t segregate her in front of the others. She’s fierce and loyal, she shouldn’t be admonished for that trait.

I’m spitting mad on her behalf. My steps falter and my hands get planted on my hips as I wrench my torso sideways and narrow my eyes at every single one of them. “You should *all* be ashamed of yourselves and count your lucky stars that she cares about *all* of us as heartily as she does. Everything she does, every move she makes, she does for you. None of it is done with selfish intent, she doesn’t ask you any questions when you tell her you need her. She’s. Just. There. Balls to the wall and jumps in head first. How dare you chastise her for doing what you’ve raised her to do! There’s nobody more dutiful and courageous than she is. If this is what it’s going to be like as a sister in the club, I may have to reconsider my acceptance.”

With my rant over and done with, I loosen my fingers from Luca’s and stomp my way down the corridor. The gall of some people!

Charlee, Country, and Luca quickly catch up to me. My man, my old man, tangles our fingers together and praises me. “I’m so damn proud of you, Curly Sue. It took some guts to stand up to my brother the way you just did. He needed to be knocked off his pedestal a notch or two.”

“Thank you,” I convey, proud of myself for speaking my mind without fear.

Charlee has glassy, red-rimmed eyes when she faces me, and says, “You’ve just earned yourself a best friend status in my books, Mera. You’ll never

know how appreciative of your monologue I am.”

“Somebody needed to say something,” I gurgle, tears clogging my throat. “It’s just wrong the way they single you out, but I don’t see that happening to any of the other old ladies. Whenever they’re reprimanded, it’s always done behind the privacy of closed doors. You should have the same consideration.”

“I agree,” Luca says. “Regrettably, things work differently in our world than what you’re used to, baby. But it seems things are changing, and we’ll be implementing new rules. Perhaps, your words will make everyone stop and think.”

“Tammera,” I hear my name whispered. Turning on my heels, I notice a cluster of kids hiding in the doorway of the library.

“Connal? Where are the older kids?” I ask, my voice just as low as his in case there’s a reason he’s trying to keep the focus off of us.

“They were taken downstairs. Something’s going on, Tammera. We’re scared,” the nine-year-old conveys.

“How long ago were they taken down there, Connal?” Luca asks, inserting himself into the conversation.

Connal, being taught to keep his trap shut, looks at me for permission and direction.

“It’s okay to trust him and anyone wearing one of these,” I vow, patting the cut sheathed on Luca’s chest. “They’re with me. You *can* rely on them. We’ve come to take you away from here. We have good homes lined up for you. I swear, nothing bad is going to happen to any of you ever again.”

“Are you sure, Tammera?” Maizy, a four-year-old pixie of a girl, asks me through the gaps of her teeth where she’s lost a tooth or two. “Sister Magda said I could trust the other man who came yesterday, but he was mean, and pinched me when I didn’t want to sit on his lap.”

Country bends his knees and squats down in front of Connal and Maizy, swearing, “Nobody will ever hurt you again. I have a little boy, his name is Hunter, and he’s three. How old are you?”

“I’m this many,” Maizy states, holding up four fingers. “I had a birthday!”

“Two months ago if my memory is right,” I add, smiling down at her. She bobs her head, happy that I remembered even though I’m not here anymore.

Luca attempts to get Connal to talk to him again. “How long ago were the older kids taken underground?”

Looking over his shoulder, Connal looks at the clock hanging on the wall, then answers, “About an hour or so ago. Mister?”

“Yeah, Connal?” Luca answers, giving him his undivided attention.

“That’s not a good thing. Can you go and get them now?” The nine-year-old pleads, causing fear to race up and down my spine. Shit.

“Yeah, buddy. We’re going to go and get them now,” Luca reassures.

“An hour is an awful long time for them to have been at the mercy of the nuns, Luca,” I remark. “Was there anyone with the sisters, Connal?”

“There were a couple of men in suits and one woman who was wearing a flowery dress,” Maizy answers, her downcast eyes going misty.

“Why does that make you sad?” I ask her, bending down on my knees so we’re at an even eye-level. Luca and Country go off to the side, making plans most likely about the best way to get down there without exposing ourselves before we have the entirety of the situation and the danger thresholds understood.

“Because it’s worse when the women come to ex-emamine,” she explains, whispering, never looking upward. She didn’t say the word correctly, but we all definitely understand what she meant, judging from the angry looks that briefly cross everyone’s face. “They’re meaner than the men.”

“Why would women come to examine them, Mera?” Charlee asks, hovering over me.

“The women want servants in different ways than the men do, if you catch my drift,” I state, leaving my words open to interpretation. She’s a smart cookie, she’ll read between the lines without me having to give her all the details and upset Maizy and Connal more than they already are.

“Say what now?” Charlee probes, her scowl deepening as she analyzes what I said. “They need to be put in the gallows. Off with their heads.” Her poor linguistics and imitation of a pirate has the two kids tittering.

“You’ve got your euphemisms wrong. I think you mean they need to walk the plank, pirate lady,” I add, winking at the little ones. Connal’s eyes scan between me and Charlee, he’s not used to playful banter, so he’s expecting some sort of punishment instead of us razzing each other.

“You say tomato, I say tohmatoe,” Charlee excuses, jacking that saying up too, shrugging her shoulders in a flippant manner. “Y’all knew what I meant, didn’t ya?” As she directs that question at the kiddos, their eyes widen as they look at me, not wanting to take her back over mine.

“Whatever. Don’t use your enchanted charms to steal and captivate my people,” I jest, this time both kids emit a full out giggle. There. Mission accomplished.

“We’re your people, Miss Tamera?” Connal asks just as Luca and Country come back our way.

“You are, Connal,” I guarantee.

“Does that mean you’ll be my mommy now?” Maizy asks, sticking her thumb in her mouth. The question takes me by surprise, and my eyes lurch upward and connect with Luca’s.

“Maizy, don’t ask dumb questions. Nobody wants us,” Connal snaps, blowing air out of his mouth.

“That’s not true,” I argue. “Connal, why do you say that? What makes you think that?” I ask, bewildered.

“Because, anytime I come up for adoption, everybody walks away. I’m still here, ain’t I?” He plants his hands on his hips, glaring at me as if I’m the source of his pain.

“Buddy, you’re still here because you haven’t met the right people. You haven’t found *your* people,” Luca insists, emphasizing the word *your*.

“Whatever,” Connal snorts, tossing his hands arbitrarily out to his sides in a

“forget it” motion. “That's not important right now. Are you going to go and rescue my friends or what, mister?”

“He's going, little man, and so are we. Why don't you watch your attitude toward the ones that have come here and have put their lives on the line to make sure you get outta here,” Kruger reasons, or at least, it's his version of reasoning with a young man who's cranky at the world. Undoubtedly. With good cause for being so.

Luca interrupts, huddling us in closer together, including the two leaders of the group, Connal and Maizy, declaring, “This is what we're gonna do.”



CHAPTER 18

LUCA

KRUGER, STELLA, TEXAS, MALICE, SHAMUS, JESSA, AND STAR HAD CLEARED their sections, and eventually made their way to us. Malice and Jessa are going to stay behind while the rest of us go downstairs to find out what the holy fuck is going on with the teens, visitors, and staff.

Mera, me, Country, and Charlee guide the others from the area, our feet pounding the pavement. It was hard leaving the cluster of kiddos behind, but they're with our brother and sister, and we know without a shadow of doubt that they'd lay down their lives before letting anything happen to any of them.

Connal and Maizy's conversation has me stupefied. I wanted to yank Maizy up when she asked if Mera would be her new mama and keep her safe in my arms. That little girl, and the boy broke my heart in half with their pleas and the way they believe they're so discardable. No child should *ever* be made to feel that way. It damages their sense of self-worth and is likely why so many young teens turn to a life of crime. They don't think anyone cares. That shit stops today.

Stopping, I turn around to Mera and ask an important question, "How many kids are we making sure are recovered here? I don't want anybody left behind."

She inclines her head sideways while thinking. When her eyes close, and

tears begin streaming down her cheeks without a sound breaking through the barrier of her luscious lips, I begin to panic. When she answers me, I know that there's something big at play, and we need to nip it in the bud. "I didn't see Cortland, Trayton, Tala, Turner, Winter, Duncan, or Sheraton in the flock of kids. They'd never purposefully leave them behind." Her body seizes into place and her eyes widen. "Something doesn't feel right about only the older ones missing, Luca."

"No, it doesn't," Star says, agreeing with her. "Do you think they're being sold?"

"I think they're being inventoried; the fuckers are checking out the merchandise," Shamus matter-of-factly concludes, no emotion laced in his voice. What little I know of him tells me he's preparing himself for the battle ahead. Because I'm sure that's what we're about to walk into—a battle.

My vision takes in the way he reaches out, and supportively squeezes Star's hand. Then he demands, "No survivors."

"No survivors," I reiterate, stating the glaring obvious, it was something we'd already concluded and established before infiltrating the abbey. This operation isn't only being shut down, the people here who are involved will be executed. There won't be a heart beating nor a toe twitching by the time we leave this place.

"No time like the present," Mera grunts, waving her hand, silently issuing the order for us to get the lead out of our feet and press onward. "I want them exterminated."

Stella isn't usually bloodthirsty, but her next statement has me wondering if I've overlooked something cutthroat and diabolical inside of her, something that I should've noticed residing within her.

A kindred spirit.

