



Unbroken

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Category: Romance, Adult, Crime And Mafia, Action

Description: He only has to keep her alive for seven days . . .

When Savannah Carrington's life is threatened, she refuses to be whisked to God knows where just to appease her father—the infamous leader of Sinners Syndicate. But when the owner of Backcountry Protection Services, Toth Holmes, is hired as her personal bodyguard, her choices are ripped away yet again. Her protector—make that captor—is anything but a saint. He looks at her like no other man dares, branding her with his gaze and promising to own her body if she'd let him. He's hot and delicious but she's not stupid enough to give into temptation. Doing so would sign his death certificate.

He said no to the job. More than once. Knowing he wouldn't be able to keep his hands off the devastatingly beautiful mafia princess made refusing the contract offer a no-brainer. But when Savannah's life is at stake, Toth knows he can't turn a blind eye. Seven days is the length of his contract, the shortest one he's ever signed, yet the most dangerous. If she's killed on his watch, he'll pay in blood. Same goes if he dares to touch one silky strand on her head.

As Toth battles with the desire riding between them, Savannah's father's enemies get closer. The more her father strikes back, the harder the villains come for his daughter. Toth might not be able to keep her alive forever, but he'll die trying.

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CHAPTER 1

Dark gray eyes stared back at Toth. Eyes so familiar even though he'd never gazed at them before.

I have a brother.

No, four. Four brothers.

While he'd sat on that news for a long time, the idea hadn't hit home until now. Looking dead in the face at a man that showed no welcome. No open arms. No sobs for the long-lost sibling he'd never known. He had made it blatantly clear Toth was unwanted.

Toth had already told Nash, the guy who'd answered the door, his relation to him. But the new man Nash called downstairs had to be another one of his brothers. His face was more stoic than Nash's, permanent anger lines etched his brow, but his build, dark hair, and turbulent eyes were too similar to Toth and Nash's to dismiss him as someone unrelated.

If Toth hadn't just read about his oldest brother, Cole Holmes, who'd died in an explosion, he'd have assumed the menacing brute glaring at him was the deceased sought-after assassin.

He cleared his throat and met the measuring gaze of the man who hadn't introduced himself. "I'm Toth. Your brother."

The man's skin paled several shades. "The fuck you talking about?"

"Uh, you can come in," Nash, the brother who'd answered the door said, beckoning from inside the house.

The dude blocking the doorway didn't move.

Nash smacked the guy in the shoulder. "C'mon man. Let's hear him out."

Without a word, the unfriendly barricade inched back enough to let Toth pass.

"Thanks for the warm welcome," Toth said under his breath as he entered the home. He let his gaze drift past the one confirmed brother to the hardwood floors, cream-colored area rug in the living room and neat pictures of nature scenes hanging on the walls. The space screamed that a female resided here.

Toth's stomach did a dance. Did he have a sister-in-law? Nieces and nephews? The prospect of having siblings had been a lot to process—he hadn't considered a deeper family tree.

Nash gestured at him to remove his shoes and Toth complied, following his older brother to the couches.

"I'd offer you a coffee but Cole might combust if I do." Nash's tense smile quickly faltered and his focus shot to the man stomping behind Toth.

"Thanks for that. Idiot," he snapped, slinking around Toth and dropping into the armchair at the corner of the room adjacent to the couch.

"Cole?" Toth shook his head and ran a hand over his hair. "I thought you were dead."

Cole sent annoyed daggers toward Nash, then returned his stare back to him. “Nah, but if it turns out you’re not who you say you are, you will be.”

The meaning hung heavily in the room.

Toth bunched his hands into fists. “I didn’t fucking come here to get threatened.” He lifted his gaze to Nash, still standing awkwardly in the living room. “I’ll see myself out.” He turned around and the muscles in his back blazed heat, waiting for the bullet that would enter his flesh.

Cole had faked his death and surely he wouldn’t let anyone walk away knowing it.

Toth had come armed—he always carried. Never thought he’d use a gun on his family though.

“Hold up.” Cole’s husky tone cut through the room.

Toth stopped. Slowly he turned around.

Cole stood, then shoved his hands in his pockets. “What year were you born?” His dark brow pierced together and a hint of question lingered in his gaze.

Toth worked his jaw back and forth. While he hadn’t come here to get threatened, he had come here to meet his family. Raised an only child, he’d longed for the siblings he’d once heard his mom call out for in a drunken stupor.

And then later denied.

For twenty years he’d kept the Freudian slip close to his heart. Wondering. Hoping. Praying that he wasn’t as alone as his parents made him feel.

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He cleared his throat. While Cole's words were far from heartfelt or even remotely welcoming, the fact that he'd asked the question meant he was interested.

"1994."

Cole nodded, then bit the skin at the corner of his mouth and turned to Nash. "What year'd they leave us?"

"Mmm. '92 maybe?" Nash mused. "Who raised you?" The rapid-fire question came at Toth.

"Sherry and Edmund Holmes."

Cole snorted and shook his head, then paced to the window and back. "You're telling me those fuckers abandoned their four sons and turned around less than two years later and had another one?"

The moisture left Toth's mouth and he cleared his throat. "Yeah, doesn't make much sense to me either, but—"

"But nothing." Disdain painted Cole's brooding features. "Brother or not, you're not one of us." He held out his hand toward Toth. "You and your fucking suit. You look like a banker," he chortled.

Toth slipped his hand inside his shirt pocket and pulled out a card. "Owner and operator of Backcountry Protection Services." He smiled. "Bodyguard, not banker. You weren't even close."

Cole didn't accept the card.

Nash stood. "Well, this was nice." He clapped Toth on the back. "Look, we're all grown men. What do you want? Buddies? You won't find that here. I barely even like any of these guys and I grew up with them," he said, shooting a glance at Cole.

Toth shrugged. "Just wanted to see for myself if it was true."

Understanding flickered in Nash's gaze. "Are they still alive?"

He gave one nod. "Mom is. Dad... well, he left when I was young so I don't know what happened to him."

Nash's shoulders lowered as if the prospect of their parents being alive was too much. "Did they tell you about us?" His voice was soft, almost sad.

Toth rubbed his knuckles with his thumb. "No, they didn't."

"Then how'd you know?"

Silence stretched out. Emotion filled Toth's throat, making the words heavy on his tongue. He'd never forget the screams from his mom's bedroom. The deep, guttural cries of a mother who'd lost—no, abandoned—her children.

He closed his eyes as the memory washed over him, pulling him back to the tiny, two-bedroom, piss-stained trailer.

"Well?" Cole pressed.

"I heard her," Toth said on a breath. He tugged at his shirt collar but the action didn't gain anymore airway. "She was drunk. Screaming and crying in her sleep." He

paused and kept his gaze on Cole. “She called for you first. Said she was sorry... something about the water. That she should have been there. I can’t remember.”

The emotion made it more difficult to speak, but like a freight train from hell he couldn’t stop. “Then Dallas. Asked him to watch over Dare.”

Turning his head to Nash, his gut fisted with the memory. “She called you her baby. Then just kept saying, “My boys, my boys.”

Tension vibrated the room.

Nash’s face turned stark white. He didn’t move.

Cole broke the silence, barreling across the hardwood floor and shoving Toth’s shoulder. He pushed him toward the door, not giving him a second to catch his footing.

“What the—”

“Get the fuck out,” Cole said, gripping his hand on Toth’s collar as he yanked open the front door. “Don’t come back.” He shoved Toth in the chest, sending him staggering onto the porch.

The door slammed shut.

Toth stared at the solid wood, the barrier bigger than the lifetime of questions he’d endured.

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So much for finding his brothers.

Two weeks later

“You really don’t know who the fuck you’re pissing off, do you?”

Toth leaned away from his desk, and the leather chair creaked with the movement. He forced his muscles to stay relaxed, not wanting to give the seething wench the satisfaction of knowing how much she’d rattled him.

Bringing his fist to rest on his jaw, he stared at the woman invading his office. Not just any woman. Savannah Carrington. Daughter of the head honcho of Sinners Cartel, a widespread mob organization with their hands in everything from drugs to money laundering. He should probably toe the line, have some respect for the mob princess, but goddamn he wanted her fine little ass out of his office before he did something stupid.

Her eyebrows bounced, nearly reaching her blond hair. She propped a hand on her hip, accentuating the slim waist that lay behind her white dress shirt. Her rust-colored leather skirt surrounded her thighs like melted brown sugar.

Her eyes blazed, a green inferno ready to incinerate him on the spot. “Did you hear me?” she asked.

He’d made it perfectly clear that Backcountry Protection Services, the personal

security company Toth had built from the ground up, would have no ties with Sinners Cartel.

She waited, her face as hard as carved marble, her slightly upturned nose lifting haughtily.

He didn't stop the twitch of his lips. Goddamn she was feisty.

That's because she's a Sinner, dumbass.

She could say whatever she wanted to whomever she wanted, and if that person was smart, they'd do her bidding—or at least cower the fuck away and cover their balls.

He'd never been too smart.

“Am I pissing you off, Sav?” Oh fuck. He inhaled and wished he could suck back the flirtatious note in his voice.

Something flashed in her eyes—interest?

No.

Maybe?

She pursed her lips, beautiful, pink-tinged pillows that called to his cock. Her eyes darkened. “You don't get to call me that.” There was no bite to her tone, but a challenge hung in the air.

He cleared his throat and rocked forward in his chair, bringing his forearms to rest on the desk. Toth didn't really know Daniel Carrington, but he was pretty damn sure that he wouldn't fare well doing any kind of business with a mob organization. Rami,

Toth's business partner, was chummy with Savannah's older brother, but that didn't mean Toth had to get entangled with them.

"Rami already declined the protection service your father requested. There's nothing left to discuss." Keeping his tone even and professional might be the only way to make her leave.

She dropped her hand from her waist. Long tendrils of hair curled at her ribcage. Sexy locks. It was all he could do not to climb over the desk and wrap her sleek legs—

She blinked slowly, and as her dark eyelashes lifted, her gaze trailed leisurely over his chest.

Arousal heated his cheeks. It took every ounce of his willpower to stay glued to his seat, to not move, to not react to the gorgeous woman staring him down.

"Look," she said, her tongue swiping over her bottom lip. "Dad doesn't like to hear the word no. I don't know what he wants, but maybe he'll be less insulted if you request a proper proposal. You declined the job without knowing the full scope of the work. Makes one think you're being discriminatory." She narrowed her eyes.

His arousal turned to ashes and his skin flamed with annoyance. Discriminating against a gang? Ha. Avoiding them was common sense. Nothing more. But he sure as shit didn't need an angry mob leader on his ass. Savannah could be onto something. He'd be wise to refuse the offer more diplomatically.

He sucked his tongue between his teeth and top lip. "Fine. One meeting."

Savannah beamed. "Good. Dad will be happy," she said, digging her hand into her purse. "But he doesn't like to meet in person often—not as discreet, if you know what

I mean.” She slapped an encrypted phone on his desk.

Toth laced his fingers together. The fact that the guy wanted their discussion to take place on untraceable phones spoke volumes. There wouldn’t be anything legal about Daniel’s request. But he’d already agreed to talk to him. There was no backing out.

He lifted his gaze from the device. “I’m still going to say no,” he said, glaring at Savannah.

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She grinned. “No one says no to Danny.” She wriggled her fingers. “I’ll be in the waiting room.” She slipped out the door of his office.

His balls ached to follow.

“Wait,” he called. “What number do I—”

The phone chimed on the smooth wood of his desk. Toth cleared his throat and picked up the chunk of black plastic. He was being played. Savannah had been used to rope him into accepting the meeting, and Danny had known when to call. The syndicate leader was a step ahead.

Another blinding red flag. These weren’t people to tango with.

“Toth Holmes speaking,” he said, after answering the call and pressing the phone to his ear. Anger simmered beneath the surface of his words, but he wouldn’t show it. Wouldn’t give these people the advantage of knowing they were already in his head. His throat expanded with unspent fury, making his shirt collar shrink around his neck.

“Mr. Holmes,” said Danny. “Thank you for taking my call.”

As if I had a fucking choice. His tongue itched to snap out the words. “My pleasure. Your daughter mentioned you’d like to propose some work.”

“Yes, indeed I do.” He dropped his voice. “Is Savannah in the room?”

Toth frowned, curiosity bubbling inside him. “No, she stepped out. Should I get her?”

“Nah, I’d rather she not know about this. I’d like to hire you to be Savannah’s bodyguard. Just for a week. I’ve got some business that could... affect her welfare if certain rivals got wind of it.”

Toth blinked and tugged at his tie, loosening the material. “Uh, I’m not sure we can fit anything in our agenda at this time, sir.”

“You haven’t heard the details,” Danny said, in a mildly chastising tone. “I’ll pay you fifty thousand for the week. Surely you can clear your schedule for that.”

Seconds ticked by.

Never in a million years had he guessed the job would involve Danny’s daughter. Ever since Rami had befriended the syndicate leader’s son, a few months ago, Toth had seen Savannah only in passing. He really shouldn’t give a damn about her. Not only was she too snotty and bossy for his liking, she was also dangerously fucking hot. On that basis alone he needed to keep away. Screwing around with Savannah was a quick way to find himself at the mouth of Danny’s gun.

But the idea of someone harming Savannah in an act of revenge made his blood thicken. If this involved some kind of rival gang, as Danny had insinuated, the threat was more than just a potential gunshot wound to Savannah’s head. They’d torture her. Cut her up into pieces and mail her parts to her father one by one.

Toth closed his eyes in an attempt to block the nauseating image. “I need to know what kind of threat you’re concerned about.”

He grimaced.

No, no, no.

What a stupid reply. The last thing he needed to know was anything else concerning this job. There was no way he could work for these people.

Danny's breath was the only sound on the other end of the line. He was likely deciding how much he could trust Toth. "Like I said, I have business that some... organizations might have an issue with. I don't want Savannah in the crosshairs."

"Excuse me for being blunt, Mr. Carrington—"

"Danny."

"Danny," Toth echoed. "Don't you have your own team that would be more fitting for this kind of thing?"

"Normally, yes. But I'm quite certain our unit has been compromised, and until I find the mole, I need my daughter safe. No one can be trusted right now."

"So why the hell would you trust me?" Toth retorted.

"Because I don't know you. And the fact that you've already refused my offer once tells me exactly what I need to know about you."

"And that is?"

"If you wanted to harm my family, you'd have jumped at the opportunity to work for me."

Toth pinched the bridge of his nose. Jesus. Here he thought Danny couldn't take the hint. Turns out his refusal was what had made him the best candidate. Shit. He had to figure something out. Find a way to say no. One thing was for sure: there was no fucking way he was working for Sinners Cartel.

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Swallowing the lump of colorful words collecting on the back of his tongue, Toth lowered his hand to the desk. “I’m sorry. Really. Our company can’t get involved.”

A beat passed. “You and I will do this privately then. Nothing on the books.”

Cold sweat trickled between Toth’s shoulder blades. Goosebumps sprung up under the hair on his body.

One word screamed like a siren in his head:Run!

“Look, Mr. Holmes. I don’t blame you for wanting distance from Sinners Cartel. You’re not the first business to turn me away.” Danny’s voice grew soft. The man suddenly seemed to have aged, as if he’d lived a thousand years of pain. “Savannah’s all I care about. If you heard the threats—” His voice broke. The older man cleared his throat.

“You do me this favor and I promise you’ll never owe any debt to a Sinner. After this week is over, you won’t hear from me again. Just give me seven days to make sure no one can touch her.” Emotion was thick in his words, tugging at Toth’s resolve.

He tapped his fingers on his desk like a woodpecker on speed. He lifted his gaze to his closed office door and his gut clenched. He had no reason to trust Danny. No reason to believe he’d keep his word and Toth would escape this job without the expectation of more contracts. It could be a ploy. Just a way to acquire another business and crush everything Toth had ever worked for. He could even end up in prison, or killed.

But if Danny was telling the truth...

If someone threatened Savannah and succeeded in harming her...

Christ.

Savannah's delicious ass aside, he couldn't live with that guilt. Even if it were someone else, another woman, he'd have to do whatever he could to protect them.

"Fine. One week."

"Good," Danny said, with delight. "And Toth? Don't tell her. Let me handle Savannah."

"All right." He disconnected.

Balling his hand around the phone, he rested his fist on his chin. All he had to do was survive one week with the hottest woman alive and keep his hands to himself. He could do it.

A soft knock sounded at the door.

"C'min."

The wood opened and Savannah cocked her hip in the doorway, a sly smile on her plump lips. "Well?"

Toth clenched his jaw and held out the phone. "Done."

She sashayed the distance between them and accepted the device. Her dainty fingers brushed over his knuckles. Just the touch of her cool skin made his cock twitch.

With her other hand, she toyed with the phone's stubby antenna. "Did you say no?" There was a twinkle in her green eyes, but some of the smugness had vanished.

"I accepted. It's a short gig. One week of hell. I've endured worse." He kept his face neutral. Wait until she found out that his idea of hell was babysitting her.

Amusement lit her face. "Well, I hope it's not too painful for you. See you around." She paused at the door and looked back over her shoulder, giving him a tantalizing view of both her pretty face and her mouth-watering ass. "Smart move, Holmes." She exited his office, closing the door behind her.

She was wrong.

He'd just made the biggest mistake of his life.

CHAPTER 2

"Lachlan." The name rolled off her tongue with a hiss as Savannah shoved her way around her brother, who was blocking the bedroom door in her apartment.

He had no right to be here and his presence was a glaring warning of what her father had sent him for. She entered the cream-colored space—her space—but its usual peaceful ambience was tainted.

Two suitcases lay open on the bed.

Her stomach dropped, but she kept her gaze off Dominic, her father's manager and favorite henchman, standing with his arms crossed in the center of her room.

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Turning to face Lach and his gruff expression, Savannah vibrated on the spot. “What the hell is going on?”

Her brother’s slicked-back blond hair was almost the same shade as hers. Other than that, they barely resembled each other. Lach’s eyes were light brown, and at six foot one, he stood a good seven inches taller than her.

He took a step into the room. “Dad wants you out of town for a bit. That’s all.”

The anger heating her skin turned to downright rage. “I’m twenty-eight years old. He can’t uproot my life whenever he wants.”

Sympathy etched itself in Lach’s face before his mouth hitched up in a smirk. “You know that’s not true.”

She balled her hands into fists at her sides, ready to punch someone. “It is this time.” Firing her gaze at Dominic, she pointed to the door. “Leave.”

Dominic’s usual bland expression shifted to one of bewilderment. He clearly wasn’t used to anyone defying Danny’s orders. He looked at Lach then back at her. “Your dad gave me orders to escort you outside to your guard, miss.”

She forced her own lips into a smirk. The poor guy’s head would probably explode if he couldn’t enforce Danny’s orders. And it wasn’t as if he could lay a hand on her. That’d only garner more of her dad’s wrath. “Well, now you have my order to leave my apartment.”

Dominic lifted his hand to his shaved head. His meaty bicep flexed. “I’m gonna have to call the boss.”

She hiked up her shoulders. Any attempt to make her change her mind wouldn’t work. “Do that. Outside.”

Dominic huffed and sidled around her. “Talk to her, will ya?” he muttered to Lach.

Once Savannah’s apartment door slammed shut, Lach met her gaze. “It’s not Dom’s fault.”

Savannah zipped up one empty suitcase, then the other, and swung them off the bed. Her brother wouldn’t help her. No doubt he wanted no part of her defiance.

“I don’t care whose fault it is. I’m not leaving, Lach. I’ve got my own things going on and Dad needs to learn that he can’t allow his business dealings to trickle into our lives.”

When she was a little girl, she and her brother were often picked up randomly from school or yanked out of their beds in the middle of the night to be sent off to some safe house until her father could kill whoever had threatened their lives. But ever since her mom died in a car accident, eight years ago, her dad had been even more protective and overbearing, making her wild with frustration.

It’d been three years since the last time he sent her away, and she’d sworn to herself then that she’d never let it happen again. Another eight months in Wyoming, alone, was out of the question. Hell, she wouldn’t even take an all-expenses-paid vacation.

“You can run your business from anywhere, so that argument won’t work with Dad,” Lach said, with reproach.

Savannah tapped her foot. He wasn't entirely wrong. As a freelance web designer she often enjoyed working remotely. "That's beside the point. And you know that if I go with him, my internet access will be restricted. It's like frickin' house arrest."

Lach nodded then hung his head. "Look, I won't force you to do anything. But I think you should consider leaving this time." The tone of his voice was more of a warning than his words. "Threats were made. Ones we need to take seriously."

Threats against her.

"Let me guess. He's fighting with Red Eyez?" Two gangs in Seattle were one too many. Red Eyez wasn't as big as Sinners Cartel, but they vied for the spotlight. One wrong move by the rival gang's leader would have her dad up in arms and ready for war.

It was a damn miracle nothing serious had gone down yet.

Lach lifted his shoulder and wandered to the window across from her bed. He pushed aside the linen curtain and stared at the street below. Her stomach tightened. Lach wasn't the quiet type, but today he seemed on edge. Unlike himself.

Was he worried about her?

A niggle of unease cinched her stomach muscles. Still, she didn't want to leave. She was tired of running. "Lach, I won't go."

He straightened away from the window. "I'll drive you to see Dad."

She nodded and led the way out of the bedroom. After scooping up her purse from the foyer table and slipping her feet into her high heels, she opened the apartment door. Her brother didn't say a word and dammit, his silence screamed at her that he

wasn't happy.

Why did she always have to pacify the men in her life?

Bullshit.

She needed distance from Sinners Cartel, but her father and brother were all she had. She couldn't turn her back on them. Not to mention she collected a healthy paycheck from the organization. She kept her father's schedule and lined up meetings with small local businesses.

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And when it came to persuading people to sign contracts or accept work from the well-known gang, her polished appearance and professional manner outdid that of anyone her dad could hire for the job. But that was as close to his dealings as he allowed her to get.

Savannah stepped into the waiting elevator and hit the button to close the door once Lach was inside.

His bunched shoulders and tensed mouth sent annoyance flaring through her. “What is it? You look like someone kicked your dog.”

“If someone kicked my dog, they’d be dead.”

She rolled her eyes. “You know what I mean. You’re mad.” Once again, she was stuck trying to reach these communicatively constipated men.

“Not mad. Just don’t want you chopped into little pieces. Maybe I’ll stick around for a bit. Take up your couch.”

She snorted. “You don’t have time to babysit me. The only thing that’ll make Dad madder than me disobeying his orders is you helping me disobey his orders.”

The elevator dinged and she moved to exit the cart. Lach’s hold on her wrist stopped her. “Let me go first.” His free hand hovered at his hip, under his jacket.

She swallowed and nodded. Maybe she was being dumb. If Lach was this bent out of shape over the threat, it could be more serious than the others. She followed him into

the sunshine. Warm April air swept over her cheeks.

Dominic stood on the sidewalk talking to a man in black dress pants and a crisp white shirt with rolled-up sleeves. Unease swarmed inside her. Her heel caught on the pavement and she stumbled.

Lach caught her arm. “You okay?”

She straightened. Lach’s gaze traveled to the man who’d distracted her.

“What’s he doing here?” she asked, shaking out of his grip.

Her brother’s response went in one ear and out the other as Toth Holmes glanced in her direction. His thick beard was neatly trimmed close to his face, the shade of the bristles matching that of his dark-brown hair. Tattooed flesh peeked out from beneath the material of his sleeves and the collar of his shirt. Deep lines of consternation were etched along his forehead. His gaze sharpened on her face.

Shit. Had he sensed her staring? Seen her stumble?

His mouth lifted in a slant. Not a smile. More like a smirk of acknowledgment. She turned back to Lach. “I didn’t hear you. What?”

His blond eyebrows screwed together and he shook his head. “You’re acting weird. I said dad hired him. For you.”

Heat scorched her back. “Me?”

Toth turned away from Dominic and approached her. “Ms. Carrington,” he said, his deep voice rumbling with arrogance and control. “I’m your bodyguard for the week. You need to come with me.”

The heat on her back erupted into a friggin' inferno.

Like hell.

Air wheezed through her nostrils as her brain grappled with the puzzle pieces clicking into place. She couldn't think properly with his gray eyes boring into her soul like that.

Damn him.

She'd figure out what was going on later, when she could form a coherent thought. For now, she needed to get to her car.

"I'm not going anywhere with you—or anyone," she added, for Dominic's benefit, though he was too far away to hear her, and talking on his cell phone.

"Hey, I thought I was taking you to Dad," Lach said, frowning in confusion.

"Never mind. I'll go myself." She couldn't sit idly right now. Driving would calm her mind and allow her to put distance between her and everyone else.

Savannah fished inside her purse for her car keys and stormed around Toth's body. She punched the button on her key fob, and a softbeep,beepsignaled that her Mercedes was unlocked. When she'd seen Lach's vehicle parked out front of her building she hadn't wasted time going down the parking garage, sensing a confrontation with her father was imminent.

Her bodyguard?What the hell was going on? She'd sort this out. She didn't care if she had to bust into her dad's office and raise hell. He couldn't bully her with big, muscular men and expect she'd take his overprotective bullsh—

“Savannah,” said a growly voice behind her. “Your father has reason to believe you’re in danger. I need to take you to a secure location, if you’ll come with me.”

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She'd spoken to Toth only a handful of times, but enough to know that he didn't have much patience. Still, she didn't respond. Doing so would reveal how truly enraged she was, and showing emotion to him—or anyone—would steal what dignity she had left. What dignity her father hadn't just taken away.

She reached for the smooth black door handle. When she got to her father's office, she'd do more than raise hell. She'd—

A hard body slammed against her. She shrieked as her back connected with the pavement. Her breath whooshed sharply from her lungs. Her vision shook and her brain spun. A hot, heavy form covered her from head to toe.

Crack,crack!

Gunshots split the air. A scream lodged itself in her throat. Warning bells screeched through her head. People were shooting.

At me?

Panic shot through her limbs, but if she gave way to the suffocating need to get up, she'd probably get her head blown off. Her heart pummeled against her breastbone. Was she on the verge of cardiac arrest?

Sounds drifted away, mingling with screams and footsteps thundering on cement. Then her instinct came back with a vengeance. She needed to get up. To run. But she couldn't move. Couldn't get out from under the weight pinning her to the ground.

Shielding her.

She squeezed her eyes closed and forced her lungs to suck in a breath as shots fired from the gun of the brute on top of her.

Each blast stung her eardrums. The heady scent of cologne warmed her nostrils and urged her to take another breath. The basil-and-pepper fragrance was like aromatherapy for her terror.

The gunshots stopped. She snapped open her eyes. A bright-white dress shirt was the only thing in her view.

Toth.

Shifting off Savannah, Toth quickly scanned her body. It seemed there was no blood decorating her tight black dress, but the material was too dark to be certain. His finger twitched on the trigger of his gun.

If he'd reacted half a second slower, Savannah would be dead.

Had he not followed her as she moved toward her vehicle, he wouldn't have spotted the blacked-out SUV across the street. Wouldn't have seen the mouth of a gun poking out the window.

Angst beat against his chest.

Fuck.

Savannah lifted her head and propped herself up on her elbows. "What's happening?"

Her voice was squeaky, and her hair was tangled around her face, the blond strands glistening like dew on a spiderweb.

Placing a hand on her waist, he urged her to lean back against her car. Her eyes found his. They were so wide and green that his heart skittered. “Drive-by,” he answered curtly. “Are you hurt?”

She’d lost her color. Even her lips were pale. Scared. She was scared.

She shook her head and gripped his elbow. “Where’s Lach?” Her chest rose and fell in quick pulses.

He didn’t give a damn about her brother. He hadn’t been hired to protect that guy. But the look of hysteria on Savannah’s face made him tear his focus away from her so he could search for Lach. Sirens filled the air, penetrating the storm of blood and adrenaline firing against his eardrums. Seconds ago, the now-vacant sidewalk had carried clusters of pedestrians.

“Boss! We’ve been hit. A drive-by...”

Toth looked for the speaker and spotted Lach and Dominic hunched in the small inlet of the apartment building’s entrance, guns drawn. Dominic’s phone was to his ear.

“He’s okay,” Toth confirmed. The grip on his arm loosened only a fraction, telling him she had no intention of letting go. “I think they’re gone, but we need to get you out of here.” He swept his arm around her waist.

Her hold shifted from his forearm to his bicep, her fingers piercing his dress shirt. She leaned into him, and her spine trembled beneath his palm. In his urgent desire to get her to a secure place to check for injuries, he almost picked her up and carried her. He guessed this act wouldn’t be well received, given her usually snooty

demeanor.

He searched her face, and his throat tightened at the sight of the foggy glaze over her irises.

“That was them?” she asked. “Red Eyez?”

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“Has to be.” He nodded at her legs. “You’re shaky. Can you walk to my car?” he asked, gesturing to the SUV she’d refused only minutes before. Impatience made his words curt.

She stiffened but didn’t let go. “I’m fine.”

He straightened to a crouched position so he could scan the street and sidewalk. “Move. Now.” He pulled Savannah to her feet and shielded her head under his elbow, keeping her tight against his side. She didn’t protest and scurried next to him—in those damn neck-breaking heels that painted all kinds of lust-filled images in his brain.

He reached the rear passenger door and flung it open. He shut it after she slid inside, then climbed in the driver’s seat. With Savannah safely behind the bulletproof exterior, he heaved a sigh of relief.

Turning the key in the ignition, he glanced in his rearview mirror.

“Wait.” Savannah’s shrill voice made him tap the brake before he could ease into traffic.

The blaring of sirens grew louder by the second.

“What?”

“We can’t just leave Lach.”

Toth flexed his hand around the steering wheel. “Sorry, honey. I was hired for you, not your brother. Besides, cops are on their way. He’ll get out of there.” He merged into the driving lane and accelerated.

Leather crinkled. He glanced in the mirror to find Savannah’s fierce green eyes staring at him.

“Don’t call me honey,” she hissed through clenched teeth. “And—”

“And nothing. Sit back and put on your seatbelt.”

She scoffed. “I’m not a child.”

“Then stop acting like one. Someone just tried to fucking shoot you. How about we use some common sense?”

If looks could kill, he’d have burned on the spot.

Savannah’s nostrils flared, only accentuating the cuteness of her small nose.

No. Notcute, you idiot.

Pissy? Yeah.Sexy as fuck? Also yeah.

Cutewas dangerous.Cutewas the type of adjective that would make him do stupid shit. He pulled his attention back to the road and his neck tensed as he waited for her to whack something into the side of his head.

She must have realized the danger in that, as he pulled safely onto the interstate. The soft click of her seatbelt assured him she was restrained.

“Where are we going?” she spat with disdain.

He glanced over his shoulder, taking in her flushed cheeks and folded arms, then refocused on the road.

At least he didn’t have to worry about her being shot or injured. No way she was bleeding out in the back seat with that much fire in her cheeks.

“Can’t tell you. You’ll just have to wait and see.”

“Oh, how charming,” she said mockingly.

“Nothing romantic about it. We need to be careful. Someone could be listening in through your phone.” He lifted his palm. “Pass it over.”

She snorted. “Hell no. What is this, a kidnapping?”

“Sure. If kidnappers normally save people’s lives.”

She mumbled something unintelligible under her breath then slapped her cell phone into his hand.

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“Thanks.” He rolled down the window and tossed the device.

“Oh my god!” she cried. “Are you insane?”

“Nope. Just doing my job.”

“Do me a favor and quit,” she shot back.

“Trust me, honey. I’ve already considered that.”

He didn’t lift his gaze to the rearview mirror. Last thing he needed was to worry about her plotting his death.

CHAPTER 3

Savannah steered her gaze to the car window. The afternoon sun didn’t filter through the tint, and she craved to feel its warmth on her face. To have something calm the rage mounting inside her.

It was ridiculous that she’d let Toth evoke such strong feelings, and she’d be damned if she let him see how he affected her more than she already had.

She’d never been shot at before. Growing up, she’d had many altercations with people on the streets who wanted revenge against her dad or just to screw with a Sinners daughter. Not to mention the threats her father had received over the years. But this... this was the first time anyone had ever gotten close enough to carry out their threat.

Taking a breath through her nose, she watched the cars whiz by and took stock of her body. Her head pounded, and the sharp throbbing at her temples made her want to stretch out on the seat. A burning sensation on her knees caught her attention. She shifted her legs and glanced down. Dirt peppered the raw skin, and she gently flicked away teeny stones.

“You hurt?”

The sound of Toth’s smooth, uberconfident voice should have set her off again, but the gentle question softened her a bit.

Of course, he didn’t really care. Probably just worried she’d gotten hurt under his supervision.

“I’m fine. Just a couple of scrapes.” She repositioned her feet on the floor. “Now that you threw away my phone you can tell me where you’re taking me.”

“Your dad asked me to get you out of town for a week,” he said matter-of-factly, as if they hadn’t just been shot at. Realization dawned.

One week of hell.

He’d been referring to being her watchdog. Renewed anger tickled her neck, but instead of making a smart-ass comment to let him know she’d figured out the meaning of his statement, she shrugged. “Ah, well,” she said flatly. “You can forget that. My dad will be at his warehouse. Take me there.”

“I was given specific instructions.”

She leaned forward in her seat. “Unless you want me to tell my father you got handsy with me, I suggest you follow my orders.”

Silence filled the car like a missile leveling out a battlefield.

A slew of curses came next. “You’re a piece of work, you know that?”

She sat back in the seat as he took the next exit, and satisfaction wriggled her lips into a smile. She’d won this round.

Now all she had to do was convince her father not to ship her off with this ape.

Infuriating. No, the prissy little shit in the back seat was beyond that. Diabolical. He gripped the base of the steering wheel to stop himself from smacking the dashboard or doing something equally unprofessional.

Just keep your mouth shut.

He wouldn’t get into a fight with her. But fuck. He’d been in worse situations in the Marines, situations where he’d come close to losing his shit, yet somehow dealing with Savannah was more trying. All he had to do was keep his head down, not fuck her sexy little body, and not let her get a rise out of him. Even if she’d just threatened to tell her father he’d assaulted her. That was next level. Jesus. A statement like that would get his hands chopped off—at best.

He glanced at the rearview mirror again. A smug smile hung on her lips. Well, better a frustrating client than a dead one. A dead client was bad for business. That’s how he had to think from now on. This was nothing more than a job. Nothing personal.

Although he should be getting paid extra for threats and belligerence.

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He followed the directions to the address Savannah had given him. Less than ten minutes later he turned into the parking lot at the back of the warehouse.