"Don't worry, Mera. If there's anything our men are good at, it's annihilating rodents and other disease carrying miscreants. And I'm holding the knockout juice that'll expel their final deathblow." When Stella raises up her arm, and presses a trigger, a blue and orange flame bursts from the tip like a volcanic eruption.

I'm both scared as well as impressed at the weapon she's chosen and currently has latched between her five, slender fingers—a handheld blowtorch.

“They’ll be begging for a breath of fresh air by the time it’s all said and done. Only, they’ll find no pity from us. We will obliterate them and their operation. Even if I have to steal their ventilation personally. They will die.” Stella proudly juts her head upward with a destructive look blazing behind her irises.

“Fuck me,” Shamus tosses out, unsure if he should be in awe of Stella, or stay ten feet behind her at all times. I’m personally going to make sure I have her in my sights, so I don’t end up in line of her *literal* fire.

“Isn’t she something?” Kruger gloats. “That’s my girl.” I try not to look too closely at the way his eyes are shining as he stares at her, almost as if her words have turned him on. Yeah, that’s not something I want to think about, or hell, even *know* about.

“She’s something alright,” Texas mutters, but hidden behind his mumbled words is the sound of camaraderie. Texas doesn’t fool me—he’s enthused with her proactiveness. He’ll be the first one standing next to her, pointing out her victims in no orderly fashion, and he’ll do so without missing a beat. Texas loves all things death and destruction. He gets off on hearing his marks’ screams of protest, fear, and pain. Some think he needs to be evaluated and possibly committed—they think he’s fallen off the rocker. I say let him do his thing. He may be a sociopath, and can sometimes be overly psychotic in his pursuits, but that trait is occasionally needed in our field of expertise.

The rest of us keep our traps shut not knowing what to say, and begin the trek to the stairwell, with quiet, practiced proficiency, we get the door open leading down without even so much as a creak from the hinges permeating.

We can hear muffled voices the further we decline, I can’t make out what they’re saying, but the audible cries from the teenagers have my feet accelerating and I start taking two steps at a time, everyone keeping up with my rapid pace. Mera’s hand is holding the seam of my shirt, the stitching at the bottom becomes further compromised when she recognizes the teens as

they sob out the words or phrase, “Stop. Please don’t.”

Our feet become featherlight, our weight on the steps ebbs as we hit the chipped and decaying linoleum deck. Lucky for us, we don’t hit the open floor plan, we have a small corridor that’s wide enough to fit us all. Lifting my finger to my lips, I silently order for everyone to stay quiet until I can get a read on and grasp on the seriousness of this situation. As my hand is placed on the wall, I can feel where it’s been scratched, dented, and smashed—spackled with construction mud. The fresh paint has hardly had a chance to dry. As I continue to graze my palm along the plasterboard, I feel a head-sized gouge that’s recently been patched and repaired.

My entire body begins to tremble as the ground quivers beneath my feet.

I’m beyond angry.

I’m motherfucking livid.

These kids have been through more hell than what we’ve speculated.

The men and I glance at each other, we nonverbally and stoically communicate our individual theories. Even if our suspicions are unconfirmed at this juncture, about what they’ve more than likely been through, we decide to keep those accusations to ourselves for the moment. We don’t want the women to begin freaking out and act hastily.

We have one shot at this, and we need to be successful. There are no do-overs.

Each one of us pushes our women behind us and takes the lead. As my head peers around the corner, all sense of urgency hits me like a battering ram. We have no more time to stall.

The men and women who’re guests of the nuns are doing disgusting things to the teens. “That’s Winter,” Mera advises, pointing out the girl whose teeth are being examined like she’s cattle.

When our heads shift to the corner where a boy is hollering, “Don’t touch me!” I blackout.

“Oh, God. That’s Cortland,” Mera murmurs. I can hear the tears in her voice

at what she's witnessing. The boy in question has his pants down around his ankles, a couple is all but molesting him as they scrutinize his ball sack. The woman's hand lifts, wrapping her fingers around his shaft.

"Fuck this," I hear Shamus state as he rounds me, pulling his arm back as he sprints toward the adult male, and cold cocks him. Star, not one to let her old man show her up, jumps on the bandwagon by leaping onto the female's back, taking her to the ground.

Kruger sees something I didn't yet, and goes flying past me, becoming a murderous machine, the life has all but vanished from his eyes. Stella, watching the scene unfold, lights her torch and with a battle cry, launches herself into his fight, the odor of burning flesh permeates the room, but I ignore that, and apparently, so does everyone else as we find our targets.

Mera's finger lifts, showing Charlee three women wearing habits, black robes, and other nun attire. Charlee nods her head, and the two sprint away, the nuns had no clue what hit them, but when the two old ladies take the three down to the floor, a proud and pleased smile crosses my face before I hone in on another man who's got a teenage girl's back plastered to his front, using her as a shield.

"Sweetheart?" I call out to the girl. When her eyes snap to mine, I ask, "You okay with a few bumps and bruises?" Her nod confirms that she doesn't give a shit if she's caught in the crossfire, she just wants this monster's hands away and off from her adolescent body. "Okay. Close your eyes."

When she follows my command, I reach into my jeans pocket and drag out my favorite ammunition—my necktie. The guy gets a smarmy smirk on his face, thinking he has this in the bag. He has no idea how ruthless and brutal I can be with this wispy material.

Taunting him, I ask, "Do you see this?" I taper my finger and show him my club designation. Steering his eyes where I want them, I smirk back at him. "They don't call me Hangman because of the game, although I am good at it, but because this right here, is my weapon of choice."

His grin fades as he puts two and two together. But I bet he's not coming up with four, because his knowledge is limited when it pertains to me. I'm a wild card, what you see, and what you get, aren't always the same thing, they

don't always add up, and by the wrinkles and indented crease in his forehead, he knows it.

Deciding to add a layer of mischievousness to his already growing discomfort, I propose a solution to his current dilemma. "However, I'm willing to make an exception and give you a fighting chance by letting you solve the jigsaw puzzle. First letter begins with 'I' and the last letter of the brainteaser ends with 'U'. Now, it's up to you to fill the blanks in between the clues I've given you." I'm so full of shit, nothing's getting him out of this mess. Oh, well. He doesn't need to know that. I'm allowed to have a slice of fun with my prey.

"Fuck off. I'm not solving jackshit. I'm not an investigator nor a detective, and I never want to be one," the fuckface spews, being belligerent, which makes me chuckle. "Solve your own damn riddle because I'm not joining you on whatever bullshit game this is you're trying to play with me."

"No? How disappointing." I drawl, allowing my southern accent to come to the forefront. "What's your name, sweetheart?" I switch my attention to the girl since her chest is heaving erratically. I don't want her to be scared any further than what she already is.

"Sheraton," she answers, licking her dry lips. "Please, get him away from me."

"Gladly," an enraged Bull says as he joins our group activity. "Sorry, Luca, but I'm going to take this bully off your hands."

"I understand," I tell him, because he and Dottie had already called dibs on this kid, she's going to be his, so it's only right that I step aside and let him handle this one. There's plenty of fish in this pond that need to be caught and fileted. "Reel him in, Bull. But when you hook him, make it hurt."

"It'll be my pleasure," Bull roars as he charges forward, and in the blink of an eye, Sheraton is removed from the captor's hands and gently set to the side. Her synapses come alive and she hauls ass to the corner where nobody's close to her. She huddles there, watching as we pick off the sick freaks one by one.

"He's getting away!" Sheraton hollers, and I follow her line of sight. A

malicious gleam enters my eyes, and a vindictive smile encompasses my face.

“Not for long, sweetheart,” I vow, my ankles bouncing in anticipation as I come up behind the escapee and wrap the middle of my tie around his neck, yanking him back and choking him. “Now, where are you off to? The fun’s only starting, you can’t miss the grand finale.”

The smell of urine and shit percolates, and I raise my eyebrows at Sheraton in question. She pinches her nose between her two fingers and confirms that the man I’ve confiscated has indeed, pissed and defecated himself. “Gross,” she mouths, fanning her face with her free hand.

“Damn, dude. You reek,” I say as loudly as I can muster. “Weren’t you potty trained? You aren’t supposed to shit your pants.”

“L-let me g-go,” the man stutters. “I-I promise I’ll never come back. I.” He stops, swiping his hands upward and trying to force some slack between his neck and my tie. “I swear to you, I’ll never accept another invitation to another exhibition again.”

“Damn fucking right you won’t. But not because of your own volition, but because you won’t be around to be tempted.” There’s no way a man like him can refuse an invitation of this sort. A zebra’s stripes don’t change color just because he’s had one scare.

With practiced ease, I grab the tail ends of my tie and pull, the pressure causes his esophagus to pop but it’s not enough to kill him... yet, he’ll start to drown in his own fluid. With the need to watch him struggle, I lean around so I can witness his eyes bulge as the veins in his forehead protrude.

“Uh, uh, uh,” I chant. “You aren’t getting off that easy.” I unwrap my tie and with one end, I wrap his wrist together, then I weave it around his neck and knot it with the cuffed end. Every time he moves, he’ll strangle himself, and move he will because I’m about to scuffle with him. Instinctually, he’ll lift his arms to protect himself.

Last time I tussled with my tie, I was too weak and malnourished to enjoy it. But now, my strength has returned, and I’m ready to get down and dirty. I’m primed for battle.