So far, Toth had managed to keep himself and his business physically away from Danny's operations. The payment—half up front and half upon completion—had been delivered in cash. Keeping Sinners Cartel and the branches of its business off his books was paramount. Being red-flagged by the FBI would be a cherry on top of a shit sundae. But now his anonymity was about to be blown out of the fucking water. If his presence at Danny's warehouse was caught on camera somewhere—and it would be—he'd have a hell of a time convincing anyone he wasn't involved with the gang's criminal activity.

"Wait here a minute," Toth said, as he shoved open his door with more force than necessary. A woman half his size had him by the balls.

And she knew it, too.

He took a minute to scan the area and draw his weapon. After today's fiasco, he couldn't be sure the opposing gang didn't have the guts to show up at Danny's headquarters. It'd be a stupid move, but a drive-by wasn't much smarter.

Nothing suspicious alerted him.

Opening the rear passenger door, he motioned for Savannah to exit the vehicle. "Keep your head low," he said, his words clipped. "I don't see any threats, but doesn't mean there aren't any."

Savannah's smooth legs in those damn high heels poked through the opening first. The sight of her skinned knees made him want to pull the first aid kit from his trunk, but there was no time for that.

She stood next to him. He closed the vehicle door then circled his arm around her back and moved her toward the rear entrance of the warehouse.

She shrugged out of his hold and stomped ahead of him.

"Ms. Carrington, would you wait?"

Her heels clomped on the pavement as she approached the door. "For what? You can go."

Yanking the door from her grip, he held it open. Anger vibrated through his limbs, but he kept his temper in check. "Get in. I don't want to get shot."

Her eyelashes flickered on an eye-roll before she sauntered inside. He followed.

"I mean it. You're relieved. I'll deal with Danny," Savannah said with a harrumph, as her ass shimmied down the hall in that short black dress.

He knotted his hands into fists. "I don't take orders from you," he said to her back.

She just hiked up her shoulders an inch.

He stalked over the cement floor. The hallway opened to a larger room, and a set of metal stairs near the entrance stretched to the second level. The main area was sectioned off with partitions, boxes, and crates.

His stomach reacted.

Drugs? Weapons? Shit he needed no involvement with, whatever it was. Nonetheless, he walked by the material that could get him incarcerated and kept his eyes glued in front of him. Fortunately—or unfortunately—that meant they were on the sculpted masterpiece of Danny’s daughter’s backside.

If he made it through the next seven days without being killed by Danny, or Savannah herself, it’d be a fucking miracle. He’d even start buying lottery tickets.

Savannah stormed down a shorter hallway. A guard stood outside a door at the end. “Ms. Carrington, you’re not supposed to be here.” His gaze flew to Toth.

Toth forced down the tension cramping his throat. The guard’s reaction was clear: Danny wouldn’t be happy to see Savannah.

And that wouldn’t be good for Toth.

“Well, I am,” she bit out. Making her way around the guard, she bumped open the wooden door of what had to be Danny’s office.

“Savvy! Why aren’t you with Toth? Dominic told me about the shooting.” Danny’s stout frame came into view as Toth entered his office unannounced, behind Savannah. Least he could do was prove he hadn’t bailed on the job.

“Why didn’t you just tell me I was in danger? I can take care of myself.” Savannah’s demand bounced off the beige-colored walls.

Danny’s blond hair, similar to Lach’s and Savannah’s, waved back from his face. He wasn’t much taller than his daughter in her high heels, which put Danny somewhere around five foot nine. His black dress shirt was unbuttoned at the top and tucked into navy-blue dress pants.

When Danny's green eyes, not nearly as bright and full of vitality as Savannah's, landed on Toth, the older man's mouth became a tight line. "She was to be escorted out of the city immediately. What part didn't you understand?"

Toth crossed his hands in front of him. "My apologies. I'm ready to leave as soon as she is."

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Savannah's head cranked over her shoulder, reminding him of a scene from *The Exorcist*. "I'm not going anywhere but back to my apartment."

Toth clamped his lips together and refocused his gaze on Danny.

Fifty grand. All's you gotta do is put up with her for a week.

"Honey, this is nonnegotiable. That's why I didn't tell you about it sooner. Only us three," he said, gesturing at the bodies in the room, "and Mark, Dominic, and Lach know about the threat that was made."

Mark had to be the guard in the hallway who'd been stunned by Savannah's appearance.

Savannah brought her hands to her hips. "What threat was made?"

Danny brought his fingers to a spot beneath his right collarbone and rubbed, as if the topic brought instant pain. "We're not talking about it right now." He sat down behind his desk then pulled open a drawer and took out a yellow prescription bottle. After shaking out two pills, he downed them with a gulp from his coffee mug.

The mention of the threat made fresh sweat heat Toth's palms. After his initial telephone meeting with Danny, he'd been given more details regarding what the Red Eyez gang had promised to do to Savannah.

Shit he couldn't even allow himself to picture.

Just the thought of someone threatening to peel back the pretty skin on Savannah's face and return her to her father alive and raw made him want to punch a hole in the wall.

And that was only part of the warning Red Eyez had given.

Savannah's rigid back loosened and her shoulders dropped. "Dad, what's going on? Why is Red Eyez targeting me?"

Danny's face turned hard, unrelenting. "You're my only daughter. What the fuck do you think is going on?"

Toth winced at the sharpness of the words.

"Dad, please," Savannah said, moving closer to the desk and resting her palms on the wood. "I can't be shipped off again. I won't." The end of her statement rang with determination.

Danny craned his neck to look behind Savannah. "Are you up for this job or not?"

Toth cleared his throat and gave an abrupt nod.

"I said I'm not going!"

Danny brought his focus back to her. "You'll do what I say."

"No." She smacked his desk. "I won't."

Danny's face turned a deep shade of red and his hands curled into fists on his desk. "Get her out of here," he said to Toth.

Toth's breath turned stale in his lungs. Shit. What was he expected to do? Drag her out? His feet itched to make a move, to follow the order, but he didn't budge.

Danny zeroed in his wrath on Toth. "Do your job."

A torrent of curses burned Toth's tongue. Forcing his arms to relax and his hands to remain still in front of him, Toth kept his demeanor steady. "Ms. Carrington, come with me."

Savannah whirled around. Even when she stared at him with loathing, she was gorgeous. "I told you—you're fired." The last two words were shrill, and something flashed across her face as she said them. Fear? Whatever it was, it had tears collecting on her lashes.

Jesus Christ. He either carried out Danny's orders and dragged Savannah to safety—he'd probably get a few punches from her—or he refused and risked Danny tarnishing his name or worse, killing him for knowing too much.

"Get her out, Toth. I don't want to see her for a week. Understood?"

Toth stepped forward and extended a hand. "Please, Savannah. It's one week." The plea had probably made him look weak in Danny's eyes, but hell. Reason might be the only way he could reach her.

She shook her head. "You have no idea what you're getting into." The rudeness had left her voice. Only sympathy remained—for herself or him?

Toth dropped his hand.

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“Fine,” Danny barked. “Mark,” he called, not taking his eyes off Toth.

A beat passed, and the dude from the hallway rushed into the room. “Yeah, boss?”

“Take Ms. Carrington to my car. I’ll have to make other arrangements for her.”

With one brisk nod, Mark advanced on Savannah. Her eyes widened and she pressed her back against her father’s desk, hands gripping the wood at her sides.

Mark didn’t slow. He snagged Savannah’s arm and towed her forward.

“Don’t touch me!”

A red hue tinted Toth’s vision. Danny was testing him—pushing him to a limit to see if he’d break. Regardless, Toth sure as shit wasn’t going to let this cocksucker touch Savannah.

He stepped forward, rage pulsing through his veins as he grabbed Mark’s forearm. Mark jerked, but Toth didn’t let go.

“Fuck off, man,” Mark snapped. “I’m following orders, since you’re too pussy.”

Toth tightened his grip, every furious cell in his body putting pressure on Mark’s arm.

Mark’s face contorted with pain. “Ah, shit. Boss!”

The silence in the room egged Toth on. He yanked Mark’s wrist to the side and

something popped in the guy's arm.

Mark crumpled to the Oriental carpet. "Sonofabitch! He broke my arm."

Toth heaved a breath as he locked his gaze with Danny's. Interest and a bit of amusement had smoothed the lines on Danny's face. Toth locked his fists at his side, as if doing so would regulate his anger. Then he looked at Savannah and his heart rate slowed a fraction.

Her eyes were wide, her mouth slightly slack. No appreciation was evident on her face, only awe.

"I'm still on the job," he said to Danny. In one swift movement he bent, swept his arm behind Savannah's knees, and tipped her over his shoulder.

Her sharp gasp pierced his ears. "Put me down," she hissed.

He turned his back on Danny and left the room while Savannah kicked and screamed obscenities at him.

He'd just sealed his fate.

CHAPTER 4

Indignation scorched Savannah's skin. She delivered another blow to Toth's meaty back. "Put me down, you asshole!" The beast didn't even have the decency to flinch, his muscles as hard as steel beneath her fists. He stormed through the warehouse.

The curious gazes and snickering laughs coming from her father's henchmen made her blood boil even more as embarrassment lit her nerves on fire. She'd worked hard to be the untouchable daughter of Danny Carrington. Even harder to prove she wasn't

some ditzy blond who had her daddy's name to help her sail through life. More than that, she'd worked her ass off for respect.

Being a woman in this world of lawless men wasn't easy. And Toth Holmes had just stripped her of any dignity she'd cultivated over the years.

Bastard.

To this day she hadn't utilized her family name to harm another human being, but so help her god she'd make him pay for this. If she didn't have the guts to kill him herself, she'd—

“Would you hold still?” he asked, as he pulled his gun from his waistband at the small of his back and shoved open the door to the warehouse. The cool breeze touched her exposed skin. “I'd prefer not to alert any of Red Eyez' shooters if they're around.”

She squirmed against the shoulder digging into her abdomen. “You're going to be so fucking sorry,” she cried. “You humiliated me.”

There. He'd finally succeeded in making her lose her cool. No turning back.

His body tensed beneath hers as he strode across the small parking lot and opened the rear passenger door of his SUV. He caught her lower back and swung her inside the vehicle. As soon as her butt hit the seat, she kicked out her foot and caught his knee with her heel.

He grunted, pushed her legs inside, and shut the door. Once he was in the driver's seat, the locks clicked into place.

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She lunged for the door and yanked on the handle. It didn't budge. "Oh, so you are into kidnapping."

He started the car then turned in his seat. Eyes the color of worn-down slate bore into her. "I'm into keeping your ass alive, in case you haven't noticed. It didn't seem like you wanted to go with Mark."

She leaned forward. "I don't want to go with anyone."

"News flash, princess. I'm not too happy about it either."

She ignored the jab. "How much is he paying you?" The question blurted from her lips. Stupid, because the amount was irrelevant. But part of her wanted to know just how desperate her father—and Toth—was.

His lips compressed. He rocked his chiseled jaw back and forth and dammit, she couldn't help but admire his tanned skin, his full, neatly trimmed beard, and his tattoos peeking out from the cuffs of his sleeves. Toth might be a royal pain in her ass, but he was a good-looking one.

"Fifty grand," he said flatly.

Savannah froze. Holy shit. Of course, her father had money to throw around. But fifty thousand dollars for a week? That was more than she'd expected. She sat back in her seat and forced down the thickness in her throat. Whatever the threat was it must have been bad.

“We good now?” Toth’s sharp question penetrated the fog closing in around her. “Or you gonna try to kick me again?”

She scrunched up her face in mockery. Now that her anger was dwindling, she wouldn’t take the bait. She folded her arms across her chest. “I need to stop at my apartment.”

A vein twitched at his temple. “You realize we’re trying to avoid getting you killed, right? You were just shot at there.”

“Exactly. Cops are crawling all over the area. The shooters are long gone.”

Toth mumbled something under his breath and peeled out of the parking lot.

She stared ahead while he drove in the direction of her apartment, confusion percolating inside of her. Toth wanted the money, that was why he’d carried her out. She couldn’t say she was too angry about how he’d roughed up Mark. Dominic was the only one of her father’s men she tolerated. Spending a week with Mark would have been brutal. At least Toth was attractive and somewhat interesting. He seemed to struggle with his temper as much as she did, so that could be fun.

Or dangerously tempting.

Savannah straightened her dress as she got into the back of Toth’s vehicle once again. She should have changed into something more comfortable, but with his brooding glare on her she hadn’t—plus, after the shooting earlier she hadn’t wanted to spend an extra minute at her apartment than necessary.

She’d packed a small bag even though he’d grumbled his ass off about how stupid it

was to stop for her belongings. At least she had something comfy to change into when they reached their next stop. She couldn't take her computer or any other electronics that could pick up her location. But at least she had her notebook. She'd have to Little House on the Prairie it for the next week.

While they left the building, Toth had kept his hand loose around her elbow. If his palm hadn't been so effing warm, she'd have shrugged him off. Even now, minutes later, her skin singed with the branding of his.

It wasn't just that. He'd kept her close and used his body as a shield, acting as if he'd take a bullet for her. Which was hot as hell.

Geez, girl, you've got daddy issues.

She squeezed her eyes together and shook off the thrill of it all because really, she'd take a bullet for fifty Gs too.

She watched as he got into the driver's seat and checked his cell phone before setting it in the cupholder next to him. Harrumph. Easy for him. His life wasn't being hijacked. If she had to endure seven days away from home with no phone, no computer, no connection to her life, she'd at least have her own clothes. And so help her god, she was returning in one week, even if she had to shoot Toth and steal his vehicle.

"Where exactly are you taking me?"

He glanced over his shoulder. "Buckle up."

She rolled her eyes but clicked her seatbelt into place. He shifted the vehicle into drive and pulled away from the curb. The area outside of her building had an eerie feel about it. The street was unusually quiet, as if everyone had left the area and

hadn't returned since the shooting. The only signs of life were a few cars parked along the curb. An icy chill touched her spine. Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea to get away for a while.

"Well?" she pressed.

His gaze met hers in the rearview mirror then flicked back to the road as he sailed through an intersection. "I've got a place. Isolated. We'll hang there until we get the word it's safe to return."

"No, we'll hang there for seven days. That's it."

He sighed. "Why do I get the feeling you're going to fight me on everything?"

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She smirked. “‘Cause I’m a fighter.”

Toth didn’t reply, just steered onto the interstate, and as Seattle faded behind them, Savannah’s anxiety eased. Darkness was pushing away the pinky-gray hue of the dusky sky.

After another thirty minutes or so, the interstate turned into a single lane. Toth drove them farther and farther from home and deeper into the mountains. Pine trees walled one side of the road as they traveled higher. The stretch of thousands, no, millions, of trees laid out below and as far as her eye could see always filled Savannah with wonder. She’d lived here her whole life and its beauty still took her breath away.

As she gazed out of the window, tasks pinged around in her head, but thinking about work was useless. There was very little she could do with a pen and paper. When she got home next week, she’d have a pile of—

Lights flashed. Headlights.

A vehicle erupted from the wall of trees at the left side of the road. It didn’t slow.

Savannah straightened in her seat as fear gripped her spine. “Toth!”

“Shit!” Toth gunned the vehicle forward, but there was no way to escape the truck closing in on them.

Crash!

The vehicle slammed into the driver's side of the car. Savannah's body whipped to the right.

A scream tore from her throat. Toth's shouts reverberated off the windows, but not a single word sunk into her brain. She gripped the back of the seat in front of her and turned her head away from the blast of headlights.

"Get down, dammit!"

Toth rolled down his window and took aim with his gun.

Crack! Crack!

As Savannah ducked low, her gaze flitted to the window. The edge of the mountain loomed. Any second and they'd tumble over the side.

Searing-hot fear touched her palate, too dry to let out another scream. The vehicle pushing them reversed.

Oh god. Oh thank god.

Savannah's chest heaved. Had Toth shot the driver? Killed him? She lifted her head. Their attacker was still reversing.

"Hang on!" Toth shouted.

The truck gunned forward.

Smash!

Savannah's body jerked. The sickening crunch of metal on metal screeched in her

eardrums.

A weightlessness took over her limbs and her stomach lifted to her throat as the vehicle rolled over the escarpment. Savannah covered her head and screamed as they barreled into the treetops. Her head connected sharply with the window. A screeching noise filled Savannah's eardrums. She fought to hang on to consciousness, but darkness kept pulling her down, down, down...

A husky, anxious voice cut through the screeching inside her head. She squeezed her eyes shut against the invasion. An icy-cold sheen coated every bit of her skin except for one spot on the back of her neck. It was warm there.

“Savannah!”

She flinched. The movement awakened her muscles. Pain pulsed throughout her body.

The heat on the back of her neck shook lightly, and she was injected with a heavy dose of reality.

Tooth driving.

The skyline dark.

Screams...Herscreams.

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A truck hitting the car and pushing them over the mountain.

She snapped open her eyelids and her lungs sucked in a sharp breath of air, her body forcing her into survival mode, fight-or-flight instantly switched on.

Toth's face filled her vision. His features were washed in shadows, his mouth set in a grim line. An angry gash above his eyebrow leaked blood. The reddish-black liquid mixed with the dirt smeared on his forehead and cheeks. His dress shirt was ripped across his bicep, and his hair was rumpled.

Angst seized Savannah's stomach, and she bolted into a sitting position. The woods around her spun like a carousel. Vomit rose in her esophagus. Toth's rough grip eased her flat on her back again. Her heart pounded with the speed of a racehorse, and the screeching noise inside her ears had been replaced with the sound of hyperactive blood pumping through her veins.

Toth's vehicle caught her eye and terror saturated her insides. The SUV was upside down, its windows smashed, one of its lights flashing sporadically. Two tires lay on the ground nearby.