CHAPTER 19

MERA

“TAMMERA. YOU HAVE NO RIGHT COMING BACK HERE AFTER WHAT YOU DID!” Sister Magda scolds. “Look what we’ve been forced to do because of you and Shayne.” She holds her hands out to her sides like a show hostess, presenting the next prize to be offloaded.

“What we made you do?” I snort. “Don’t victimize yourself, sister. You’re not an innocent in this thing, and you *aren’t* the good person you portray yourself as being. You had the same plans in mind when it came to Shayne, only, you were selling her off to her siblings, instead of strangers. You’re the one who doesn’t have the right!”

“I knew the day you were left here that you were no good, that you’d bring trouble to our doorsteps. I should’ve gotten rid of you right away. But sister Agnes thought we could drill the evil out of you. I should’ve listened to my initial instincts. You needed a good belt lashing, not the word of God,” she berates, leering at me.

If she thinks her low opinion of me is going to make me weep and beg for forgiveness, she’s sorely mistaken. “Stop with your boo-hooing, would you? You’re the one who’s rotten to her core. Not me.”

When her arm rears up, and her palm pendulums, preparing to slap me, I know that our commentary is over with. Which is fine with me. As she swings at me, I bend backward, missing her slap—barely, I feel the breeze

trickle past my face as her arm bypasses me, causing her to stumble.

Admittedly, the young girl in me that took years of neglect and chastisement from her wants to stick her tongue out at her, put her fingers in her ears and wiggle her fingers, singing, nana-nana-boo-boo. However, the adult in me only wants one thing, and that's to knock the living daylights out of her.

Pleased that she doesn't make even a trace of contact with my flesh, I gloat, "You're nothing without that sharp mouth of yours, are you sister? You don't even have the basic fighting skills. What a shame."

"Don't try and use your ridicule on me, girl," sister Magda heckles, straightening her habit. "I've got a black belt in humiliation. Hundreds, if not thousands of kids have come waltzing through these doors, none have managed to slight me, and you won't be the one who succeeds."

"Fuck. You." I sneer, done with our back-and-forth bantering, I swing, only, I don't miss. When an emboldened red palm print is tattooed on her face, I don't stop to admire my work, I begin to rain down blows—an open palm here, a closed fist there, and a few kicks added in between. I'm not cognizant of how long we fight for, but when we're done, and she's passed out on the floor, my breathing is labored and my muscles are sore.

"A little assist here, Mera," Charlee calls out, and my eyes snap from one of my three adversaries. Noticing she's stuck between sisters Agnes and Ann, I don't stop and think, I charge into the fray.



Charlee and I lean against the wall, all of the teens standing between us, as we watch Luca mess with his quarry. He's being vindictive, making the man choke himself every time he goes to defend himself.

It's quite entertaining.

"I would've never thought about using that form of punishment before. I'll give him this, it's inventive," I admit to Charlee.

“I hope he chokes,” Tala exclaims.

“Have you had prior run-ins with him before, Tala?” I ask her, wondering if that’s why she’s been shooting daggers at him since we got them gathered together, and tucked between us.

“Not me. He likes the younger kids,” she confesses, balling her fists, and tossing it through the air when Luca receives another defensive maneuver attempt from the man, like she’s the one hitting him.

“Who?” I ask, suddenly feeling hostile.

“Maizy is his favorite kid to visit,” Trayton tells me, the first word he’s spoken since we got him and his cousin, Tanner out from a makeshift room we located attached to this basement. That was our mistake, we thought it was a janitor closet because it was skinny in dimension and the wood was plywood thin. It wasn’t until we heard an earsplitting “no” shouted that we searched it. Thankfully, the man was wimpy, his voice and look was intimidating enough to have the boys scared. But for us, he was a wuss when it came to standing up to another adult, and together, Charlee and I took him down, tied him up, and delivered him to Country.

“Luca!” I holler.

“Yeah, Curly Sue?” He stops, pivots, smiling at me. Only his face drops when he sees mine. “What happened? Who am I killing?”

“That piece of shit right there,” I say, indicating his toy.

“Was already planning on it, darlin’,” he vows.

“I know. But I need you to make him hurt. You’re being easy on him, I want him to feel the burn, Luca.”

“Again. Why, Mera?” Luca stares at me, dissecting me. “What did he do?”

“He hurt Maizy,” Winter announces, looking Luca dead in the eyes, never once wavering.

“Did he now?” Luca probes.

“He did. Several times,” Cortland states. “I tried to stop it, that’s why I’m

down here. This time.”

Luca makes a guttural sound that emanates from his trachea, then loses his ever-loving mind. My jaw drops to the floor when he elevates the man from the length of his binding that connects his wrist to his ankles.

“Who’s first?” he asks, his eyes blackened, his irises blown.

“Pin the tail on the donkey, or is he our pinata?” Country asks, grabbing a two-by-four out from the building material that’d been stashed in the corner.

“Why choose?” Kruger snickers the question. “Personally, I like a little variety while doling out my punishments.”

Texas adds, “Cruelty *is* fundamental when doing a job the right way. I want to taste his fear.” A shiver races up and down my spine when I take in Texas’ brutal look. I knew he was insane, but this—this is deranged.

“Make him shit candy, Country!” Charlee, my bloodthirsty friend, hollers.

“Taste the rainbow,” I giggle, singing my favorite candy commercial’s jingle.

“Hear that, fellas? My lady wants us to make him bleed a bag of skittles,” Luca maniacally snickers. “Ready to shit fruit flavored candy out of your asshole, freak?” he asks, terrorizing the restrained man.

They don’t wait for an answer. They don’t care about what he has to say. Shamus picks up a box of nails as Country grabs a hammer. “What are they going to do with those?” I quiz Charlee.

“Play pin the tail on the donkey,” she says, smiling at me.

“Oh, yeah, that makes sense,” I reply, shaking my head. My mouth opening wide with the ‘O’ part of my sentence. Like I’ve said previously, they’re in-ven-tive.

I don’t even question it when Country hands off the two-by-four in his left hand to Kruger while his right hand hammers the nail Shamus just placed in the meat of the man's left butt cheek. The boys and girls are oohing and ahhing, making me wonder if we should get them outta here and escort them back to the others.

They shouldn't be seeing this, it's... disturbing to say the least.

"Come on, let's get back upstairs. The others are worried about you and need to see you with their own eyes in order to believe you're all alright," I suggest.

"Do we have to?" Cortland questions.

"Yeah, buddy. I think we do," I answer, guiding them up the stairs and leaving the men to do their thing.



When we make it back to the others, they've been joined by the rest of our missing men and women who were taking care of their own task.

"Where are the guys?" Gunner asks, his eyebrows raised as he keeps an eye on the empty space behind us.

"Disposing the trash," Charlee tells him, censoring her words since there are ears nearby that shouldn't hear the details of what's happening down there.

"Ah," he remarks, sitting in Sister Ann's high back chair that looks like a throne, his arms laden down with file folders. Looking at me, he clears his throat. "You'll be happy to hear that this is a new operation. Everyone is here and accounted for. That's not to say that other... *things* haven't been happening behind the scenes."

"Kinda figured that out for myself," I mumble, then confess, "The things we just walked in on are disgusting and hard to take."

"I'm sorry you had to see that," Julius says, anger laced with sorrow directed toward me. "We know that the world is evil and unconscionable, but when it's shoved in your face it makes it hard to swallow." Then his attention turns to his daughter, sadness laced in his eyes. "Charlee girl."

"It's okay, Pops. Water under the bridge," she contends, waving his concern away. "We're good. I swear."

“Are we?” he asks her, walking up and cupping her cheeks with the palms of his hands. Caressing the apple of her cheeks with his thumbs. “You’re one of the most important people in my life, I can’t stand there to be a rift between us. I’ve been harsh with you. I’m sorry... terribly sorry, baby girl. Ma would be ashamed of me for the way I’ve treated you. I love you so very much, you are my sunshine.”

“As far as apologies go, that’s a pretty damn good one,” I spout off, causing Charlee to chuckle and Pops to shake his head, a smile spread across his face, reaching from one ear to the other.

Charlee snuffles before she says, “She’s right, it is. I promise Pops, we’re okay.”

“Is she crying? Did you know she could do that?” I ask Gunner who simply chuckles.

Pops sighs, giving me a side-eye full of mirthful condemnation. Then he turns back to his daughter, insisting, “We aren’t, but we will be, Charlee girl. I’ll start taking the time to put your feelings into consideration before letting my tongue run loose on me. I never want to push you away from me, and I am grateful for you. I forget sometimes that you aren’t one of the guys.”

Feeling like I’m invading a private moment, I shuffle toward Gunner and sit down beside him. He hands me a folder and I start scanning it. From there, we compare my memory to what’s been noted. We sit for a long period, I get lost in the jotted notations, and before I know it, the room is filling up with the men we left downstairs.

“Everything been taken care of?” Gunner asks Luca, who simply nods. “Good. Let’s head out. We’ll let the ladies gather the kids while we make sure we’ve left no trace behind.”

The kids are anxious to leave with us, so it doesn’t take a lot of effort on our part to get them loaded into the vans. By the time we’re settled, the men come out, appearing as if they’re out for a Sunday stroll.

“Okay, kiddos. Y’all ready for the first day of the rest of your lives?” Charlee asks, twisting the key and firing up the vehicle.

They all shout that they are. We couldn’t fit everyone into one van, but the

ones who couldn't ride with me weren't hard to persuade to separate from me after I promised we were heading to the same place.

As we drive home, a weight lifts from my chest, and I wear a smile the entire way back.

My demons have been conquered.

My past has been dissipated.

There are no more threats waiting on the horizon for us.

Or so I thought.



CHAPTER 20

LUCA

“WAKE UP, MERA. WE HAVE A FULL DAY AHEAD OF US,” I WHISPER INTO Mera’s ear. Her beliefs are important to me, I know that I can’t take her until we share some vows, so I’ve been working behind the scenes to make that happen for her.

“Five more minutes,” she grumbles into her pillow, causing me to smile.

“You said that twenty minutes ago, Curly Sue. Up and at ‘em, baby.”

“But I’m tired, Luca,” she complains.

“I know. But I’ve got a surprise for you,” I tell her.

“Surprise?” she asks, popping her head up from the pillow.

Shaking my head, I laugh. “Ah. Should’ve known that’s what’d catch your attention. Get your shower, baby. Wear a nice dress and meet me downstairs for breakfast.”

“Fine. This better be one helluva surprise, Luca.”

“It is. Now get a move on. I’ll be waiting for you.” With that, I give her a peck on the forehead and leave her to do her thing.

When I make it down the steps and into the dining room, it’s merry and chaotic. The kind that makes a man feel proud and whole. Kids are laughing

as they pack their plates full of waffles, sausage, bacon, eggs, biscuits, and a myriad of fruit. You'd think they'd never eaten before with as high as their piling the food on.

Julius comes up next to me, wearing his own smile as he watches Shayne interact with the abbey kids. "They weren't allowed to openly talk while eating. They're having a blast and are making up for lost time."

"I see this," I chuckle, nodding my head in their direction. "It's good to hear laughter filling this house."

"It's been a while," he states, nudging my shoulder.

"Too damn long," I add, remembering when he and I were teens ourselves, and caused a ruckus with our wild and reckless ways. We kept the staff on their toes, they never knew what mischief we'd cause next. Our parents were never interested in us enough to make sure we were behaving. It was essentially up to us to keep an eye on each other, which never is a good idea when you have two boys who love nothing more than to cause the most damage they possibly can.

We were nuts.

We'd slide down the banisters, jump off the second-floor landing onto a mattress we'd dragged into the foyer from one of the guest suites, and dare each other to climb the tallest tree and parachute out of it with nothing more than a bed sheet. Neither Julius, nor me, could ever say no, the repercussions were disastrous to our badass reputation if we did. Our brotherly agreement was if either of us said no or didn't follow through out of fear, we'd have to dress in one of my mother's ball gowns and let the victor take photographs—for blackmail material. We were cold and ruthless to each other, no wonder I'm as fucked up as I am.

"I dare you to—" Julius slams his hand down over my mouth before I get a chance to complete my sentence.

"We're not going there, Luca," he states, but I see the interest shining in his eyes.

When he removes his hand, I ask, "What would we use against each other to force compliance anyway? There's no way I'd ever fit into a dress these

days.”

“I don’t even wanna know,” Julius remarks, closing his eyes. “You’re far scarier than you were back then. I’m not sure there’s anything you wouldn’t do.”

“Probably not,” I agree, thinking it over, he’s right. I may be decades older nowadays, but I’m still a kid at heart. Not much phases me, and I don’t embarrass easily, not like I did when I was twelve, anyhow.



“Where are we going, Luca?” Mera asks as I cart her from the car after blindfolding her.

“Patience, little grasshopper. You’ll find out soon enough,” I say, planting a chaste kiss to the top of her head. “I promise, it’ll be worth the wait.”

She grits her teeth, heaving out a heavy sigh. “Have I mentioned that, as much as I love surprises, I can’t stand being teased about them? When I’m told there’s one coming my way, I want it now, not later?”

“You’ll survive, Mera.”

“Luca,” she groans. “This is annoying.”

I have to bite my bottom lip so that my laughter doesn’t come barreling out of my chest. “Maybe. But again, once you see what I’ve done, it’ll be something you’ll remember forever, and I aim to make this day as memorable as possible, love.”

Lifting her in my arms, I carry her up the courthouse steps, and through the check in point. Julius and Shayne came ahead of us, and the judge that’ll be overseeing our vows is a close family friend. He’s shut down his cases today in order for them to direct the decorators in making his courtroom as wedding ready as possible. In Shayne’s words, they’re going to beautify it. Probably with all of that frilly shit women like. After her past with the nuns, I didn’t think a church wedding would be up her alley, so I came up with this concept

as a compromise.

I don't care where we do it, where she becomes mine, as long as she does. The room, the state, the country doesn't matter, her wearing my ring and carrying my last name is the only thing that'll make our life together more perfect than it already is.

"I'll remember it alright," she says, winding her arms around my neck, and combing her fingers through my hair. It's shaven close to the scalp on the sides, and more sensitive to her ministrations—I all but purr. "You really do like it when my fingernails scrape against your head, don't you?"

"I love it anytime you're touching me, Curly Sue."

"Then I'll make sure my fingers are on you every day for the rest of our lives," she swears.

"That's the best damn news I've ever heard, baby girl."

When we make it to Judge Merrimore's door, Julius and Shayne are standing there, and when they open them for me, I'm ecstatic at what I see. It's not overly done, only enough flowers, bows, and other shit that resemble a traditional wedding. Not speaking to them so that I don't give anything away, I send them an appreciative smile, which has Shayne beaming back at me.

"Ready?" I ask her, lowering her down, gently setting her feet on the ground.

"It's about time," she admonishes me, but I can hear the thrill and excitement in her voice. She may claim to not like waiting, but she loves surprises no matter how long they take to unfold, she doesn't fool me.

Placing my hand on the place I tied her blindfold on her, I release the knot and watch as her face lights up. Bending down on my knee, I pluck the ring out of my slacks pants, and open up to her, speaking to her from my heart. "Mera, you're the best thing that's ever happened to me. I always thought I knew what love was, but I was wrong. I want to go to bed with you every night and wake up with you in my arms every morning. I want to spend every day, every hour, every second with you. I can't imagine growing old with anyone else, nor do I want to. When I look into my heart, I see only you. If you can look into your heart and only see me, then we should spend the rest of our lives together. I promise you; no one will work harder to make you

happy or cherish you more than me. When I met you, I knew I'd met my match. It was only a matter of time until we arrived at this moment. How it turns out is all in your hands. You deserve the very best, someone who will back you up without limits, let you grow without borders, and love you without end. Will you let me be the one? Will you do me the honor of becoming Mrs. Luca Dominic Alvarez?"

"Yes," she answers, as I slide the engagement ring on her finger. "For the rest of my life, Luca, yes."

"I love you, Curly Sue."

"I love you too." She sniffs. "Are we doing this today?"

"We're doing it right now, if you're game," I tell her.

"Yeah. I am. Let's get married, Luca."

"Sounds like a fine idea to me, baby. Let's begin the rest of our forever and end this day as man and wife."

Standing before the judge, Mera and I chose to share our own vows. And I start us off. "Mera, with you, I've found my calm in the chaos and my light in the darkness. With you, I've found my purpose, and I vow to make every day count. I promise to be the shoulder you lean on, the laughter in your heart, and the love in your life. I choose you today and every day for all the days of our lives. You are my forever, and I promise to make every moment count. I promise to stand by your side in sickness and in health, in times of joy and sorrow, as we build our life together. With this ring, I give you my heart, my love, and my unwavering commitment." I slide the band on her finger and pray I didn't screw that up. Shayne told me to keep it short and sweet and leave my witty humor at the door. So that's what I did.

"Wow. How do I follow that? You have me wanting to cry. I love you, Luca. You are my forever love story. I promise to be your partner in all things and to share in both the laughter and the tears. Today, I take your hand and your heart, and I promise to hold them both with tenderness and care. From this day forward, I promise to be your confidant, your partner in adventure, and your greatest love story. With every beat of my heart, I choose you, now and for all the days ahead. With this ring, I give you my heart, my love, and my

unwavering commitment.” When she slides that gold band on my ring finger, my heart soars and a feeling of completement washes over me.

I knew she was the one.

My love.

My light.

My forever.

My Curly Sue.



CHAPTER 21

MERA

“I NOW PRONOUNCE YOU HUSBAND, AND WIFE. YOU MAY KISS YOUR BRIDE.” When these words are announced, a lustrous spark seems to brighten within us that’d been smoldering in the background, waiting for the right opportunity to ignite into a flame. “Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Alvarez,” Judge Merrimore felicitates, a happy smile on his face as he places his hands on each of our shoulders. “I’m happy for you two, may you always be united.”

“Here and in the afterlife, Curly Sue is mine. She’s stuck with me,” Luca announces, before brushing Judge Merrimore’s hand aside and off of us, bending me over his arm, and plastering a claiming, passionate, scorching hot kiss on my lips.

Since he’s branding me as his in front of an audience, I decide to repay the favor in kind, and meet his tongue with every lash, proving I’m his match in every way, as he boasted about in his vows. He moans into my mouth, the vibrations traveling down the nerves of my body, resting in my clit—I swear that bundle of nerves shares its rhythmic beat with my heart because the pounding in my chest matches the throb between my legs.

“I think Shayne is wanting a little time alone with you, baby. Go over by the door and wait for me, let her say what she wants, and then we’ll get out of here after I thank Judge Merrimore and pay him for his service. Stay in my eyesight, okay?”