He must have pulled her from the vehicle. How far had they fallen?

"Jesus. You probably have a concussion. Just lie still, okay? I need to check you out."

She let her cheek rest on the forest floor. The earth cooled her skin, grounding her, which helped to slow the adrenaline that wanted to take her on a high-speed chase.

Toth's hands ran over her thighs, knees, and ankles. He traveled back up her legs slowly, his touch careful and deliberate. He gently eased her onto her side and made his way up her back to her neck.

"Do you have any pain?" he asked.

She snorted. "What do you think?"

He placed his palm firmly on her shoulder. The contact forced her to focus on his anchoring gaze. The walls of her throat thickened and tears burned behind her eyes.

No, no, no. Don't be a wimp.

"Cut the shit. Where are you hurt?" Toth's aggressive words were softened by his concerned tone. None of which helped stop the urge to ugly-cry.

She swallowed. "Nothing serious. I remember being jerked against the seatbelt. My neck and hips are sore. Head's pounding and I feel nauseated. Other than that..." She swept her gaze to the mountain behind him. "Better than expected."

He grunted and pushed her hair away from her face. A penlight clicked on. She winced as the beam struck her eyes. "Ouch." The pain in her head and her nausea intensified, but she'd hang on to her cookies if it killed her.

He flicked the light into one eye, then to the side, then back. He repeated the action on the other eye then turned off the light. She released a moan of relief.

"I think you've got a concussion. We need to get moving. They'll come make sure the job's finished. Can you sit up?"

The idea of moving made her want to curl into a ball. Maybe just letting them come

and kill her would be better.

God, I must have really hit my head.

As welcoming as permanent sleep sounded, she knew the assholes who'd sent them over a mountain wouldn't end her life peacefully. Oh no. They'd make her suffer, and given the way she felt right now, that wouldn't take a whole heck of a lot of effort on their part. Just sitting upright would be torture enough.

"Yeah." She didn't dare nod for fear her head would spin like a vortex and send her back into a dream state.

Toth pocketed the penlight, brought his hands to her biceps, and helped her scoot into a sitting position. The world tilted on its axis and searing pain spread through her skull. A weak cry leaked from her lips. For a flicker of a moment, fear struck her. Could she be seriously hurt? Have a brain injury? Shit.

Toth cursed and pulled her head to his chest. "Just breathe."

She closed her eyes and focused on her senses. The ground was firm and hard beneath her. Toth's shirt was soft on her cheek. His body heat surrounded her, a sharp contrast to the cool dirt soaking through her dress. His cologne—or maybe it was just the scent of his skin—wafted to her nostrils. Basil and pepper. The thick smell mixed with the strong odor of the pine trees made her relax a fraction.

"There you go. Take another breath."

"Maybe you should just leave me," she said on a light chuckle. "I'm deadweight."

He chortled. "Not a chance."

“Oh yeah. I guess my father would have your head.”

Toth shifted away but moved his hands to her shoulders. “I’m going to carry you. We need to get as far away from here as we can. Can you sit a sec while I get our bags?”

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“Uh-huh.” Again, she didn’t nod, but slowly, her surroundings were becoming less foggy. The cacophony of crickets and other questionable critters filled the night.

Toth stood and went to the upturned SUV. Savannah pressed her palms into the dirt to hold herself up. Her arms wanted to give out, and her body craved sleep, but Toth was right—they had to hustle. A minute or so later he returned, his arms looped through his backpack and her small duffle in his hand. He set down her bag and stretched out both of his hands.

Tattoos covered his knuckles, the dark ink illegible without proper lighting. Intrigue filled her. Mustering all her strength, she accepted his help and he pulled her to her feet. Chilly dirt touched her toes and she glanced at the ground. “My shoes... I must have lost them in the car.”

“We don’t have time to look for them. Did you bring something besides those damn heels?”

She would have rolled her eyes if her head weren’t throbbing. It wasn’t as if she’d planned to lose them in the accident. “I have runners in my bag.”

“All right. I’m carrying you anyway, so we’ll get them out when we stop. We need to get out of here.”

She couldn’t argue, and there was no way she was dumb enough to refuse being carried either. Just the idea of having her weight off her legs was enough to make her want to climb up his tall, stacked form like a cat.

He leaned down and swept his arm behind her knees, just as he'd done in her father's office, only this time he lifted her more carefully. He grunted slightly and she winced. Was he hurt?

"You can prop yourself up on my backpack to keep the blood from rushing to your head. If you get dizzy or anything, just tap me. We need to be quiet until we get somewhere secure, so don't talk unless you have to."

She did as he suggested and rested her forearms on the top of his backpack. He scooped up her bag and strode through the woods.

Savannah stared at the wreckage they'd survived. A large pine tree had stopped the vehicle from tumbling further down the mountain. Broken branches and bushes carved a path up the mountain's side.

Her mouth went dry at the sight. The fact that they hadn't died was a miracle. One that Red Eyez would rectify as soon as they found the empty SUV.

She'd escaped death twice in one day. Next time she might not be so lucky.

CHAPTER 5

Adeep achesettled into Toth's bones, but he didn't slow in his trek through the woods.

"They must be on foot!"

Savannah's sharp intake of breath told him he wasn't hearing things. They'd gotten away from the wreckage minutes before the headlights of a vehicle appeared on the dirt road that snaked down from the interstate above. He'd hoped it was just some kind civilian who'd witnessed the accident.

No such luck.

Toth picked up his pace, ignoring the scream of his muscles. He hadn't had time to assess his own injuries, but as long as he could breathe, he'd make sure the assholes chasing them didn't get to Savannah. He needed to turn on his flashlight—one gnarly fucking tree root could end them both. But he couldn't risk the beam alerting their pursuers. He kept his gaze on the ground, weaving around tree trunks and hopping over treacherous rocks. The voices faded behind them, and a few minutes later, Savannah tapped his shoulder.

He squeezed her thigh so she knew he'd understood then took shelter behind a huge tree. He heaved out a breath as he lowered her to the ground, keeping his hands on her waist for her balance as well as his own. "You okay?" he whispered.

She held her side but nodded. "Just needed some air." Her voice was fainter than a whisper. In the moonlight he could see her pale face, squinted with strain. She needed rest. Shit, so did he. Not yet.

"We have to get away from the road," she continued, nodding to the dirt path thirty feet away.

He grunted. "If we do that, we'll get lost."

"If we don't, we won't lose them." She dragged her tongue over her top lip. Fear was evident in her features. "We're basically surrounded. We can't go south—that's the steepest part of the mountain. It'll be impossible to climb. And with the road running alongside our path, it's only a matter of time before they find us."

He squeezed the bridge of his nose. She was right. But he wasn't equipped for a backcountry hike. They had little water, barely any food, nothing but the clothes and toiletries in their bags. And that was to say nothing of the wildlife they might

encounter. He had the handgun and the knife that he always carried, but those wouldn't get them very far if they encountered a grizzly.

He could call Rami on his encrypted phone, but speaking in anything but a whisper would be too risky until they were somewhere secure. "Fine," he said, nodding. "We'll cross the road and go farther west. Since that's the direction they came from, they might not look that way."

"I should get my shoes." She bent to the bag, but he caught her hand.

"Nah, we don't have time."

She shook her head. "You can't keep carrying me and all our things. It's—"

A low whistle sounded in the distance.

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“Fuck.” He swung Savannah over his shoulder.

“What?” she hissed.

“I think they’ve found our tracks.”

Her body tensed on his shoulder. Anger pulsed through his core. If he didn’t have Savannah with him, he’d stay and kill every one of the bastards that’d nearly murdered them.

Don’t stray from the job.

It was one of his and Rami’s mantras. He hadn’t been hired as a hitman; he’d been hired as a bodyguard. But Savannah’s safety was beyond compromised now. Outrunning the men was becoming more and more unlikely. Going up against gang members, injured and without any idea as to how many there were, wasn’t smart. But he didn’t have a choice.

Hunt or be hunted.

First, he had to be sure Savannah was safe and that help was on the way in case something happened to him. The anger did a good thing for his body. With renewed strength and energy, he pivoted toward the road. His stride chewed up the distance. He paused a few feet from the gravel stretch, being careful to hide behind the trees and brush. No noises came from either end of the road.

Toth hiked Savannah up higher on his shoulder, sprinted across the gravel strip, and

broke into the line of trees on the other side. He continued for another twenty minutes, his body now moving on autopilot. Just a little more distance from the crash and Red Eyez' men. Then he could stop.

Sweat dampened his shirt, and the cool air made the material uncomfortable on his skin. The backs of Savannah's satiny thighs were cold against his hot palm. Too cold? Shit. He'd had tunnel vision, so eager to get them to a place where they could rest and call for help that he hadn't checked in on her.

He paused and gulped down a breath of mountainy air. The scent of pine collided with the damp smell of mulch and his own sweat. He dropped Savannah's bag to the ground then pulled her off his shoulder. Rather than set her on her feet, in case she was unsteady, he held her against his chest. Her feet dangled next to his legs and her face met his.

Moonlight leaked through the canopy of trees. This close, he could see the fatigue and pain creasing the skin around her eyes. She'd lost a lot of color. Her lips were only a shade darker than her face. "Are you okay?"

Her tongue moved between her teeth as she laid her hands flat against his chest. "Thirsty. Tired. But probably better than you." If she was uncomfortable with him holding her, she didn't look it.

With her snuggled up against his abdomen, he was aware of every curve of her body. She was slighter than she looked. Hell, it was probably her fierce attitude that made her seem bigger than she was. Her breasts were firm against his chest and her sweet, fruity scent invaded his airspace, tickling every neuron in his lust-filled brain. He didn't take his gaze off her face. Why'd a crime lord's daughter have to be so fucking pretty?

One of her eyebrows twitched, as if she'd read his mind. No, she was probably

wondering what the hell he was doing staring at her like a creep.

He grunted and looked away from her to study their surroundings for a beat, wanting to ensure the area was clear. Other than the trickle of a shallow creek that carved through the landscape twenty feet away, the area was dead silent. “I’m fine. But I could go for some water too.” Satisfied there was no nearby danger, he leaned down and set her on a large boulder then pulled his bag up beside her and dug through it for the water bottle he’d refilled that morning. He unscrewed the cap and passed it to her.

She clutched the black stainless-steel cannister with both hands and brought the rim to her lips. She took three big gulps before wiping her mouth and handing it back to him. “Thank you.”

He took one long drink, secured the cap, and returned the cannister to his bag. Then he pulled out his satellite phone.

Savannah’s gaze lifted with interest before she slid off the rock and bent to her bag. “I think we lost them,” she said softly, removing her runners.

He scoffed. “For now.” He waited for her to put on her shoes and a cardigan. The temperature had dropped drastically, and while April was mild enough, the air was still damn cold at night.

Toth checked the clip of his gun, more out of habit than necessity, and then returned the weapon to his waistband. His knife was clipped on the inside pocket of his dress pants. He patted it to make sure he hadn’t lost it along the way. He had one other gun in his bag, and while he sure as shit might need it, Savannah might too. He passed it to her.

Her eyes rounded, but she accepted the weapon as if she’d done so a hundred times. No hesitation. He didn’t want to think about the situations in which she’d needed to

defend herself. Damn Danny Carrington for entangling his daughter in his affairs.

She placed the gun on her lap and covered it with her hand. “Where are you going?” Her voice rose a fraction of an octave, and if he didn’t know Savannah Carrington and her badass streak, he’d suspect she didn’t want him to leave.

“I need to make sure they don’t find you.” He sat beside her on the rock, pulling up his contacts on his phone. There were only two. “This one here, R, is Rami. N... N is someone else.” He forced the pile of words down his throat. He couldn’t exactly explain who N was. Not in a nutshell, anyway. “Call Rami. Tell him our situation and that we need him here now. He could track my other phone, but he’ll find us faster if we give him our coordinates. Can you do that?”

She made a face. “Of course. But how will you find your way back? These woods are huge.”

“Don’t worry about it. If I get lost, Rami will find you and get you outta here.”

He stood, but Savannah’s slim fingers grabbed his bicep. “If help is coming, then you don’t need to find Red Eyez’ men.”

He studied her face. Her golden hair was messy and debris clung to the long strands. Streaks of dirt smeared her forehead, and her cheek appeared discolored. His chest tightened. Leaving her alone was all kinds of fucking wrong, but they couldn’t run forever. He had to put an end to Red Eyez’ search, at least for tonight. “Yeah, I do. It could take Rami hours to get here. There are some protein bars in my bag. Help yourself.”

She dragged her top teeth over her bottom lip, and her gaze flicked over the dark trees before returning to his face. Goddamn. Savannah affected him. Not in a good way, either. Until now she’d just gotten on his nerves and gotten him hard. But now...

Vulnerable Savannah was a side he'd never witnessed. Jesus, he didn't want to leave her. He swallowed what little saliva had accumulated in his mouth. "Call Rami. Stay put. I'll come back." He moved away and her arm fell.

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“Call out—or something,” she said.

He turned as he pulled his gun from its place at the small of his back. “Huh?”

“You know,” she said, fluttering her fingers. “Like a bird call or something. Then you can follow my voice if you get lost.”

He smirked. “Bird call. Got it.”

“Just don’t be stupid, okay?”

“All right. Not stupid either.” He nodded and headed for the trees. “Caw-caw,” he called softly.

Her snorting laughter carried on the breeze, and his cheeks warmed on a smile. If he survived the night, he’d never last the fucking week.

Great.

Savannah had spent half the day wanting to be rid of Toth Holmes and now she wanted to cling to his departing legs like a three-year-old trying to stop her parents from going to work. Pathetic.

Unease swam in her belly as she stared at the vast mosaic of trees that had swallowed Toth. An owl hooted and Savannah shivered. She placed her hand around the gun in

her lap then brought her attention to the satellite phone he'd given her.

N is someone else.

Like his girlfriend. Had to be. He hadn't given her an option to dial N, just instructions to get a hold of Rami.

Who cares if he has a girlfriend? You're running for your life, stupid.

She was exhausted, her brain was scrambled from the accident, and she desperately needed out of the woods. Of course her mind was going to wander. She was losing it.

Forcing all thoughts of Toth out of her mind, she tapped Rami's number and brought the bulky device to her ear. There was a long pause before the line connected.

"Hello?"

Savannah cleared her throat. "Rami, it's Savannah. Toth and I were in a car wreck on our way out of town. We need backup." She closed her eyes. It sounded so silly. We need backup. As if she were one of them and not their cash cow for the week.

"Shit. You okay? Where's Toth?"

She brought her fingers to her throbbing temple. "Yeah, we're fine," she said stiffly. After tumbling down a friggin' mountain she was anything but fine, but that wasn't important right now. "Toth went to stop Red Eyez from following us. He said you could use our coordinates and help. We're in the woods."

He cursed. "I know where he was taking you. Text me your location. There's an app installed to give you the points."

Just what she needed with a suspected concussion—to tinker with technology. “I’ll do that now.”

“All right. If you have any problems or Toth doesn’t return soon, call me back.”

“Kay.” She disconnected and flicked her thumb over the screen. Unlike her phone, this one had only a handful of apps, which made finding the locator thing fairly easy. A few minutes later, the device spit out a coordinate. She copied the numbers, pasted them into the text field, and hit send.

There. Help was on the way.

She tucked the phone back inside the bag then brought her hand to her neck, gently massaging. Part of her wanted to crack open one of the protein bars, but she couldn’t chance putting anything in her stomach. Her senses were on alert. She heard every branch creaking in the wind. Her heart rate hiked up with each passing second. She’d never been overly anxious, but an unfamiliar urge to chew her fingernails gripped her as the shrouded trees closed in around her, the scent of pine and dirt thickened in her nostrils.

Chill. She needed to chill. If she didn’t get her breathing under control, Toth would come back to find her passed out or having a panic attack. Neither would suit her image.

She placed a hand on the cool rock beside her thigh and kept the other on the reassuring metal of the gun. Then she focused her gaze on her feet instead of the shadows morphing into threatening shapes. The constant trickling of water over rocks, slow yet steady, calmed her nerves further. Within a couple of minutes, the muscles in her chest loosened and air flowed freely in and out of her lungs. There. Sanity returned.

Toth wouldn't be gone long. They'd probably walked twenty minutes or so after crossing the road, but he'd been carrying her and their bags. Surely he'd cover much more ground with less baggage. By the time Toth returned and they made it back to the road, Rami wouldn't be far. Hell, in an hour or two she'd probably be cozy in whatever place Toth had been taking her to. Even a cheap motel would do.

She needed food, a bath, and a bed. In that order. Toth better be a quick killer, because—

Crack,crack!

She jumped at the distant sound of bullets firing. Terror flooded her body.

If Toth didn't make it back, Rami might not find her alive.

CHAPTER 6

Toth advanced on the thinning treeline. He was close to the crash site but hadn't yet run into Red Eyez' men. Maybe they'd given up.

Ha! He wasn't that lucky. They were around here somewhere.

He didn't break stride as he smacked away branches and ducked under larger ones. He'd run most of the way, slowing only moments ago. It couldn't have taken more than ten minutes, fifteen tops. Now that Savannah was a safe distance away, he cared less about being spotted. Then again, he'd be outnumbered. Better not to get noticed until he took someone out.

He slowed his pace further and skirted around a bush. His eyes had long since adjusted to the darkness.

Ring,ring!

The shrill of a cell phone split the night air, sending birds scattering from the leaves. The sound of a squirrel's claws scraping against bark reached his ears. Toth froze. He held his gun in front of him but kept it pointed at the ground.