“Yeah, Luca. But I thought we were out of danger, and no longer had to be cautious. I need to use the restroom, and I don’t see one here.”

“I can have one of my bailiffs escort them so they can use the facilities,” the judge offers, and I send him a grateful smile.

“Alright,” Luca concedes. “I’ll wait here for you. But hurry up, yeah? I’d like to get you home so we can begin to celebrate our nuptials.”

“I’ll hurry,” I say, my voice turning breathless. “You knew, didn’t you?”

“Knew what, baby doll?” He pulls me into the sanctity of his arms, our noses touching, and his breath feathering across my pillowy lips.

Internally, a small smile spreads, looks like we’re not done playing with nicknames yet. But for some reason, I like this one as much as I do Curly Sue, because they’re mine, and mine alone. Plus, he makes me feel like a doll when he holds me in his beefy arms. I’m tiny in comparison to him, and I wouldn’t have it any other way.

“Come on,” Shayne begs, doing what I refer to as the pregnancy, I’m fixing to pee my pants, dance. “I’m gonna explode if we don’t potty soon.”

“Better get going before I don’t let you leave my arms. We can’t have a urispllosion all over the courtroom,” Luca teases, his smile causing my belly to flip flop.

“I’ll be right back,” I tell him, our fingers holding on until there’s too much distance between us.

“I’ll be here,” he says, smirking, watching me until the doors click shut between us, blocking our view of one another.

“Come on, Mrs. Alvarez, escort your friend to the bathroom before she pisses her pants,” Shayne giggles, her hand splayed below the lower part of her belly, supporting her small-ish baby bump. She’s beginning to get a waddle, but I refuse to mention that to her, no matter how cute I think it is because she won’t find it humorous in the least. If she were wearing one of the nuns’ habits, she’d look like a penguin, that’s for dang sure! I snicker, more to myself than anything, and when she glances at me, I shrug. I’m not giving up my secrets to a woman who’s pregnant. She’s liable to start spinning in

circles or something.

A bailiff keeps pace behind us, using a respectable distance between us. He doesn't give me the safe feeling one of Luca's men does, but since my husband trusts this judge, I'll trust his men. Even if he gives off alarming vibes that have my icky meter going off. He doesn't feel pervy, he just has me unsettled.

"Ignore it, ignore it," I chant to myself.

"What was that?" Shaynie asks me.

Not wanting to freak her out, because my radar may be on the glitch, I decide to play off my weird sensations. "Nothing, lady. I'm just ignoring my bladder."

"Wish I could. That's next to impossible these days," she jokes, lovingly rubbing her palm across her lower abdomen. She's going to be such a good mom.

She claims her stall the second our bodies make it through the threshold, and I hold back my mirth. That woman can move fast when my niece or nephew is pressing down on her bladder. Quickly, I choose the stall closest to her and take care of business. When I'm flushing the toilet, I swear I hear the door open and shut, and the lock engaging, but I'm so lost in making sure I don't touch anything inconspicuous—most especially, the toilet handle due to nasty germs seeing as some people are gross and don't wash their hands, that I hardly notice and shrug off what I believe I overheard. It's not important, the bathroom is a public one, I can't force others out just because I don't want strangers in the small space with me.

"When are you and Julius going to get married?" I ask as I pull up my stockings, and make sure my dress isn't tucked into the back of them.

"We're going to wait until after the baby is born. I don't want to be swollen and fat during our photos," Shayne answers.

"We didn't have a photographer," I grumble, suddenly sad that I won't have them as a memento to tuck away into an album.

"You did too. You just didn't see her," Shayne rebuts over the sound of her

toilet flushing.

“Huh,” I hum as I open the door and head toward the sink. “Guess I need to get better about paying attention to my surroundings.”

“I’d say so,” a beautiful Latina lady recommends. “If you had, you may have noticed I have a gun pointed at you.”

“Shayne! Stay in the stall!” I holler, now that she’s pointed it out, my eyes stay glued to the round end of the gun, praying that it isn’t loaded while hoping that a bullet doesn’t shoot out of the chamber’s barrel. “Who are you, and what do you want?” While asking these questions, I begin to wonder where our damn escort is.

“Looking for someone? Possibly my brother? You see, when he let me know that the man who murdered my Vir, my husband, was going to be in the courtroom he patrols, I knew this would be the best opportunity I’d have to ruin his life, the same way he ruined mine. Your husband is a hard man to get alone. Always someone guarding him like he’s the president needing the secret service at his back or something.”

Squaring my shoulders, refusing to let her know that she’s gotten to me, I ask, “Who’s your husband? Luca’s killed many men, so you’ll have to be more specific, sweetheart.” My taunting has her face scrunching up in anger, and she sneers. “I’m sure that Luca didn’t take your husband out for the hell of it, he must not have been a good guy.”

Her face contorts into that of a monster. The next words out of her mouth sends a wave of disbelief through me and has my body shivering with cold chills. “Graham was the best man! He didn’t deserve to die because he was earning a living. He was taking care of me!”

Sliding my head sideways, because surely, she did not call that rat bastard a good man, I ask, “Graham? Crumley?”

“Ah, so I see you knew him? He was glorious, wasn’t he?” This bitch has fallen off a cliff and smashed her skull, it’s the only reason I can come up with for her thinking Graham was anything but evil. Perhaps the fall caused some kind of traumatic brain injury because the man she’s describing and the one who manhandled me are not one and the same.

I'm so confused right now hearing her positive words about that evil man. Maybe she needs psychiatric intervention because this bitch is as batshit crazy as they come. "He was a disgusting human being. Do you know what he did? What he and his brothers did for a living? Did he smack you over your head with a hammer or something?"

"Don't talk about him like that! He was my life!" she spits. Literally. I know because some of her flying spittle lands on my face. "I've decided." She then nods her head as though she's having a discussion in her mind or something, because her last statement makes zero sense.

"You've decided?" I parrot, wanting to keep her talking and distracted until I can find a way out of this unstable lady's confrontation.

"That I want him to hurt the same way as I am," she continues saying. "And the only way I can think that he'll suffer the most, is by taking the love of his life away from him."

"Oh, shit." I hear Shayne cry out. "Shit. Shit. Shit."

I want to laugh since this is the first time Shayne has said anything that shouldn't be said in polite company. I'll make sure to bring it up later, now is obviously not the right time to pester her. Not with a gun directed my way.

"Lady!" Shayne bellows. "You were married to my brother?"

"I was. I'm your sister-in-law, I apologize for us meeting this way. I promise, as a Crumley, you're safe from this altercation. You will live, sister. I wish I didn't have to hurt you by shooting your friend, but I'm a believer in an eye for an eye." This bitch is speaking like they're having a festive reunion after familial introductions have been made between long lost family members, not like she's fixing to break Shaynie's heart by putting a bullet into her best friend's. Her real sister.

"Huh. I could've sworn Luca said you were his mistress, not his wife," I say, wanting her to focus on me, and not Shayne.

"Looks like the mighty Widowmaker doesn't know everything, huh?" she asks, gleefully smirking at me as if she's got the upper hand. "We married years ago, only we had to bury it so his brothers didn't find out. He didn't trust them not to come after me if he did something they didn't like. That's

how much he loved me.” The gun in her hand shifts through the air until the barrel is now aimed at her chest.

I don't think.

There's no time for rational thought.

I react.

My mind goes blank as I charge her. The booming sound of the projectile leaving the chamber reverberates through the air, nearly deafening me. Shayne screams, but I don't stop my pursuit, because if I do, I know I won't live to see another sunrise.

And I really want to see another one... with my husband.



CHAPTER 22

LUCA

“THE WOMEN ARE TAKING TOO LONG,” I MUMBLE, ANXIOUS TO HAVE MY bride in my bed. “I’m gonna go see what the holdup is.”

“I’ll come with you. Judge, it was nice to see you again,” Julius says, forever the polite brother.

“You two take care,” Judge Merrimore adds as our strides eat up the space between us and the waiting area.

“You too,” I call back, my feet never stalling as I keep putting one foot in front of the other. An intense need to see Mera encompasses me. I don’t question why, if my senses are in overdrive, there has to be a damn good reason behind the incessant need.

“Where’s the bailiff?” Julius asks as we continue walking.

“I have no idea. But he’ll pay for leaving them unprotected,” I promise.

Just as we hit the alcove that leads to the restrooms, a shot blasts out. I pick up my pace, Julius hot on my trail, and we rush to the women’s entrance. The door doesn’t give, it’s been locked from the inside.

“Fuck! We need a key,” I inform my brother. Shouts of anguish have my limbs shaking in both fear and anger.

“Stand back!” Judge Merrimore orders, his black robe floating behind him as

he urgently sprints our way. “I’ve got a master key. Here.” He all but shoves it at me, and I insert it into the lock and wrench my wrist. When it disengages, and the door opens, I see red... lots of motherfucking red. Blood to be specific.

I leap to Mera’s side, yank her off the lifeless woman, and envelop her in my arms. “What happened? Who the hell is that?”

“Graham’s wife,” Mera spews. “The bitch wanted me to spend forever in the afterlife. We had a difference of opinion and I sent her there instead.”

Rage consumes me, and I spit on the dead bitch. “Good fucking riddance.”