Someone was close. They'd either answered their phone quickly or silenced the ringer. Toth pressed his back to a large tree and listened. A man's voice carried on the breeze for a moment then stopped. Several beats passed. Toth waited, his breath stale in his lungs.

Snap!

Toth's body tensed, but not with fear. The warm sweat of satisfaction coated his palms. He'd relish every second of taking the fucker's life. His senses prickled and the hair on his arms bolted to attention as the energy in the forest shifted.

He's behind me.

Keeping his finger on the trigger, Toth wheeled around the tree and came face-to-face with a man. Toth fired just as the guy ducked and tackled him. His attacker's shoulders rammed into Toth's midsection. Toth squeezed the trigger again, but it was a wasted shot.

The man twisted, attempting to throw Toth to the ground, but Toth raised his gun and brought the butt down on the back of his attacker's head.

Wham,wham,wham!

The guy's skin split open and his muscles went lax. He sunk to the ground at Toth's feet.

"Over there!" Two forms stepped through the trees fifty feet away.

Shit.

The newcomers fired. Toth ducked behind another tree and crouched low. One down.

He had at least two more to take out. When he was done with these guys, he'd find their vehicle and see if another vehicle had accompanied them.

Heavy footsteps pounded the earth. The soft swishing of pine branches told him they were moving in.

Peering around one side of the tree, he locked his gaze on one of the men. Black balaclava, black leather jacket and white shirt underneath. Staying down, Toth aimed and fired.

The first shot hit the man in the shoulder, second in the midsection. The man let out a guttural cry and dropped like a stone. Toth returned to cover. The scent of bark flooded him, lowering his pulse to a steady rhythm.

"Shane!" said the other guy. "Fuck."

Like a predator stalking its prey, Toth waited. His breath was shallow, his form rigid as he stayed low to the ground behind the tree. He couldn't see the second shooter, but the stench of fear was acrid in the cool breeze, pounding his brain with memories and dragging him back in time two years.

He'd been hiding behind a bleached stone wall in Iraq. The sun was so fucking hot his skin burned beneath his military gear. Instead of the sounds of animals in the woods, there'd been screams. So many fucking screams.

Men. Women. Children.

His own.

Snap

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The broken twig jolted him back to the present. And thank fuck for that. Surging from his position, he located the second man, standing in a small clearing. He aimed and shot.

Three bullets to the chest and he went down.

Toth lowered his weapon. The familiar buzz of waning adrenaline filled his ears. He approached the first body, then the second, confirming both men were dead. Then he followed the trail to the crash site.

The pickup truck that had sent them over the mountain was parked on the road. No other vehicles around. Using the light on his phone, he lit the inside of the vehicle to search for clues as to how many people had been inside. A coat lay on the seat behind the driver's. And behind the passenger's seat was another coat.

Fuck. If there'd been four people in the car, one was unaccounted for. The muscles in his throat cinched his windpipe.

Savannah.

No more shots had been fired after the last three. But was that a good thing or a bad thing? There was a fifty percent chance Toth had killed Red Eyez' men, but there was also a fifty percent chance he'd been taken out.

Savannah pinched her temples between her thumb and forefinger. Please, don't die

because of me. The silent prayer circled through her mind. She stomped it out before she could analyze why she was so worried about Toth. She was Danny Carrington's daughter. Heartless bitch of Seattle's downtown core. No one expected her to care about another human being.

She sighed. She didn't care about him, per se, but about how his outcome affected hers... maybe. Or maybe she just didn't want someone to die trying to save her. No shame in that.

He couldn't be dead. He was too annoying for her to be rid of him so easily.

With that fact firmly in mind, she slid off the rock, gun in hand. The wind picked up and she pulled her cardigan tighter around her body. Toth had been gone for over half an hour. He'd surely be back soon.

She trailed away from the rock, heading for the nearby stream. Stopping inches from the rush of water, she watched the current lap over the stones. This close to the gentle symphony, she couldn't hear the rest of the forest noises. The moon shimmered off the swell of water as it moved over and around the rocks, instantly softening the hum of her nervous system, which was still wired from the crash. But a little ball of anxiety sat heavily in her chest. Worry. The sensation was worry. Worry for Toth.

Ridiculous. Once again, she shoved the irritating emotions aside.

The creek was wider than it was deep, and the water moved swiftly. She knelt, balancing the weapon on her lap, and stuck her hand in the icy liquid. A rush of movement sounded behind her. The ball of tension unwound. He's back, thank god.

She shook the water off her hand and stood. "Took ya long—"

Whack!

A fist connected with her cheek. Pain exploded across her face and she stumbled backward. She shrieked as her foot caught a rock and she landed in the creek. The freezing water instantly soaked her clothes. Panicked, she scrambled to her knees, but her attacker kicked her in the back of the thigh and she went down.

The gun.

She spun around. It had fallen near the shore.

Rough hands grabbed her waist. It'd been years since she'd practiced self-defense, but her training kicked into gear. She turned, swinging her elbow with the movement, and caught the man in the jaw. His head snapped back but he didn't go down.

"Bitch," he hissed. The moonlight caught his face, illuminating a deep scar across his cheek and dark, soulless eyes that glittered with vengeance. His head was covered with a black knit cap, and a brown sweater covered his upper body.

She pulled back her fist and jabbed him in the nose. He let out another curse as blood ran over his lips. Jutting out his hand, he clamped his fingers around her neck and forced her onto her back.

"No!" she screamed, kicking and flailing as he pushed her under the current. Water rushed into her nose and mouth, its frigidness shocking her senses. The back of her head connected roughly with the rocks. Stars twinkled behind her closed lids.

She grappled with his wrists, digging her nails into his flesh. Her chest contracted. Her lungs burned, begging for air. A light fog rolled over her consciousness, threatening to pull her into oblivion.

I'm going to die.

No. She had to do something. She couldn't die like this, at the hands of a gang member. Plunging her hand under the water, she seized a rock. Her fingers ran over the flat, jagged stone. Gripping it, she jammed the pointed end into the man's calf. His leg buckled but didn't give out. Simultaneously, the pressure holding her underwater released. She surged up and gasped. Air rushed into her lungs faster than she could inhale, her body greedy for oxygen.

In that instant, her attacker regained his bearings. With his hold still on her neck, he pushed her toward the water. Not again. She wasn't going back under. She twisted, keeping one elbow on the streambed so he couldn't resubmerge her.

She had to do something quickly. Had to get out of this goddamn creek.

He bent over her, bringing his face inches from hers. "You're going to die tonight, bitch." He reached his free hand behind his back. The moonlight caught the sheen of a blade and all the moisture left her mouth.

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With the rock still tight in her grip, Savannah summoned all her strength and slammed the sharp edge of the stone against the side of his face.

The man's jaw went slack and he careened back an inch. As he brought his hand to his jaw, his glare turned vicious. "You fucking cunt." He lifted the knife and brought it down toward her midsection.

She screamed and jabbed the inside of his elbow. The knife missed her middle, but piercing pain split her side, followed by warmth. She gasped. He grunted in frustration and raised the knife again, this time holding her arm with his other hand so she couldn't deflect his movement.

Savannah's body froze. She couldn't run. Couldn't escape. Fear made her want to beg for her life, but she wouldn't go down like that. Her pulse raced against her skin, the ferocity of her blood pressure enough to give her a stroke.

She fought the urge to squeeze her eyes shut. Fought the urge to pray.

He brought the blade down.

Crack!

The blast of gunfire made her jump. A scream ripped from her throat, long and ragged. Warm fluid splattered her body, and the man dropped his arm as if it were a lead weight. His eyes glazed over and he slumped into the creek, his body pinning her legs in the water.

The scream kept peeling from her lips. Terror hot and blinding coursed through her veins as her mind struggled to comprehend the situation.

I'm alive.

She kicked her legs out from under her attacker as if he'd rise from the dead and take her back with him. A figure was next to her. Solid, calming hands ran over her arms. "Hey, hey, Savannah. Can you hear me? Fuck."

That curse. The tone. So familiar.

Slowly, her brain led her into the present. She was no longer facing death—facing the hell she'd surely only be welcome at. Instead, she was facing Toth.

"Savannah!" he shouted, his fingers biting into her biceps. "Are you hurt, goddammit?"

Her lip trembled and she shook her head. "I-I thought I was dead." The words came out on a raspy whisper.

Before Savannah could get her equilibrium back, Toth swooped his arms underneath her and stood. She shivered as the cold mountain air struck her drenched skin. Toth stalked out of the stream, over the grass, and back to the rock she'd abandoned, where he set her down. For once, she was grateful he didn't back off. His body stayed close, his arms warm enough to heat a furnace.

She let her face press against the smooth cotton of his shirt. Let him surround her in his embrace. The whiskers of his short beard tickled her temple.

"I'm freezing," she said, to break the silence. And maybe to explain why she was letting him touch her.

“You’re in shock.” He caught the nape of her neck and tilted her head back. “Do you hurt anywhere?”

Everywhere. But she didn’t say that. “I don’t think so.” Leaves rustled in the forest next to them and her body coiled.

Toth didn’t budge. His hand swept along her neck, and then he cradled her chin between his thumb and forefinger and forced her darting focus to his face. “You’re safe. Got it? No one else is here ’cept some wildlife. And if there is someone, I’ll kill ’em.”

His last statement sent a bolt of electricity through her loins. It wasn’t just reassuring. It was protective. Primitive. Hot.

She wet her lips and nodded.

“Where’s the gun?” he asked, dropping his hand.

Her skin grieved as he put distance between them. Shame warmed her cheeks, the hot blaze of embarrassment almost strong enough to chase away the shock. “By the water.”

His face twisted. “You know that was your protection.”

She dipped her chin and tears stung her eyes. “He surprised me. I d-didn’t hear him approach over the sound of the creek.” Her voice shook from the tremors taking hold of her muscles, and for the life of her she couldn’t steady her words or prevent the stammering. It was like watching a bad movie. She couldn’t stop talking. Couldn’t stop trying to explain herself when all she’d done was fail. “I h-heard footsteps. I-I thought it was you and—”

He gently lifted her chin with his knuckle. The damn burning tears rolled down her cheeks.

Shenevercried.

Call it shock. Call it fear after facing death. She was coming unglued, and it was just her friggin' luck that it was happening in front of Toth.

“Don’t do that.”

She sniffled. “What?” At least she’d managed not to stammer this time.

“Don’t feel stupid. I’m glad I came when I did.” His gaze moved over her face and his words came out tight, as if it hurt to speak them. “Let’s get you into dry clothes.”

She said nothing. Sharp shivers took hold of her muscles and her teeth chattered. Toth reached for her hips and slid her off the rock.

“How do we get this thing off?” His hands smoothed over the tight material of her black dress.

She turned, offering him her back. “Zipper.”

He pushed her hair to one shoulder. The cool metal slid down her spine. He dropped his hand and stepped back. She spun around slowly as she peeled the material from her arms. The air puckered her bare nipples, and she cursed herself for not wearing a bra. But she’d already been vulnerable in front of him. Had already cried. She wouldn’t hide her body.

And some twisted part of her wanted to affect him.

Toth averted his gaze and knelt to rifle through his bag. “You can wear somethin’ of mine. I’m sure it’ll be warmer than what you have.”

Rather than respond, she pushed the dress down her torso. As she slid the material

over her ass, a sharp pain pierced her hip. She sucked in a breath then stepped out of the dress. The pain didn't go away. Glancing down at her body, she saw that her pale skin practically glowed in the moonlight. She brought her palm to the throbbing spot just above her panty line and a wave of agony washed over her, making her head swim.

"Here, step into these," Toth said, still crouched in front of her. He held a pair of jogging pants open near her feet.

"Uh, Toth." His name was a whisper over her teeth.

His expression stilled on her face. "What's wrong?"

She held out her hand. A dark substance coated her fingers and palm. Dizziness knocked her knees. "I'm bleeding."

CHAPTER 7

Toth's blood moved like pudding through a fucking straw as he stared at Savannah's hand. He choked down a groan, keeping his face passive. Inside him was a tsunami of emotion. Fear. Fuck, he never got scared. But seeing that much blood on someone so damn feminine made him clench his back teeth.

"Lemme see." He caught her wrist to still the tremble of her arm and covered her thigh with his free hand, turning her toward the light.

The airy scent of jasmine stirred his cock as he brought his face closer to her almost-naked body. The only thing covering her was a pair of light-blue panties. Sure enough, a two-inch gash was carved into the delicate line of her hip. Blood stained her silk underwear. His stomach lurched.

“He cut you.” The words came out hollow, but the lack of venom was only for her benefit. He wanted to kill the sonofabitch all over again. Had he known the guy had succeeded in slicing her, he wouldn’t have put a clean bullet through the back of his head. He would have made his death much more painful.

Savannah’s breath hitched. “I know.” She steered her hip away from his gaze, but he held fast to the sweet skin of her thigh.

He glanced up at her face. Pain contorted her petite features. She looked ten times worse than she had after he’d dragged her unconscious body from the wrecked car. Her cheeks were dirty, and scum from the water matted her wet hair. Still, she was breathtakingly beautiful. Her lowered gaze stayed on his face. The fact that her tits were on display and she wasn’t cowering gave him a new respect for her. This woman had balls.

Her pink nipples were puckered in her full, pert breasts. So perfectly shaped, like her slim waist. He gave himself a mental kick in the ass and forced his palm to release her leg. If he didn’t, he wouldn’t stop touching her. Aside from how lethal and utterly stupid that would be—possibly one of the stupidest things he could ever do—it would be downright disrespectful, especially after what she’d been through.

He stood and removed his dress shirt then caught the hem of the T-shirt he wore underneath and pulled the material over his head. His dress shirt was a little wet from carrying her, but the cotton one beneath was warm and dry. He fit it over her head, and she threaded her arms through.

“I don’t want to get blood on your clothes,” she said.

“Don’t sweat it.” Her nipples poked at the thin cotton. Jesus fuck. Covering her body was a sin. He went to his backpack and pulled out the first aid kit. “We need to fix up that wound.”

She kept her gaze on him. A shiver shook her body and her teeth clanked together. He moved back into her orbit. Fucking dangerous. If he managed not to make a move on her, he should be awarded a goddamn medal.

She moaned as he approached. Her hands went around his waist and she pulled his torso to hers, snuggling her face against his sternum. “You’re s-so warm.”

He froze. The kit slipped from his fingers and landed on the rock. He needed to clean her wound and make sure it wasn’t as bad as he feared, but her frigid body made alarm chop through his thought process. If she was in shock, she needed to get warm. He ran his hands up and down her back.

Christ. So much for that medal.

With her half-naked body on his, images flooded his mind. He wanted to taste her. To roll her tight nipples between his fingers and sink his tongue into her mouth. He wanted to mark her, own her, fuck her until she screamed. His already hard cock throbbed. A little sigh from her lips snapped him with the force of an elastic band to the dick.

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He inhaled the cool air, bringing his senses back to alert mode. If she weren't hurt, he'd have made his way to the stream to cool off.

Keeping his mental focus on nothing but heating her chilled body, he created friction with his palms on her skin. Rubbing from shoulder blades to waist, he gave her all the fire he could generate. There was one surefire way to get her blood moving...

Off-limits, dummy.

He caught her arms and gently pushed her back. His dick protested. "Let's have a look at that." His voice was grim and gruff.

"Okay." She held the shirt, oversized on her delicate frame, away from the bloody gash. He crouched, and she jumped at his hand on her upper thigh. "Is it deep?" she asked on a wheezy, pained intake of breath.

"You'll need stitches," he said tersely.

She scrunched up her face. "No way."

"Not now. We don't have time. I'm going to clean and bandage it quickly, then we need to get to the road to meet Rami."

He clicked on his penlight and passed it to her. "Hold this for me," he commanded.

She did as he asked, keeping the light on her wound. Her hand shook, and it took all his willpower not to hold her against his chest again. She was still injured, still

terrified. Needed comfort—and he wasn't the dude to give it to her because he wouldn't be able to keep his cock in his pants.

Reality was sinking in. Had he shown up a minute, no, a second later, she'd have been dead. Stabbed to death and bleeding out in a cold fucking stream. He shouldn't have left her. None of this would have happened if he'd just done his job and—

“You're angry.”

It irked him that she could read him.

He fit a small towel beneath the wound and then popped the cap off the antiseptic. “Not angry. This'll sting for a minute.” Holding the bottle away from the cut, he waited for her okay. Her jaw clenched and she gave one curt nod. He doused the wound. Savannah's sharp gasp made him want to stop.

He didn't. Washing away the blood, he took a closer look at the gash. “Yeah, it's as deep as I thought.” He returned the bottle to his first aid kit then pulled out a square waterproof bandage, which he carefully applied.

She squirmed.

“Sorry,” he breathed, still pressing on the bandage, his other hand on the inside of her knee for counterpressure. “I want that bleeding to slow.”

“You sound mad,” she pressed. Her voice was small. Until now, he'd witnessed only one setting in Savannah Carrington: Fuck you.

Thinning his lips, he rocked his jaw. Clearly his professional demeanor had gone out the fucking window. But damn right he was mad. He was pissed as hell that he needed to keep his hands off her for a week and he'd barely lasted the day. “I'm mad

you got hurt. It's my fault." He kept his voice even and drank in her pouty lips and dirty face. Still a fuckin' smokeshow.

"It's not your fault."