Shayne’s shaky voice says, “Can you believe the bullshit coming out of her mouth? She actually thought my brother was the good guy. That’s ludicrous. It’s like she didn’t know him at all.”

“Jesus, fuck. Did you just cuss, Shayne?” I ask, wondering if we’ve journeyed into an alternate universe. Is the world ending? First Mera. Now Shayne. We’ve corrupted them, and I like it. “Atta girl.”

“Now is not the time, brother,” Julius scolds me, holding Shayne close to his chest. “Are you alright, temptress?”

“Physically, I’m fine,” Shayne answers him.

“Mentally?” Julius probes.

“In a bit of shock. Moreso, because she was delusional. My brothers were a lot of things, Julius. Being good, that wasn’t one of them.”

“I tend to agree with you, Shayne,” I state, leaning back and scanning Mera for injuries. “Are you hurt?”

“No. This isn’t my blood, it’s hers. She gave me an opening and I took it.” Her tone is shaky, but on the outside, she’s as strong as a rock.

“I need to get this off of you,” I tell her, plucking at her dress. “Let’s go home.”

“Can we? Don’t we need to make a statement or something?” she asks me, burying her head in my pecs.

“No. I’ll take care of it. Y’all go home and salvage as much of this happy occasion as you can,” our judge friend insists. “If we need anything from you, I’ll get in touch.”

“Don’t have to tell me twice,” I huff, standing up and lifting Mera in my arms. This wasn’t the way I wanted to carry her home and over our marital threshold. But there’s no way I’m gonna set her down. I may not for the rest of the damn night.



“Luca. I’m alright, I swear,” Mera protests as I wash and scrub her skin for the second time since getting her in the shower.

“Let me do this, Curly Sue. I need it,” I confess, making sure my fear and need is visible in my eyes.

Despite where we are, and the fact that I’ve got her naked before me, there isn’t anything sexual in my actions or about my touch. They’re methodical, clinical, as I strive to ensure that not even a miniscule speck of blood is evident on her smooth, velvety soft skin. At some point, I’m sure, through our union, we’ll have a more pleasurable shower, but now’s not the time.

“I understand,” she murmurs, her gaze never leaving mine.

My virginal bride hasn’t stopped blushing since we entered our en suite, and I undressed us both. She also hasn’t looked lower than my shoulders, which is probably not a bad thing considering that I’ve been harder than a rock ever since the last piece of my clothing dropped to the floor. I briefly wonder if she knows what to expect, and hope that maybe Shayne talked to her because I don’t see the nuns doling out information on sex, unless it’s to tell them to abstain.

While I’m not so misogynistic to expect my woman to be pure and innocent, there’s a certain sense of satisfaction deep in my soul because I’ll be her first, last, and only. Having been the second born son, I always got the rags-to-riches hand-me-downs, and while this isn’t the same thing, knowing Mera is mine first, and there was no one else before me? Yeah, I’m kind of being a

caveman right now, without the club or beating of my chest. Hell, I wouldn't even have the position I have if Julius hadn't left to marry Ma and start the DreamCatchers.

"Curly Sue? We haven't talked about this but there's no time like the present," I say, broaching a topic that I worry might upset her. It's important, however, because as much as I want to start a family with her, I want it to just be us for a while.

"What do we need to talk about, Luca?" she asks.

"Do you... are you on any kind of birth control?" I manage to stammer out. No clue why I'm suddenly so nervous—I've faced men head on with little more than my necktie while they held weapons designed to decimate. Yet with her, I feel my softer side. "I mean, I know your beliefs, of course, but I don't know if you want to follow them in that way."

Her blush deepens until her cheeks are a deep, rosy pink. "Um, I have problems with my period sometimes, so I've been on the pill for several years now to regulate them and help control the issue."

"What kind of problems and issues are we talking about here, Mera?" I question, worried about her physical health. Not like I can change anything like that for her, but in my mind, I want to vanquish anything and everything that could possibly hurt her.

"Um, really bad cramps and a heavy flow. I'm still kind of a mess during that time of the month. I curl up in a ball, and just want to be left alone until the aches subside. But it's better with the birth control," she confesses.

"Okay, it's not good that you go through that, baby doll, but I'll hopefully figure out how I can help you during that time," I vow. I make a mental note and tuck it into my mind's vault to do some research on the topic, because there's no way my woman, my *bride* is going to suffer if there's anything I can do to prevent it. "I know we have to discuss it further down the road, but I presume you'll want children?"

"Yeah, I know you're older than me, but I've always wanted to be a mother, and the thought of having your babies thrills me half to death," she claims. "But can it just be us for a little while?"

A woman after my own heart because she just spoke the words I'd thought in my mind. Instead of answering, I nod. "You ready to get out of here and get dried off?" I query. I'm positive there's no more blood anywhere on her delectable body, and I'm ready to move on to our marital bed and commemorate our wedding night.

She grins, even as she reddens impossibly further, her gaze skittering down my body then quickly returning back to my eyes, causing me to chuckle. "Yeah, Curly Sue, that's what you do to me. Have ever since I laid eyes on you," I admit. "But even though I'm in this condition, if today, with Crumley's bitch has distressed you, we'll wait." It'll pain me, give me a raging case of the blue balls, but that's easily rectified with a cold shower and rubbing one out. I won't pressure her, even if the need to consummate our marriage is driving me to madness.

"Luca, I'm not going to lie and say I'm not a little bit nervous, because I don't really know what to expect, but I'm sure you'll take my skittishness away. And no, today didn't mess with me too much, there was no way I was dying before I became your wife in every way," she replies. Then, the little minx winks at me!

Damn, I love this woman more with each day that passes.

"Then let me help you, baby," I murmur, stepping out of the shower and holding out my hand. She willingly steps out, and I grab a towel from the rack, and slowly, sensuously, dry her off before wrapping the towel around my waist, knotting it so it doesn't fall off my hips before I'm ready for the great reveal.

Scooping her up, I stride out of the bathroom to the massive California king bed that takes center stage in the room. Depositing her gently in the middle, her skin now a delightful pink hue, I look my fill, and if the throbbing in my cock is any indication, I'm going to be very happy with our coupling.



Most of our kisses have been innocent by design because I wanted to honor

her beliefs, but now, I won't hold back. I can't, I need her too bad. Crawling in so I'm nestled in next to her on the mattress, I maneuver her so we're both laid out on our sides before I cup her face, and lower my head, my lips lightly brushing hers with a butterfly, fluttering touch.

"Luca," she breathes out, her eyes wide as she feels my hardness sweep against her soft abdomen.

"I feel like I've waited forever to properly kiss you," I admit, leaning down and breathing in her powdery scent. The courthouse kiss notwithstanding, we had an audience, so I tried to keep it as innocuous as possible. Leaning closer, I capture her lips with mine, and when she lets out a little sigh, slip my tongue inside so I can fully claim her angelic essence, stealing a bit of it for myself to hold onto during those times she's not with me.

Long moments pass as my innocent bride kisses me back, but soon, it grows more heated, and I feel her legs start restlessly moving against mine. It's time to take it to the next level—I just hope she's ready because with each one of our shared touches, I lose more of my will-power to keep any sort of distance between us.

My hands begin caressing her until I'm cupping one of her swollen breasts in my hand. As my thumb brushes across her distended nipple, I see her eyes widen as she emits a small mewl of pleasure.

"Just wait, baby, this is just the beginning," I warn, my voice full of assurance. Leaning down, I capture her nipple between my lips, then begin sucking and lightly nipping. "Feel good, Mera?"

"Oh, my word, yes," she exclaims, undulating her hips, grinding against me. "I wish Shaynie had been able to tell me about this and the sensations that would be flowing through me without stammering and blushing."

My interest piqued from the wonderment in her eyes, I lift my head, and ask, "Did she try to tell you about sex?"

She rolls her eyes and starts to incessantly giggle. "Well, she tried, but she was so busy mumbling and using her hands to express herself when she couldn't coherently find the right words, that I ended up being more confused than anything else. Finally, she said I'd figure it out like she did, and then

quickly left the room with a blush from ear to ear. Luca, I may not know the specifics, but I *do* read, or at least I have since I've been here, so I know the logistics of how it's supposed to work. So far, I've liked everything you've done to me, can't you tell?"

I smirk at her. Looking into her innocent, doe-like eyes as they stare up at me, her lips swollen from my kisses, and her cheeks pink and flushed from my avid succor, I nod. "Yes, baby, I can tell. If there's anything you don't like, don't hold back, tell me."

"I'm good, now, can we get back to it?" she sasses. "I'm not getting any younger, and neither are you."

Minx.

I continue my assault on her until her breasts are so swollen, and her nipples are so distended and hard, that she's writhing beneath me with insatiable lust. Moving further down her body, I maneuver her legs so I'm seated between them, the evidence of her arousal now staring me in the face. Knowing that I've caused this reaction, that her rising passion is because of my ministrations makes me want to shout to the heavens. Instead, I move closer and swipe my tongue through her soaked folds, her wetness glistening, calling to me like a siren calls a sailor to his doom.

"Oh, my word," she whispers, her body rippling under my attentive caresses. To keep her still, and to prevent her from taking my banquet away, I throw one arm across her lower abdomen then continue licking and sucking on her swollen bundle of nerves, reveling in her breathy moans as I heighten her arousal. I know when I sink inside her it's going to hurt, so my goal is to have her orgasming on my tongue and fingers before I attempt to enter her virginal pussy.