He pulled his hands from her skin then grabbed the pair of jogging pants he'd cast aside when he saw her bloodied hand. Holding them open once again, he jerked his head. "We need to move."

She placed her hand on his shoulder for balance, put one foot in a pantleg, then the other. He shimmied the joggers up her legs and tightened the drawstring, but the damn material still hung off her hips.

"Thank you." Her tone was cautious. If he didn't know any better, he'd think she was scared.

Of me?

He didn't have time to dwell on feelings. His or hers. He shoved the first aid kit into his backpack and looped his arms through the bag then returned to where he'd found her. The gun was lying near the stream. He slung her bag over his shoulder and held out his hand. "Can you walk?"

She nodded. He'd half expected her to push on without assistance—the Savannah from a few hours ago probably would have chomped at his hand. Instead, she gripped his elbow and walked beside him. He pulled his gun from his waistband and kept it pointed at the forest floor as he led them through the woods.

"I can carry my bag," she said.

He scoffed. "Honey, no offense, but I'm afraid you're gonna drop as it is."

She stiffened. “I’m fine.”

“You weren’t even fine before you got stabbed.”

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She blew a breath through her lips. “Well, you’re not so hot yourself.”

A beat passed. “Didn’t say you weren’t hot.” Fuck. If he had a free hand, he’d have beaten his own ass with a tree branch for saying that.

She didn’t reply. Thank god for small graces.

Five minutes later, she broke the silence. “Where are they?”

“Who?”

“Seriously?” she asked, her tone prickly with annoyance.

He didn’t want to admit aloud what he’d done. At the end of the day, the more dirt a Sinner had on you, the worse off you were. But he also didn’t want her to be afraid. He warred with himself about how to answer. In the end, it was a waste of time because for some fucked-up reason, what was most important to him was that she knew she wasn’t in immediate danger.

“Dead.”

Her breath wheezed through her nose. “How many?”

His arm bunched beneath her hand, an involuntary reflex, as if his body were warning him to shut his mouth. “Four.”

She was silent, but her fingers tightened on his elbow. Did she suddenly find it

disgusting to touch him? Nah, that was stupid. No way Danny Carrington's daughter was put off by murder. Such an act would be a normal occurrence in the life of someone like her.

As they approached the crash site, Savannah gasped. One of the men he'd shot lay on the ground, his vacant eyes staring at the trees overhead, his mouth slack, his chest covered in blood. They walked near the other two, but Savannah kept her reactions in check.

When they reached the road, Toth stopped and fished his phone from his backpack. "Rami should be here by now."

As if on cue, the phone rang. Toth accepted the call and pressed the device to his ear. "Yeah?"

"I'm close to the coordinates Savannah gave me. I'm on a dirt road off the highway and heading into the forest. Sound right?"

Headlight beams shone in the distance. "I think I see you." Toth raised his arm and Rami beeped the horn. Disconnecting, Toth picked up his bag and reached for hers.

Savannah's hand brushed against his as she scooped up her bag. "I've got it."

He didn't argue. He had too much shit in his head to try to be chivalrous when she wanted to be a hard-ass. The black SUV, the second of two in their small company's entourage, rolled to a stop and Rami hopped out.

Savannah tensed. She'd met Rami a few more times than she'd met Toth, Rami being chummy with her brother. Nonetheless, the guy's appearance still made her bristle.

Which said a lot. She'd seen some pretty sketchy people over the years, but Rami? Dude had a look at me and diekinda vibe. Maybe it had something to do with the tattoo that ran in a vertical line from just above his eyebrow to his cheekbone.

His clear blue-green eyes landed on her as he stormed up. "Ms. Carrington," he said. His tone was professional yet for some reason screamed annoyance. "Let me take that." He pulled her bag from her fingers, rounded the vehicle, and put it in the back with Toth's backpack.

She folded her arms over her chest. Part of her wanted to just get in the vehicle and sit down. The wound on her hip pulsed and every muscle in her body thrummed its anger at not having rested. The other part just wanted the ground to swallow her up and forget this whole nightmare.

Rami slapped the keys in Toth's hand. "Gimme a lift to the next service station and I'll get a cab back."

Toth shifted his gaze from Rami to the crash site. "What about the wreck?"

"Handled it. I reported the vehicle stolen. I'll have to deal with some cops and insurance, but don't worry about that for now. Just finish this job."

Savannah stiffened. This job. Meaning her.

Toth nodded, turning his attention to her, and concern slipped over his features. "She's hurt. We need to get moving." Toth caught her elbow and walked her to the rear door on the driver's side. "You okay?" he asked, as he opened it.

As the interior light washed over them, she studied his face. He'd been tense and short with her since he helped her dress, his face practically unreadable. But now, worry puckered his forehead. The cut above his eyebrow was swollen and crusted

with dried blood. He wore the dress shirt with the buttons open. Her hands begged to stroke his ripped chest.

Bad girl, Savannah.

“I’m fine.”

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“You don’t look fine.” His fingers dropped from her arm and brushed her hipbone. “Are you hurtin’?”

She forced a reassuring nod. “Just tired. How long is the drive?” She slid into the seven-seater SUV and didn’t protest when Toth reached in and buckled her up.

“You folks ready?” Rami interrupted, glancing back from the front passenger seat.

Savannah suspected his question would’ve been more caustic if she weren’t a client. He probably would have chosen different words, too.

Toth shut the door, got into the driver’s seat, and eyed Rami. “She got stabbed, dude.”

Rami cursed. “Sorry ’bout that, hon. There’s water in the cooler next to you and some grub. Have at it.”

Savannah pulled her tongue from the dry roof of her mouth. Water sounded divine. She popped open the cooler and pulled out a bottle of water and cracked it open while Toth made a three-point turn on the tight road. The SUV crawled up an incline.

“Don’t call me that,” she said a minute later, after her mouth was somewhat hydrated.

Rami tilted his head back. “Me? Oh, right. Ms. Carrington.”

“Savannah.”

He grunted another apology as if it took all the effort in the world. It was a wonder someone like him relied on customers for a thriving business. Then again, if someone needed protection, Rami and Toth made a lethal combination of muscle and menace.

They were silent for the rest of the fifteen-minute drive to the closest service station. Rami and Toth exchanged some words, and then Rami lifted three fingers toward her in a silent goodbye and shut the door.

“Want to get in the front seat?” Toth asked, craning his neck to look at her. His voice lacked the fatigue he should have felt. The only hints that he was worse for wear were the gash on his head and the blood still staining his cheek. The guy had to be carrying some kind of self-charging pack because she was damn near death’s door.

She shook her head and slid farther down against the leather. “No.” The thought of moving an inch was enough to bring tears to her eyes. “How much longer?”

“My place is another hour or so. If you’re too tired, we can get a motel. But I’d really like to get off the road if you can tolerate it.”

Another hour might kill her. She needed sleep and she wasn’t going to get it in the back of the SUV. Not when her nerves jumped like a zoo of kangaroos. If the maelstrom of anxiety thumping her chest wasn’t PTSD from the accident, she might be having a heart attack.

She wouldn’t tell him that. Better to die a silent death than have him look at her with more sympathy.

“I’m good,” she lied. “Just drive fast.”

He pulled out of the parking spot and back onto the road. Unexpectedly, her eyelids closed of their own accord. She rested her temple against the window, letting sleep

claim her.

CHAPTER 8

More than an hour had passed when Toth finally rolled down the two-mile-long driveway through the woods that led to the cabin he'd bought over a year ago. Located fifteen minutes from the town of Leavenworth, it offered the privacy and seclusion he needed while also being close enough that he could easily get groceries and necessities.

No one would find them here. Least of all Red Eyez' men.

It'd been a few months since he visited. And until now, he'd never brought a client. It wasn't a place he'd planned to hide victims but a place to unwind, his space to unplug. Hell, if need be, a bugout crib.

As he approached the log cabin, the motion-sensing lights snapped on. After tapping the garage-door opener, he drove inside the detached outbuilding and cut the engine then pressed the button again to lower the door.

Savannah inhaled a deep, sleepy breath and then let out a little moan. His balls clenched at the sound. Snapping off his seatbelt, he got out. "You sleep?" he asked, opening her door.

Great. Now she had him speaking caveman.

Lifting her knuckles to rub one of her eyes, she nodded. "A bit."

He held out his hand, but she didn't accept.

She flashed a tense smile. "I'm fine."

Probably for the best. He rounded the vehicle, opened the trunk, and removed their bags. With his backpack on and her bag swung over his arm, he pulled his gun from his waistband.

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Savannah got out and shut the door behind her. She swam in his white T-shirt and gray jogging pants. His throat went dry as she folded her arms under her breasts. The material showcased her nipples.

Moving to the man door, Toth jerked his head for her to follow him. He slipped into the night, Savannah beside him, climbed the front steps, and punched in the code on the door handle. The lock revved to life and clicked open. A softbeep,beep,beepcame from inside. He swung open the door and went in first.

“Lemme clear the place quickly—just in case.”

After setting down their bags, he waited for Savannah to enter and close the door. Then he took two steps to the keypad on the wall and disabled the security system. Keeping his gun in front of him, he flicked on the lights and swept the main floor then made his way upstairs to the loft bedroom and second bathroom.

Coming down the stairs, he tucked away his 9mm. “All clear.”

Savannah slid off her running shoes and looked at her bag as if the effort to pick it up was too great. Concern washed over him. “Let’s have a look at that cut.”

She made a face. “No, it’s okay.”

He caught her wrist. “It’s almost eleven o’clock. We both need rest. Either you let me take care of it now or I’ll need to wake you up in a few hours. Can’t let infection set in.”

She heaved a sigh and tethered her fiery gaze to his face. “Make it quick.”

He ignored the snippy comment. It was clear what she thought: he was workin’ for her.

Like hell.

He wouldn’t fight her on it now, but she’d realize really fucking quickly that he wasn’t going to put up with her bullshit. Leading her to the Aztec-patterned sofa in the living room that nearly matched the rug, he gestured at her to take a seat. “I’ll get my kit.”

Her gaze flicked to the mounted deer heads and antlers decorating the space. Her dirty feet looked small against the brown patterned area rug.

Toth went to the kitchen, where he kept another first aid kit, this one more equipped than his portable one. He stopped at the liquor cabinet and snagged a bottle of rum and two short glasses then returned to the living room.

“You hunt?” she asked.

He lifted a shoulder. “Don’t have time.”

“Did you kill those?”

After setting everything on the table, he unscrewed the bottle and looked up at the glassy-eyed creatures staring down at him and then poured liquor in each glass. “Nope. Came with the place.”

Her fingertips rubbed her knee—the only sign of her nervousness.

“Drop ’em,” he said, tugging the excess material at her thigh.

She squinted at him with disdain. “How charming.” She stood and shimmied the pants down her legs.

Gone was the vulnerability he’d witnessed at the stream. The hard exterior was back up in true Savannah Carrington fashion.

“Not tryin’ to charm you.” His gaze skimmed her sleek thighs. He locked down his expression. Because if Savannah knew how to read a man, and he’d bet his left nut she did, he’d eat those fucking words. One green light from her and it would be game on.

She sat back on the sofa.

“Lie on your side so I can reach better.” He clicked on the nearby lamp.

This time she kept her comments to herself. She shifted back on the cushion then reclined, stretching her gorgeous legs toward him.

“There’s a drink,” he said, gesturing to the glass of rum. “Might take the edge off the pain.”

“I don’t drink.” The statement was firm.

“Okay. This’ll hurt, but suit yourself.”

“I’ve endured worse,” she mumbled dryly. Almost as soon as the words left her mouth, her eyes darted to his and widened.

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Interesting. Savannah wasn't one to show her hand or reveal personal details. The little slipup gave him a small glance around her shield. He didn't ask questions. The alarmed look on her face was like a sign flashing the words *Don't push*. Besides, he shouldn't give a damn.

Correction. He didn't give a damn.

He laid a hand on the outside of her thigh and peeled up the shirt covering her. The bandage had held, but a dark-red spot indicated the wound still bled.

Judging by the cut of her panties, he guessed she was wearing a thong. His dick twitched. Every male instinct wanted to roll her on her stomach and lower his mouth to the luscious curve of her ass cheek. His fingers sunk into her skin a little too firmly, but damn, it was the only way to keep himself in check.

Lifting the edge of the bandage, he watched Savannah's face. The only sign she was in pain was a slight intake of breath through her nose.

"Sorry," he mouthed.

"It's okay."

He examined the cut. Blood had oozed, dark and sticky, but not as angrily as he'd expected. "You'll still need a few stitches, but—"

"Can't you just use butterfly bandages?"

He grunted. “Not my favorite solution. My concern is that it’ll reopen and then we’ll have a mess with a half-healed wound.”

“It’s not like I’m going to run a marathon.”

“Did you expect to go off a mountain, hike through the woods, and get stabbed today?”

She narrowed her eyes. “Whatever. Just don’t take your time with it.”

He snorted. “I think you’ll want me to take my time.” Hell, she was right, but not for the reason she was thinking. The less time he looked at her half-naked body, the better.

“This will sting,” he cautioned. He popped the cap off the disinfectant and squirted the liquid on the gash.

“Ahhh. Ohmigod.” Savannah huffed in and out through her nose as he patted dry the area with a cloth.

“Hang in there.” He held up a tube of numbing cream so she could see it then unscrewed the cap. “It ain’t magic but should take away some of the bite.”

She nodded brusquely as if to hurry him along.

He squeezed some cream on his finger and covered the skin around the wound. “It’ll need a few minutes to take effect.” Busying his hands, he took out the items he’d need to suture the wound. Then he grabbed his glass and tossed back the shot of alcohol. The amber liquor slid over his tongue and burned the back of his throat before it warmed his belly. He wasn’t much of a drinker, but his head was throbbing like a motherfucker and his nerves were still blazing.

He picked up a needle and brought the point to the opening of the cut. Savannah didn't move. He flicked his gaze to her face. Her attention was on the cushion and there was a crease across her smooth forehead. Her chest was still.

"Breathe," he instructed.

She sucked in an audible breath and he plunged the needle through her skin.

Silence.

Not wasting time, he continued. After the third one, she whimpered.

"Easy. One more." He threaded through again and quickly finished up.

Savannah let out a shaky breath and he squeezed her thigh. "Good job. I've seen men cry like pussies over stitches."

"Wasn't so bad."

"Endured worse, huh?" He eyed her carefully, waiting for a change in expression. There was none. Savannah was stone-cold.

He positioned a bandage over his handiwork then packed up the kit. "You'll need to keep those dry for forty-eight hours."

She snorted. "Great. I can't shower? Pretty sure that guy's blood is still on me." Her color faded to a light gray, making him grimace.

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“I can put something waterproof overtop if you want to shower now.”

“Yes, please.”

He replaced her bandage with a waterproof one. “You can take the loft. There’s another bathroom up there.”

“Thanks.” She stood, and the shirt fell to cover her.

“Hold up.” He caught her elbow. “You were unconscious when I pulled you from the car. I want to check out your head.”

Her attention slid over his chest and down his arm to the hand that held her. Yet she didn’t pull away. A slight blush touched her cheeks—a reaction to his touch or to the invasion of being stitched?

“I’ve got a headache, but I’m okay otherwise.”

He moved his hands to rest on either side of her head and inspected the small patch of red stuck to the strands on her left side. He parted her hair and tsked. “You’ve got a goose egg but doesn’t look like it bled too much. I have some ibuprofen if you want.”

She nodded, and he pulled the bottle from the kit and shook two into her hand.

“I’ll get some water for these,” she said.

“Kitchen’s that way,” he said, stating the obvious. “I’ll take your bag up to the

room.”

She moved out of his space and padded toward the kitchen, her gait slow and calculated. He grabbed her bag from the front entrance and carried it up the stairs. When he reached the loft, he flicked on the light and deposited the bag on the chair in the corner. He turned as Savannah entered.

She took in the loft area, a tall glass of water in her hand. It wasn't much, but it was clean, and the bright-white duvet made the bed look welcoming. In the bathroom she'd find fresh towels. He booked cleanings whenever he left. One less thing to worry about.

“This is pretty tidy for a bachelor pad.” She lowered the glass to the bedside table then made her way toward the bathroom. Turning on the light, she peered inside.

He tipped up his lips. “Who said I'm a bachelor?” If he could inhale the comment as fast as it had come out, he would have. He was flirting. Playing. And it was stupid. Reckless.

Savannah froze. “I. Uh. Just assumed, I guess.”

“Joking.” Well, hell. Now he'd just made an ass of himself. “I'm single.”

She leaned her shoulder on the doorframe, and the surprise on her face was quickly replaced with a smug smirk. “Shocking.”

She sashayed forward and his cock stirred. Her slim, tanned legs approached with purpose. He'd drop to his knees right now to have her wrap them around his face. Rather than touch him, though, she just scooped up her bag from the chair next to him.

He cocked his head. “Where’s your man?”

She scoffed and rolled her eyes. “Let’s not have this discussion, m’kay? I’m going to shower and crash. Thanks for the stitches.”

She turned away and retraced her steps to the bathroom then shut the door. But she hadn’t been able to hide the wounded look in her eyes. Savannah was far from pleasant. As a matter of fact, she had a prickly stick up her sexy ass. But maybe there was more to her than her snarky exterior.

Toth dragged his hand over his face.

Not. My. Problem.

He’d need to make that his daily affirmation because Savannah was very quickly becoming his problem. In more ways than one.

Savannah’s hands shook as she peeled the white T-shirt over her head. Standing just outside the glassed-in shower, she turned on the water and the spray blasted out. She jumped and gasped at the force, a small shriek slipping through her lips.

A sharp knock hit the wooden door. “You all right?”

“Fine,” she called. God, she’d lost her nerve because of an overactive showerhead. Ridiculous. Okay, so maybe it had more to do with everything that had just happened.

As she waited for the water to warm up, she pulled her toiletries from her bag and set them on the edge of the tub then glanced in the mirror. Sure enough, she looked as if she’d been shot at, run off a mountain, and stabbed. Her hair was matted and speckled

with debris, her eyes bloodshot, her cheeks smeared with dirt and god knew what else. On closer inspection, she saw tiny flecks of blood dotting her face.

Not my blood.

She gagged and pressed her knuckles to her mouth. God, she couldn't get sick. She didn't want Toth's hovering ass coming in while she was butt naked. Sucking in one breath through her nose, then another, she stepped under the spray.

The warm water rushed over her skin, and as its heat chased away the chills and nausea, a shiver rippled over her flesh. She tilted back her head and let the water run through her hair and over her cheeks. Memories of the last few hours flashed behind her closed eyelids and she gripped the handle on the wall to stay upright. Her throat still burned from where her attacker had held her underwater. Her hip pulsed beneath the waterproof bandage, the rhythm falling into sync with the pounding of her head.

She'd almost died. Would have been stabbed to death if it weren't for Toth. A wild current of emotion ran through her. Three years ago, she would have welcomed that blade. She would have found peace in death, no matter how painful. No physical trauma could compare with what she carried day in, day out. But the fear she'd experienced today told her that maybe, just maybe, she was ready to start living again.

She squeezed her eyes against the rush of tears. If she started crying now, she'd never stop.

When she'd touched her hip by the stream and spotted her palm full of blood, she'd been transported back in time and everything had stood still. If it weren't for Toth's touch and unwavering stare, she would have lost herself in the past and willingly died on the forest floor.

So help her god, she'd never love another man as long as she lived.

Forcing all those hideous memories from her mind, she went to work cleaning herself. She started by scrubbing a handful of shampoo through her hair, but she needed to wash it twice to get all the sand, leaves, and tiny pieces of glass out of her strands. Conditioner removed the gritty texture from her hair. She rubbed soap on a washcloth until it was sudsy then ran the material over her skin until the disgusting sensation from her attacker's blood and touch trickled down the drain. Then she shut off the water, wrapped a towel around herself, and got out.

Steam clouded the small bathroom, and she reveled in the warmth. After drying off, she stepped into her slim-fit mauve pajama pants and pulled on a long-sleeved gray shirt. Feeling marginally human, she brushed her teeth and hair then exited the bathroom.

Toth was gone, thank god. The ibuprofen had kicked in and the slamming beat of her headache was dissipating. She peeled back the covers, crawled under the sheets, and dropped her head to the pillow.

She looked toward the railing of the loft. A light shining from below told her Toth was still awake. That should have made her uneasy, but instead, his nearness helped her relax. He might be annoying, but dude was good at his job. If it weren't for him, she wouldn't be alive right now.

As she fell asleep, one burning question roared through her mind. If he was single, who was N?

CHAPTER 9

Toth swirled the remainder of the rum in his glass and finished off the liquor. As he was dumping Savannah's untouched nightcap down the drain, his phone vibrated in

his pocket. Pulling out his device, he saw Rami's name on the screen.

"How's it going?" he asked, placing both glasses in the sink.

"Probably better than you. I just dealt with the police. Had to make up a story that the car was stolen from my driveway and the cameras were out."

"Shit."

"I'm sure it won't be long before someone spots the wreckage and reports it. I'll need to buy a new SUV tomorrow and get it properly suited."

Meaning bulletproofed. Their insurance would cover a rental car, but that'd be no good to them. They needed something heavy-duty for protection.

"How's Savannah?" Rami asked, his voice dipping low.

Toth opened the back door and stepped outside so he wouldn't wake her. A cool breeze rushed over his freshly showered skin, cooling off some of the fire that still lingered from seeing Savannah stretched out in her panties. "All right. She needed some stitches and ibuprofen, but she's fine otherwise."

Pushing the seductive blond from his mind, Toth paced the width of the back deck. The boards creaked under his weight. His gaze skimmed over the small pile of firewood stacked next to the hot tub. If he was smart, he'd start chopping in the coming months so he had a stockpile for the winter.

"Good," Rami grunted. "How many did you take care of?" he asked, his words carefully chosen despite the protected phone line.

"Four."

Rami whistled. “Well, I found out something interesting about this job.”

Shit. Whatever intel Rami had couldn't be good. “And that is?”

“Turns out there's a lot we don't know about this gang's beef with Sinners Cartel.”

Toth's breath stilled. “Is this something I want to know?”

“Probably not. But you need to.”

He exhaled. “Go on.”

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“Red Eyez isn’t who’s after Savannah.”

Huh? What the hell? Toth processed that information at the speed of a sloth. “Danny lied?”

“Looks like it. He’s hiding something.”

“If you’ve got anything else, just give it to me, dude. My headache is coming back.” Toth’s patience was wearing thin. If Danny had fucked them over or misled them, he’d go ape shit.

“Turns out the people who shot at Savannah were from Lionsgate Kinship. Heard of ’em?”

Holy shit. Cold sweat broke out on his brow. Lionsgate was the organization that his brothers had taken down for child trafficking—on more than one occasion. Since he didn’t have a relationship with his siblings, he didn’t know much else except that everyone in the organization should be dead and buried. His brother Cole had recently had a run-in with them when they kidnapped a detective’s young daughter. “Yeah, I’ve heard of ’em. But why do they want her?”

“Fuck if I know.”

“Does Lach know?”

Rami chortled. “Yeah. I asked around on the street about the shooting, hoping to find the guy who’d pulled the trigger. Turns out one of my contacts knew about the hit on

Savannah but said the guy who shot wasn't from Red Eyez."

Rami's street background gave their business the edge it had. Having raised himself and done whatever was necessary to eat and ensure there was a roof over his head, Rami had connections that had come in handy more than once.

"So you went to Lach?"

"Had to," Rami said, not missing a beat. "My first thought was that Danny had another threat he didn't know about or there was a miscommunication."

"Fucking peachy." Dread closed in around him. This was supposed to be a clean-cut job. Babysit for a week and keep the siren alive. Dammit. He'd known anything to do with Sinners Cartel wouldn't be simple. That was why he'd wanted to avoid the fucking job in the first place. "Why'd Danny lie to us?" The dread now sat heavily in his stomach. "Something's not right about this."

"No shit." Rami sighed. "You were right to not want to get involved with these guys."

Toth grimaced. "Doesn't matter now." He swung his gaze toward the weathered back door. Just as he'd suspected, his little problem was becoming a monumental headache.

Creak

Savannah winced as the bottom stair protested beneath her weight. She froze and looked at Toth's hulking form on the couch. She was still groggy from sleep and far from stealth mode. According to the alarm clock near her bed, she'd woken at 9:00

a.m.

She'd slept like a rock and hadn't heard Toth at all through the night, which was surprising since sound carried easily into the loft. She sucked on her bottom lip as she admired him. He slept with his arms crossed over his chest, head slightly turned to the side, one knee bent.

With only black briefs covering his assets, he was almost on full display. A soft rumble sounded from his nose, assuring her he was still sleeping. She needed to stop staring and get to the kitchen, but there was no way in hell she could keep her eyes off his delicious body. Tattoos covered his arms, hands, and chest. Even when he was asleep his biceps bulged, and beneath where his forearms rested was a wall of abs. Trailing her gaze to his face, she took in the beard that was longer than it'd been yesterday. She'd never found beards attractive, but geez it looked good on him. Her fingers ached to stroke the short bristles, and she curled her fingernails into her palms to stop herself.

Coffee, girl. You came down for coffee, not to assault the guy while he sleeps.

Toth's eyes snapped open, and she started.

He pulled his hand down his face and swung into a sitting position. All that glorious muscle moved with him gracefully, and her mouth went dry as his steel-gray gaze landed on her. "Did you just wake up?"

She cleared her throat. "Uh, yeah. Didn't mean to startle you."

His elbows rested comfortably on his knees. He didn't seem to care that he was conversing with her half naked. Although his eyes were a little bleary and it looked as if he'd dragged his fingers through his hair a million times, he appeared capable of running a marathon. He must have fixed the gash above his eyebrow last night

because there was a butterfly bandage on it now.

“You didn’t. Coffee?” He stood to his full height and appreciation washed over her. Somehow seeing Toth in something other than his business suit made him much, much less irritating.

Why had she been so annoyed by him in the first place?

His gaze traveled from her face and skimmed her body in a way that suggested he’d prefer to have her instead of coffee. Her cheeks flamed. Ah, yes. That’s why he annoyed her. Because one glance from him resurrected her libido. Which didn’t mean anything. Hell, it’d been three years since she’d had sex. Three years since she’d even thought of a man in that way. Of course at some point she’d find someone attractive.

But it shouldn’t be him.

“Yeah, coffee would be good.” She applauded the stability of her voice.

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He gave a curt nod then scooped up a pair of sweatpants from the armchair near the fireplace and stepped into them. He left the shirt on the chair and made his way to the kitchen. Part of her wanted to grab the blasted T-shirt and demand he wear it, but that'd only give him the power of knowing he turned her on.

Following him into the kitchen, she didn't take her gaze off the clean curve of his spine. So sexy. The tattoos on his shoulder blades bled into a couple of patches of marred skin—likely scars from whatever part of his past brought him to his current job. Curiosity made questions erupt on her tongue, but she halted them. Some things were better not knowing.

As he started fixing the coffee, she went to the window in the back door and gazed outside. "It's pretty here."

He glanced up as he poured water into the coffee maker, looking out the window above the sink. "That's why I bought the place."

She cocked her head. "For yourself? I assumed you had it so you could kidnap young women."

His mouth split into a grin and his gray eyes danced with mischief. The dark hair of his beard matched the shade of his eyelashes. "Nah, the problem's getting them to leave, not stay."

She laughed. "Oh, you've got jokes. That's good. We'll need humor to get us through this week of hell." She hadn't been able to stop the jab from rolling off her tongue. Damn it, had she sounded hurt? She should be over his comment about babysitting

her.

His expression softened. He took two mugs down from the shelf then turned to rest his back against the counter. He appeared to be weighing his words. His laser-hot stare was on her face. A small smile finally tipped up one corner of his mouth.

Unease made her shoulders pull forward. “What?”

“Did you figure out what I meant by that?”

She blew a breath through her lips. “It was silly. I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

“But you did,” he countered. “What did I mean?”

She turned away from the door and faced him, throwing a hand in the air carelessly. “That a week together would be painful because you dislike me as much as I dislike you.”

He ticked his head to the side. “No.”

She didn’t stop the jump of her eyebrows. “No? Well then—”

“I meant...” he said, drawing out the syllables. The coffee maker started to drip and hiss. He ran his tongue over the seam of his lips and steered away his attention as though he weren’t going to continue.

Her nerves spiraled and her brain worked at Mach speed, but she couldn’t for the life of her piece together what he might be about to say.

“I meant,” he continued, his voice stronger, “that you’re gorgeous and keeping my hands off you will be a pain in the ass.” His words dropped like a bomb.

She sucked in a breath, but it did nothing to regulate the racing of her heart.

He lifted an eyebrow. “Glad to hear you don’t feel the same, though.” He winked and busied himself with the sugar jar. “I don’t have much to eat. I’ll have to run into town for groceries, but I’ve got protein bars for now.”

Crap. She’d insulted him. Told him she disliked him. She’d been striving for humor and trying to take the spotlight off herself. But the moment had passed, and she wasn’t one to backtrack. Nonetheless, guilt gnawed inside her belly. She should probably be nicer to the guy. After all, he had saved her life numerous times yesterday.

Not like he did it for free, she reminded herself.

“Protein bars are fine.”

He took down a box from the cupboard and set it on the table. She pulled out a chair and sat then dug out a slim bar. As she opened the wrapper, the scents of chocolate and peanut butter hit her nose. She hadn’t eaten much since yesterday morning.

Toth carried their coffee cups to the table then set out the sugar. “Sorry, no cream.”

She made a face. But after the day she’d had yesterday, she wasn’t going to turn away caffeine. “Add that to the grocery list.”

“Duly noted.” He took a seat next to her. “Anything else?” While his posture still suggested confidence, something in his voice was off. Distant, maybe? Or perhaps she was imagining things. A guy as hot as Toth wouldn’t get worked up over one woman not falling over him. He surely had a lineup of women waiting at home.

She broke off a piece of the bar and nibbled on the chewy center. “Real food would

be nice.”

He snickered. “All right. What do you like to eat?”

She pursed her lips. “Fruit, veggies, things like that. Chocolate.”

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“Three food groups, got it.” He opened one of the protein bars and took a huge bite. “Need anything personal while I’m there? You’ve got shampoo and all that?”

Butterflies battled against the lining of her stomach. No one had ever looked out for her. Sure, her dad would kill anyone who hurt her, but she’d taken care of herself for as long as she could remember. “I’m good.”

He nodded then stirred a spoonful of sugar into his brew and sipped.

She did the same. The dark roast was bitter in her mouth despite the added sweetness. Not that she cared. The coffee warmed her core. She closed her hands around the mug and studied Toth. “Who’s N?” she blurted.

His gaze flicked up to her face then down to the table. He wiped away imaginary crumbs. “What do you mean?”

“From the phone you gave me last night. You said ‘N is someone else’ and told me to call Rami.”

He nodded slowly. “Yeah, I remember.”

A sickening sensation filled her gut, and she felt the acidity of the coffee eating away at her stomach lining. If he’d just been flirting with her when he had a girlfriend, she’d—

“Why so curious?” he asked.

She lifted a shoulder. “I should probably know more about my captor.”

He chuckled. “Honey, you know you’d come with me willingly on any other day of the week.”

And there it was. The charm was back. If she’d injured his pride with her earlier comment, he hadn’t been deterred long. “Doubtful,” she said, narrowing her gaze. “Especially if you have a girlfriend that you’re lying about.”

His head jerked back. “Hell, no. I’m single.” His finger toyed with the handle of the white ceramic mug. “N is Nash. My brother.” His tone was neutral but something hovered near the surface. Strain?

Interesting. “I didn’t know you had a brother.”

His mouth twisted. “He didn’t either.”

She widened her eyes. Questions spun through her mind like a tumbleweed. “He didn’t know about you?”

He brought the mug to his lips and took a sip. “My turn,” he said firmly, setting down the mug. The finality to his tone only added intrigue, but the hard set of his jaw told her the conversation was done.

Biting off another piece of the protein bar, she shrugged. “Go.”

“What’s your dad’s beef with Lionsgate Kinship?”

Her belly flipped inside out and she had to force the thick, sticky bite down her throat. She coughed and took a swig of the almost-sour coffee, washing down the remnants. Her history with Lionsgate was as dead and buried as her ex-boyfriend.

How had Toth gotten wind of her past? The full weight of the anxiety she'd been carrying for three years—no, more, because if she was being honest with herself, nothing had been okay prior to what had happened three years ago—crushed her chest.

The air felt thick as Toth watched her, his damn gaze scrutinizing. If circumstances were different, she'd walk out the door.

“Well?”

Panic annihilated all rational thought. She couldn't discuss her relationship with Lionsgate without unloading baggage. And nothing short of therapy could release the trauma she carried. As memories stirred, her anxiety turned to downright terror.

Terror at the thought of talking about it. Of remembering it. Of feeling it again.

No. She couldn't. She wouldn't go there. It'd taken her years to get where she was. To be able to function and live a semi-normal life.

Whatever reasons Toth had for unearthing her past he could take right back to hell, where he'd come from. Anger bubbled inside her. In truth, she shouldn't be upset with him. But anger was the only emotion she could feel without breaking down.

Shoving back her chair, she got to her feet. “I don't know why you're sniffing around me, Mr. Holmes. But stay out of my life.” She stormed from the room and ran up the stairs to the loft just as a swell of tears clouded her vision.

CHAPTER 10

Jesus. He'd expected her to be tight-lipped. Maybe even a little suspicious. But he sure as shit hadn't expected her to break right in front of him.

Her face had fallen as her green eyes got huge. For a second, he'd thought she was going to pass out. Her shell-shocked response made him ache to know what she was hiding. What he did know was that her anger was a ruse. He could see that. Her pink cheeks and rapidly blinking eyes had screamed that she was hurting.

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Fisting his hand on the table, he fought the urge to follow her and force her to tell him who the fuck had harmed her. But he couldn't do that. She'd just shut him out more.

He'd bet the house he sat in that whatever had made Savannah react like that had everything to do with why Lionsgate—or Red Eyez, if Rami was wrong—had pushed them over a cliff. And he'd get to the bottom of it. But not now. He'd give her some space, collect his thoughts, and see if Rami could find out more details. Then he'd get answers from Savannah.

After taking their dishes to the sink, he made his way to the main bathroom and turned on the shower. Fifteen minutes later, his beard was trimmed, his teeth brushed, his hair slicked back. He got dressed then snagged his keys from the counter and positioned the 9mm comfortably at his back. He walked to the bottom of the stairs and listened for a few seconds. No sounds came from the loft.

“Hey,” he called. “I’m heading into town. I left a phone on the kitchen counter. My number’s the only one in there. Call me if you need anything.”

Seconds passed.

“I should be back in an hour.”