Adding a finger, I let out my own moan when I feel the heat emanating from her. She may burn me alive, but what a way to go. I mimic what I'm doing with my tongue, and soon, insert a second digit as I hone in on her engorged clit. When I close my lips around it, and flick it with my tongue, her back arches off the bed and she lets out a small shriek.

"Luca, I can't, it's too much," she protests, trying to push me away. "I'm too sensitive."

“You can, Curly Sue, and you will,” I adamantly instruct, increasing my motions. I feel her pussy begin to quiver around my fingers, and command, “Come, Mera. Come for me, wife.”

She keens out my name, her head thrown back in delight as my mouth and fingers milk the last of her orgasm. I gentle my strokes as she comes down, instinctively knowing she’s going to be sensitive. Raising up so I’m hovering over her, my forearms alongside her head, I gaze down at her sated face.

“Ready for more?” I ask, my voice husky with need. If she says no now, I’m going to die, but I’ll always honor her wishes.

“I’ll probably die from it, but yes,” she gasps out, grinning up at me. “That was... no wonder Shaynie was stammering.”

“I’d appreciate not hearing about my brother’s bed play when I’m about to make you mine,” I murmur, humming against her lips, causing her to giggle. “In fact, I’m good *never* knowing what they get up to, okay?”

“Fine,” she replies, smirking at me. “Now, are you gonna show me how you use your weapon of mass destruction?”

Rearing back, I look down at her wondering if I’ve blown a neuron or two in her brain. “What the fuck? My what?”

“It’s what we were taught to call it,” she explains while tittering with a girlish laugh. “Although, I suspect when we were taught that, they never knew that they came in your size.”

Deciding to put an end to my minx’s mutterings, I notch the head of my cock at her entrance, and slowly, methodically begin propelling my way inside of her until I reach her hymen. Looking down at her, I quietly divulge, “This might hurt, Curly Sue, but stick with me, I promise, it’ll get better and it’ll feel unlike anything you’ve ever felt before.”

Her gaze doesn’t leave mine as I thrust through the thin piece of skin, although I see her wince slightly as I bottom out inside of her tight, wet, heat. Leaning in, I peck her lips gently, giving her time to get used to me, oddly enough, I’m dying to start moving.

She reaches up, and as her hand cups my jaw, she smiles, claiming, “Luca, I

need you to move, honey.”

I watch intently for any outward sign that she’s in pain, but her eyes remain clear and free of any discomfort as I slowly withdraw then reenter her once again. I suspect I won’t last very long, she feels that good wrapped around my aching cock, but I pull on my control, and instead, begin a steady motion, swiveling my hips when I bottom out so I hit her clit, until I hear her begin moaning.

“Feel good, baby?” I ask, my teeth clenched as I focus on not blowing my own load. She now has her arms settled around my shoulders, and has wrapped her legs around my waist, slipping further inside, making it feel as though I’m going deeper than I am.

“More, honey, please,” she murmurs, her nails lightly stroking my nape.

As my hips continue to piston in and out of her tight as fuck pussy, I start building a Glock in my head to keep my orgasm at bay. I worry that I won’t make it until I feel the telltale fluttering in her pussy. Sliding my hand between us, I gently stroke her clit, and am immediately rewarded when her pussy clamps down on my cock so hard I see stars as she screams out my name, her head thrown back in ecstasy. I continue pumping, giving myself permission to come, and three thrusts later, I plant my cock to the root, and bellow her name in satisfaction.

I slow down my pace, but don’t completely stop as we both ride out the waves of our climax. Gazing down at my sweet, Curly Sue, I grin as her wide-eyed gaze greets me. I lean in and kiss her gently. “I love you, Mera Alvarez.”

“I love you too, Luca Alvarez. How soon before we can do that again? Now that I know what I’ve been missing, I need to make up for lost time.”

Her comment has me throwing my head back as laughter consumes me. I swear I never know what’s going to come out of her mouth, and I’m looking forward to the rest of our lives so I can find out.



EPILOGUE

MERA

I SWIPE UNDERNEATH MY LASHES AS TEARS FORM ON THEM. IT'S BEEN AN adjustment these past couple of months. Between getting the kids settled into their new homes, Shayne giving birth to her little girl, Everly Tammera Alvarez, and the rebuilding of the DreamCatcher clubhouse and reconstruction of the club as a whole, things have been busy.

On top of everything else going on in the family, Cameron and Gunner welcomed a baby boy, Aiden. Kruger and Stella introduced the clubhouse to a set of twin girls, Leighton and Brynn. And holy moly, they already act like their father, which has Stella fit to be tied.

Today, Judge Merrimore is finalizing the adoption of the convent kids staying with the MC and Alvarez family. Turning my head, a smile encompasses my face when I see Connal holding little Ever in his arms. The day Shayne gave birth, Connal came with me to visit her, and he was drawn to the baby. Since then, he hasn't let her leave his sights. The few times they've been apart, he's had a panic attack. And because of this, and the bond he's formed with both Shayne and Julius, he's becoming a part of their family today—as their son. But he'll be going last, Julius wanted to make a big deal out of his ceremony.

Maizy has become my little shadow, but I'm not the only one she's grown attached to, therefore, upon a lot of late-night discussions, Luca and I decided that she belongs with us, so we had a rush put on our paperwork, and she

doesn't know this yet, she thinks she won't be our daughter for a few more weeks, but she and Connal will be inducted into the Alvarez fold together. It's a surprise I hope she's happy with because with kids, the tides can turn quickly with their emotions, so she may not react the way I'm anticipating she will.

So far, I've watched Bull and Dottie adopt Duncan, Sheraton, and Winter. Powerhouse and Salem brought Tala, Trayton, and Tanner into their family as their children. The same goes with Malice, Jessie, and Texas with Cortland. With each signing of the adoption paperwork, pictures have been taken of the new family before moving onto the next.

When Judge Merrimore looks up at us, and winks at me, I know it's our turn. "Julius and Shayne, would you come up here with Connal please." Shayne plucks Ever from Connal as Julius holds out his hand and guides the young man up front. Maizy beams at her friend, there's no resentment on her end that he'll be inducted into his family today, and she won't. No, not my little girl. She's too full of light and laughter to let anything like jealousy come between her and her soon-to-be cousin.

When they turn to face the judge, Julius gets a confused look on his face and twists his body in our direction. "Hold up, something's missing," he claims, tapping his finger against his lips before snapping them. "Luca? Don't you have something important you're supposed to be doing?" Maizy begins to get upset, thinking he's leaving and not going to be here to watch his nephew, brother, and sister-in-law come together in union.

"You can't leave, Luca," Maizy pleads, her eyes swelling with unshed tears. "Please don't go."

Crouching down, Luca bends in front of her, stating, "Where I go, you go, little one. I'm not leaving, no, something more important is happening here. Want to know what it is?"

She vigorously bobs her head, her eyes glued to him, waiting for him to tell her what's going on.

Joining him, I lean over and wrap my arms around her slim shoulders. "What would you think about going up there with Connal, and letting the judge make you our daughter?"

“Really?” she asks in shocked surprise.

“Really,” I confirm. “What do you say? Wanna make me your mom and Luca your dad?”

“Yes!” she screams, causing the room to break out in a roar of laughter.

“Then come on, little one,” Luca suggests, lifting her in his arms, reaching out his hand for mine, and walking us up to the center of the room.

The words are blurred, I say yes and I do when it's appropriate and I'm prompted, but all I can think about is that today, I become a mom. My life may have started out on a rocky path, but now, everything I survived, all of the trials and tribulations I conquered have made me who I am... a woman who's happy, whole, and in love.

LUCA

So many changes have happened. The DreamCatchers and the Alvarez's have joined forces. We are now one combined unity with two divisions. Gunner will be leading us into the endeavor, and since Julius has semi-retired, I'll be in charge of our half, only I'll go to my nephew before acting on my own volition. It'll take some getting used to, but it'll pave the way for my own retirement plans.

I'm ready to hang up my tie and put on my dad and husband hat. I've served my time, I've been loyal, my life has revolved around nothing but the organization. And to be honest, I'm ready to let the next generation grow up and lead.

“Are you ready Mrs. Alvarez?” I ask my wife as we drive home with Maizy passed out in the back seat from all of the excitement.

“Ready for what, Mr. Alvarez?” she questions.

“For our forever, Curly Sue.”

“I was born ready, Hangman.”

A smile forms on my face. Whenever she wants to rev my engine, she uses my road name to entice me. The only thing is, all she has to do is look at me

and I can't resist her.

She's mine.

My everything.

My life.

My world.

My forever.

“Love you, baby doll.”

“Love you back, biker man.”

THE END

SNEAK PEEK INTO THE FIRST BOOK IN THE NEXT GENERATION:



BLURB

Hydro, Klaus Fitzgerald, grew up originally thinking he'd be joining the clan of his father and grandfather. When he crossed paths with Julius and Shayne Alvarez, that all changed. Wearing a leather cut with brothers at his back while he battled had more appeal than wearing a three-piece business suit and fighting alone. But the DCMC and change of scenery isn't the only reason he's chosen to switch organizations. That is all thanks to a certain bike riding, gun wielding, cut wearing pixie of a woman by the name of Ella. His once best friend whose title has changed. Now, she's simply known as his. And when she gains new enemies through her career, they don't just become the club's, they become his too. Nobody threatens his woman without going through him first. He dares them to try, because his daddy wasn't a glassmaker, he was a hard as steel Dad who took no crap off anyone, which means Hydro was forged in alloy, and as a result, he's become a titanium structure.

As Shamus and Star's daughter, Ella, the only female inducted into the DCMC, which is shrouded in burly and ruthless men, should be the biggest danger she faces. It's a man vs. man world after all, and when you add a woman into the mix, things get chaotic. Her club is different, she was raised and trained to live this life and fight their fight. They're accepting, loyal, and protective. She's used to fighting for her rights, but when she faces a new

adversary, a conniving and cold-hearted woman, the plot thickens and Ella's life is in more danger than it's ever been when she has a chromed frame nestled between her thighs, and metal grips held firmly in her hands. However, her new enemy doesn't just want Ella gone, she wants her to disappear, but as a club daughter she's faced bigger threats than the one this woman poses. She won't be the one going down.

They may be the next generation of the DreamCatcher Motorcycle Club, but they've learned from their elders' mistakes and they won't be lenient—they'll be lethal.

PROLOGUE

HYDRO

I'M AN IMPORT FROM ITALY, A FAMILIA CONNECTION THROUGH THE DreamCatcher MC brought me into the thick of the fold. Shayne and Julius Alvarez came for a visit so Shayne could meet her mother's side of the family, the Fitzgerald's, *our* family, and for some ungodly reason, I grew attached to them both, and vice versa, them to me, much to the delight of our grandparents. There was no rational reason behind our immediate attachment, it just naturally unfolded that way. From there, a unique, and strong, solidified bond was formed between the three of us. We spent countless hours together, most of that time I played tour guide, showing them my favorite places to eat and roam.

When the day came that I flew across the ocean to visit them one summer, the year I turned thirteen and was deemed old enough by my parents to board a plane and travel on my own, my life was forever altered in various ways.

The first being the most important. During that vacation abroad, I crossed paths with a whirlwind of a girl named Ella. She was spectacular, mesmerizing, the most beautiful girl I'd ever set my eyes upon. Golden spun hair, bluer eyes than the clearest sea, and a personality that drew you in and captivated you. I was instantly hooked on her. At that impressionable age, she became my everything.

My co-conspirator.

My partner in crime.

My confidant.

My hell on wheels, *my little hellion*.

Ella, my amazing cohort and lover, she's been there for every one of those milestones. She's stuck by my side through thick and thin. In my gut, I know she's my 'till death do us part woman. She's my garden of Eden, my Eve, my greatest temptation.

She's still considered as being my closest friend and ally, but now, when my little hellion is anywhere in the same proximity as I am, my dick hardens and my balls ache to be emptied. Which is why I sink my cock into her sheath's heat at any given opportunity. We haven't solidified our relationship into anything past our bedtime rendezvous. As of now, we're just enjoying each other's company. But it's the best damn company I've ever kept, no doubts about it because nothing compares. One day, I will force her hand and make her see how much we're meant for one another.

It'll happen, she'll be mine, which is why I don't stress over putting a title on us and what we are to one another.

ELLA

Lacing up my boots, I look over to the side at the man who's passed out in the bed beside me. I'm not sure when things changed between us the way that they did, but once our friendship straddled that line and then leapt over it without any boundaries hindering the way, my heart crossed over behind it. Now, this man owns me body, heart, and soul, and if he decides that our time together has run its course, I'm not sure I'll survive and be able to come back from it without being obliterated and unscathed. My feelings run deep for him.

"Where are you going, hellion?" Hydro drowsily mumbles, his eyes squinting up at me through the moonlight rays shining through the open slats of the window blinds. His long brown hair is tousled from sleep making me want to reach over and comb the flyaways, smoothing them back into place with my fingers. His words are slurred and drawn out, enchanting me and causing my

lady bits to ache with need.

And that nickname he calls me, Lord have mercy it's my undoing, it makes me want to swoon—only I'm not a smitten type of girl who passes out because my crush is returning my attention. I'm a badass, the only woman elected into the DreamCatcher Motorcycle Club run by a bunch of ornery, ruthless outlaws.

“Come back to bed, Ella, the sun isn't out yet, it's too damn early to be up and about.” His Tuscan accent is dreamy and has my lips tilting upward. Compared to my southern twang, his dialect is intoxicating, scrumptious, and revs my libido's engine like it's never purred before every time he opens his mouth to talk.

“Wish I could, but I've got a call out,” I tell him, bending forward to peck his lips. Only it's too quick for his liking. He wraps his hand around the nape of my neck and drags me closer, smashing his mouth to mine, and inserting his tongue into the mix, challenging me, dominating me, wanting me to be compliant and accepting. He applies a gentle, yet weighty pressure to my jaw with his fingers to force me into compliance, making me submit—which I'll do, only for him and only in the bedroom. My body sags into him as I meet him lash for lash, our tongues dueling, making love to each other, and talking without using words.

When he leans back, his eyes are hooded, but I can't give into the temptation of his big dick and how it makes my body skyrocket and soar into the atmosphere, there's another person counting on me to save them, to whisk them away from the danger they're in, and put as much distance between them and their abuser as the miles allow.

“Who's your back up on this crusade, Ella?”

“Mane, Judd, and Jaggar are meeting me at the office. We'll gather the supplies we need and head out together from there. You worry too much, Hydro. I'm not a newbie, we've been doing this as a team for years.”

ABOUT LIBERTY



Liberty, a Texas native, has been an avid reader for most of her life. When she was younger, she used to sit and fill spiral notebooks full of stories. She loves getting creative and working behind the scenes with her characters and bringing her imagination to life. These days, you can find her behind her laptop connecting with her book family, aka the men and women who live in her head. She's a mother, grandmother, and mother-in-law to some pretty amazing people. Her granddaughter, Hayden, has become her whole world. Her fur babies, Harlee, Royal, and Tawny watch eagerly for her to put her computer away so they can crawl into her lap to take their daily naps. It's a fun and fulfilling life.

WHERE TO FIND LIBERTY

If you enjoyed this book, you can find other works by Liberty, as well as follow her at these various sights.

<http://authorlibertyparker.com>

→ Goodreads:

https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/14035441.Liberty_Parker

→ BookBub:

<https://www.bookbub.com/authors/liberty-parker>

→ Newsletter sign up form:

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→ Facebook Author Page:

<https://www.facebook.com/authorlibertyparker/>

→ Liberty & Darlene FB Fan Page:

<https://www.facebook.com/Liberty-Darlene-106493721088391>

→ Liberty Parker's Luscious Ladies:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1153797384736487/>

→ The Insiders:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/280929722515781/>

→ Instagram:

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OTHER BOOKS BY LIBERTY

RAGE RYDERS MC:

1. Taken By Lies
 2. Taken By Rage
 - 2.5. Taken By Vegas
 3. Taken By Sadistic
 4. Taken By Chaos
 5. Taken By Temptation
- Rage Ryders Volume One
Rage Ryders Volume Two

RAGE RYDERS TEMPLETON:

1. Faithfully Devoted
2. Forever Yours
3. Hide & Seek
4. One Last Ride

DIVA'S INK:

1. Blank Canvas
 2. Clean Slate
 3. Beautiful Template
- Diva's Ink Trilogy

ROYAL BASTARDS:

Property of Wrecker
Romanced by Wrecker
Waking the Dragon
Dragon's Treasure
Butcher's Destruction... May 2024

DREAMCATCHER MC:

1. Charlee's Choices
2. Capturing Dreams
3. Shattered Trust
4. Utterly Wrecked
5. Blood Bond

6. Master's Tiny Dancer
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8. Taming Bull
9. Lethal Vendetta
10. Defying Boundaries
11. Merging Factions

DreamCatcher MC Collection One

DreamCatcher MC Collection Two

DREAMCATCHER MC: NEXT GENERATION:

1. Dynamic Intention – 3/9/24

SURROGACY:

1. What Should've Been

CROSSROAD SOLDIERS MC:

Prequel – Walking The Crossroad

1. Our Cross To Bear
2. Claiming What's Mine

ROGUE ENFORCERS:

Maverick

Leigh

Charisma

DARK LEOPARDS MC:

Blaze of Glory

HEELS, RHYMES & NURSERY CRIMES:

We All Fall Down

REBEL GUARDIANS MC:

(with Darlene Tallman)

1. Braxton
2. Hatchet
3. Chief
4. Smokey & Bandit
5. Law
6. Capone
7. A Twisted Kind Of Love

RGMC Box Set 1 (Books 1-3)

RGMC Box Set 2 (Books 4-7)

Rebellious Christmas (RGMC Novella) (with Darlene Tallman)

WHERE ARE THEY NOW:

(with Darlene Tallman)

Braxton

Hatchet

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REBEL GUARDIANS NEXT GENERATION:

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2. Jaxson & Ralynn

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2. Reviving Luca

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NELSON BROTHERS:

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The Nelson Brothers Trilogy

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2. The Old Ladies Club - Soul Shifterz MC

3. Old Ladies Club - Rebel Guardians MC

4. Old Ladies Club - Rage Ryders MC

The Old Ladies Club Take One

SAVAGE WILDE:

1. Uninhibited: by Liberty Parker
2. Desire: by Darlene Tallman
3. Crave: by Kayce Kyle
4. Shameless: by Liberty Parker & Darlene Tallman... release date TBA

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2. Whimsical
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