Again, silence met him. He sighed and scrubbed his jaw in frustration. He'd just gotten her to a point of not loathing him and he'd fucked it up. Not that it was his fault. Christ. He'd never been good with this shit, kissing and making up or whatever the hell this was.

Biting back any further unsolicited comments, he made his way outside and locked the front door behind him. He inhaled deep, but the crisp morning breeze didn't do a damn thing to settle his nerves.

Savannah would be the fucking death of him.

Savannah sat on the wooden planks, her feet hanging off the low deck to dangle above the grass. The fresh air had helped her control the emotions Toth's question had stirred up. At least now she could face him and keep her composure. But god. It was getting harder and harder to keep up a wall around herself.

He had the most examining stare. Not in a creepy way. More in a I-can-read-you-like-a-book way that was both invasive and... caring? Except, no. He didn't care about her. He didn't even know her. If he did, he'd run for the hills. He might think he had a handle on who Savannah Carrington was, but if he really knew how much baggage she carried, he wouldn't flirt.

She heard a car rolling down the gravel driveway, and the atmosphere surrounding the cabin was so peaceful that the quiet hum of the garage door startled away the birds. A few minutes later, the back door squeaked.

She glanced over her shoulder as Toth came out onto the porch. "Getting some sun?"

She squinted at him. "We going to do the awkward small-talk thing?"

He snorted. After lowering a plastic bag to one of the two deck chairs flanking a small table, he put his hands in his pockets. "Guess not." He took a few steps and rested his hand on the railing near her head. He kept his gaze on the trees surrounding the property. His thumb rubbed his fingertips, telling her he probably had something

else to say. Tension pulsed in the air between them.

“I got steaks for tonight. Hope you like meat.”

She nodded, and her stomach growled at the idea of a big meal. She’d eat just about anything right now. “What’s in the bag?”

He smiled, revealing even, white teeth. He’d cleaned up. Although he’d looked bedroom-hot in his briefs, now he was even more droolworthy. He’d landscaped his beard, and the neat trim made his jawline more prominent and masculine. His hair waved back from his face. Even the butterfly bandage didn’t diminish his hunky exterior. He wore jeans, a black T-shirt, and a brown flannel jacket.

A sexy killer lumberjack.

She refocused on his smile and it only widened, damn him. Desire pooled between her legs.

“It could be a peace offering,” he finally said.

She screwed her lips to the side. “I’m listening.” Most people didn’t get to see her good side. Hell, she probably didn’t even have a good side. But he was difficult to stay mad at. Besides, she wasn’t really mad at him. It wasn’t his fault he’d crossed a line he hadn’t known existed.

“I might have burgers and fries,” he continued. “If you’re... open to talking.”

Her smile fell and alarm rushed in from all sides. She pulled up her feet and stood, but Toth blocked her escape with a hand on her forearm. “Easy now.”

She shook off his hold and crossed her arms. “I’m not a horse.”

He grinned, sending an exasperated eye-roll to the woods. Then he looked back at her. He was so much taller than she was, and his frame was easily twice the width of hers. The heat between her thighs intensified, causing a deep ache in her womb.

“No, you’re not,” he said. “But I’d like to know what I did to upset you.”

Just like that, her resolve melted like butter on warm toast. She kept her gaze on the weathered floorboards beneath their feet. “It’s nothing you did, per se. It’s just—”

“Something you don’t want to talk about?”

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She nodded and pulled her arms tighter around her waist.

His hand came to rest on her bicep, this time tentatively, as if he expected her to shrug him off again. His palm was warm, gentle. It was everything she'd missed and never had all rolled into one.

Cautiously, she lifted her gaze. His bore down into hers. Gone was the coolness he'd exhibited in their previous brief encounters. Gone was any sign of flirtation, too. He was just... present.

“There're some answers I need that will help me keep you safe. I promise I won't push you to share anything you don't want to, if you can at least try to help me understand things.”

She ran her tongue over the backs of her teeth. “What's in it for me?”

“Besides a burger? You can ask me anything you want.”

Her eyebrows inched up and she lifted a shoulder. “What makes you think I want to know anything about you?” The playful note in her voice was a betrayal. What was wrong with her?

“Ha. Well for starters, you were a little bent out of shape about who N was.”

She balanced her hands on her hips. “Fine. But when I say no more questions, I mean it.”

He pulled his fingers away from her arm and raised his palm. Her skin cooled, and she craved his warm touch. Dangerous.

“Promise,” he said flatly. Then he retrieved the white plastic bag and nodded at the table.

The smell of grease and salt called to her almost as much as Toth’s tempting smile. She took one of the chairs and he sat in the other.

He pulled out a carton and passed it to her. “Last time I was here the food was good. I didn’t know what you liked so I got all the fixings.”

Savannah cracked open the container and lifted out a burger on a brioche bun. She salivated, and her stomach rumbled. She bit into the soft bread and the flavors of pickles, ketchup, and cheese filled her mouth. She rolled her eyes and groaned. “Oh my god,” she said, between bites. “So good.”

He chuckled. “Better than a protein bar?”

“Blows that garbage out of the water.”

His eyes sparkled with amusement. “Good. We’ve got lots of food now. Should be set for the remainder of our stay.”

She knew he was referring to the time left on his contract, but intimacy seemed to line the statement. Which was ridiculous. There was nothing intimate about hiding out while her father killed off a gang. But part of her, some foreign part that’d been buried for so long, clung to this sorry excuse for companionship.

All right. The signs all pointed to one thing: she needed to get laid.

And Toth was right here, for the taking.

No.God, she needed help. Messing around with Toth would only complicate things. Whenever he was close, something stirred inside her, making her loins clench and her skin heat. But it wasn't just sexual attraction. She wanted him to look at her, to touch her. His holding and comforting her after he'd pulled her from the stream had satisfied a need that she'd been suppressing for a long time. But now. Now she wanted more, dammit.

She had an itch that needed scratching, but if she was smart, she'd stay the hell away from the man who made her heart hammer. If their relationship was under any other circumstances, Toth would totally be her kinda guy. But just the fact that he worked for her father gave her an icky feeling as sordid memories cascaded over her from her last boyfriend.

When this was all said and done, she'd put herself out there. Not that she wanted a boyfriend, necessarily, but she also no longer craved solitude and loneliness.

Weird. She was too young for a midlife crisis.

She picked up a French fry and popped it in her mouth. Salt tingled her tastebuds and she fought off another groan. "All right, you've wooed me." She kept her tone dry. "What do you want to know?"

He took a bite of his burger then stuffed a few fries in his mouth and rubbed his fingers clean. "Tell me whatever you're comfortable with regarding Lionsgate," he said, covering his full mouth.

She mulled over his words. The food helped distract her from getting sucked into the past.

“Take your time,” he added.

She took a few more bites then wiped her mouth with a napkin. “My dad used to do business with Lionsgate. He sold them drugs.” She swallowed the piece of bun that clung to her tongue. If she just stuck with the facts, she could hold herself together long enough to change the subject.

Toth raised an eyebrow and went for another bite. Anxiety pulled at her nerve endings. Hell. This conversation was starting to ruin her meal.

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“So why would Lionsgate put a hit on you?”

She jerked her head back and then snorted. “They didn’t.”

“You sure about that? Because Rami found out that it wasn’t Red Eyez who’s after you—it’s Lionsgate.”

“Uh-uh.” She shook her head. “That’s impossible.”

He tilted his head. “Why do you say that?”

She closed her eyes for a beat. She’d come this far in the conversation. If he was going down the wrong path, she had to set him straight. “Because the leader my dad dealt with is... dead. My father killed him three years ago.”

Toth’s face remained passive. “If your father killed one of their leaders, maybe that’s why they’re after you.”

Appetite gone, she placed her food on the small table wedged between their chairs. “That’s all I want to discuss right now. But rest assured, there’s no one alive within Lionsgate who wants anything to do with me or my father.” She straightened in her seat and locked her gaze on his. “My turn.”

Toth polished off his lunch. The heavy meal solidified in his stomach, and he rubbed a napkin over his palms to keep his mouth from going off. She’d said she was done,

and he'd respect that if it killed him—for now.

He'd share the little information she'd provided with Rami. It was doubtful they'd find any more breadcrumbs on their own, but maybe if Savannah started to trust him, she'd divulge more. He'd get her a burger every day if it meant she'd talk to him. Confide in him.

Don't go there, dude.

"I'm all yours," he said smoothly.

She chewed her bottom lip and appeared deep in thought, seemingly unfazed by his comment. He'd have to rein in his flirting. She clearly didn't care.

"You said your brother didn't know about you. What did you mean by that?"

He blew out a breath. "Goin' right for the gold, huh?"

She tucked in the corner of her mouth but not quickly enough to hide the smile.

"My parents abandoned him and my other three brothers before I was born." He stated the words as the simple fact they were, but like a current, memories of his childhood threatened to sweep him away. For so long he'd wanted to meet them. To have siblings and family who cared. But his efforts at a reunion had been wasted. He'd never have that. A small ache formed in his chest.

"Wait." Savannah bounced her knees. "You have four brothers?"

"Yeah."

"That you didn't know about?" Incredulity raised her voice several octaves.

“I knew about them. They didn’t know about me.”

She waved a hand in the air. “Whoa, whoa, whoa. I don’t get it. Your parents abandoned four kids and kept you? They told you about them? Admitted what they’d done?”

The pain in his chest expanded, stealing his voice. “I heard them arguing and things like that.” He pushed a memory of his mother crying out for his brothers from his mind. He worked his jaw. “My mom admitted it when I confronted her. I hired a PI a couple years ago, when I left the Marines.”

She whistled. “That’s talk-show-worthy.” Her eyebrows screwed together. “So when did you meet them?”

“I’ve only met two. Nash and Cole. Nash is the youngest of the four of them. Cole’s the oldest and has a twin.”

“Do you have a big age gap? I mean, did she have them all really young and then was more mature when she had you?”

He gave one firm shake of his head. “Not really. I’m twenty-nine, so Nash is about six years older than me. She must’ve got pregnant right after they gave them up.”

Savannah’s eyes clouded. “You’re not close with your brothers now?”

Again, he shook his head.

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Her face softened, and some of the surprise and amusement fled from it. “I’m sorry. That must be hard. How come you didn’t meet the other two?”

He huffed a breath through his nose and looked out at the scenery surrounding them. “I’ve seen Nash and Cole only once. Cole threw me out—literally—and told me not to come back.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “After that, I never bothered to get in touch with Dare and Dallas.”

“Oh my god.” Her mouth hung open. “That sonofabitch. How could he possibly have anything against you?”

“Honey, he’s far from a saint.” His tongue burned with the urge to tell her about his family’s involvement with the takedown of Lionsgate, but the information felt foreign. It wasn’t his story to tell. And really, he didn’t have anything to do with his brothers. What right did he have to share their accomplishments? None. But whatever Savannah asked about, he’d divulge, because for some fucked-up reason, he wanted transparency with her.

Even if it was one-sided.

She reached out and rested her hand on his wrist. “Their loss. You’d be a cool little brother.”

“You think I’m cool?” He bobbed his eyebrows.

She pulled her hand away and laughed, but he caught her fingers. Her smile froze but didn’t vanish. “You’re all right,” she conceded. “The tattoos and gun carry a lot of the

weight, though.”

His laugh boomed out. “Oh, come on. I think carrying you through a forest has to count for something.”

She held out her thumb and forefinger and created a tiny space between them. “Little bit.” Her eyes sparkled, and then, as if a cloud had blocked out the sun, they darkened. “I’m going to see what snacks you got. Then we’ll do a final tally.”

She stood, and his chest tightened. Part of him wanted to grab her and pull her to his lap. The other wanted to take a cold shower. Neither would end the battle inside him.

CHAPTER 11

Savannah dug into the bags on the kitchen table. Although her back was to Toth, her skin vibrated as he entered the room.

She’d been careless—acted out of character. But god, she couldn’t fight the pull inside her chest whenever he smiled at her. Or got within arm’s reach. So messed up. If they weren’t basically living together for the next six days, she’d just avoid him and surely all the flirtation would stop and he’d move on. But being so close to him physically, spending countless hours with him a day...

She’d never had a man’s focus like this. Jace had always been busy with friends, had rarely spent time with her. Not that this had been a bad thing. She’d learned very quickly that Jace was as predictable as a tornado and if something set him off, he turned downright cruel.

She shook off the memories as if a spider had crawled on her skin. Sometimes she wondered how her life would have turned out if he hadn’t—

“Cold?” Toth approached. Even though he didn’t touch her, the electricity of his body synced with hers.

She shook her head. “I’m fine.”

He delved into one of the bags and pulled out three bars of dark chocolate. “This what you wanted?”

Snatching one of the bars, she moaned. “Mmm. Thank you.”

His mouth twitched, and she studied the curved line of his jaw and straight nose. His demeanor had changed, as if talking about his past had opened a wound. “Had I known chocolate was the key to your good side, I’d have bought you some a month ago.”

“Oh, come on. I wasn’t that bad.”

He chortled. “I thought you were going to murder me.”

She rolled her eyes. “That’s a little dramatic.”

“Why’d you always have an attitude, then?” He pulled out a bag of chips and popped it open. “Want some?” He turned the bag toward her.

“No, thanks.” Like a termite, his question dug into her mind. A wave of embarrassment filled her. “You probably thought I was a bitch.”

He grabbed a handful of chips. “Well, I wouldn’t go that far. But I took you for a man-eater.”

A brittle laugh broke out of her throat. “What’s that even mean?” If only he knew

how long it'd been since she'd had sex.

“That you chew men up and spit them out.” Amusement flashed in his eyes, and it seemed he wanted to know more. “To be honest, ya scared me a little, and I still think you'd be a dangerous one to get involved with.”

Her mouth went slack. “Wow, don't hold back.” Sarcasm hung from her words, but in truth, his honesty was a courtesy not many men in her world gave her. “I'm not a man-eater,” she said with a shrug, as she removed three packages of berries from a bag. “In fact, I veer away from your species as much as possible. If I didn't act tough in Sinners Cartel's world, I'd wind up dead. My father's colleagues think I'm a bitch, and it's safer that way.”

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“Why?” The word came out as a demand.

“The obvious. If I look like an easy target, it will be easier to screw Dad over—”

“No,” he said, setting his little pile of chips on the counter and placing his full, unwavering stare on her. “Why do you veer away from my species?”

Her breath stilled in her lungs, and she set down the berries. Words grew heavy on her tongue. For the first time in three years, she wanted, no, needed to tell someone.

“Sav, did someone hurt you?” There was a tremor in the loaded question. He didn’t touch her, but her body hummed in tune with the current of his energy field. The nickname should have made her pause, but it didn’t. It sounded right on his lips. Like it belonged there. “I—”

Ring,ring!

Toth froze then cursed and pulled his phone from his back pocket. “It’s Rami,” he said, apologetically.

“Go ahead.” She waved her hand and returned to the groceries.

“I’ll just be a sec.” He moved out of the kitchen.

She let out a pent-up breath. Saved by the bell. She’d been dangerously close to spilling her secrets, and that would only further bind her to Toth emotionally.

Other than her father and Lach, no one knew.

And she'd keep it that way.

"Yeah," Toth answered, not hiding his impatience. Savannah had almost opened up to him. Whatever shit had happened in her past was clinging to her still, possibly even trying to kill her, and for fuck's sake she'd been close to trusting him. He might not get that chance again, and that pissed him off. Not just because he wanted to find out what Danny was doing, but because of reasons he didn't want to examine. Plus, he suspected Savannah wasn't close to anyone outside of her family and maybe, just maybe, she needed someone like him on her side.

But he couldn't help her if she didn't let him in.

He moved through the living room and onto the front porch. He had nothing to hide from Savannah, but Rami could have information about Lionsgate, and he needed to tread carefully until they figured out more.

"Catch you at a bad time?" Humor danced in Rami's words. Which said a lot because the guy smiled about as often as a badger.

"Any time you call is a bad time," Toth retorted.

"Don't take out your blue balls on me."

"Did you call about something in particular?" Toth asked sharply. All he wanted was to get back inside and pretend Rami hadn't interrupted their conversation.

"Just to tell you I came up empty-handed on a lead for Lionsgate. I don't want to

push Lach. He got pretty defensive—”

“Who gives a shit? The job comes first, right? Lach’s friendship isn’t part of the equation.”

“I get that,” Rami said curtly. “Thing is, I don’t want to piss off Danny or make it seem like we’re being nosey. You said yourself these are dangerous people. And the more details we have, the more our asses are on the line.”

Toth sighed and stretched his neck from one side to the other. Inhaling the crisp mountain air, he forced his agitated nerves to settle. Rami was smart and one step ahead. All the time. It wasn’t like Toth not to trust his friend’s instincts, but Christ. This job was getting to him.

Savannah was getting to him.

He scrubbed his free hand over his face. “Yeah, you’re right.”

“Course I am. Did you talk to her?”

“A bit.” He swung his gaze over his shoulder. Part of him didn’t want to expand on what little he knew. Didn’t want to betray her trust. But at the end of the day, Rami was his partner—everything going on with Savannah affected them both.

“She told me Danny killed whoever he had beef with from Lionsgate three years ago.”

“Hmm.” Rami mused. “Who was that?”

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Toth paced along the grass in front of the cabin. “We didn’t get that far. She shut down the conversation.”

“Well that’s not very helpful.”

“I know. Look, I’ll see if I can get more out of her, but in the meantime, maybe you can ask around. I get the feeling this is something personal for her.” More like it was glaringly obvious. The haunted look in her eyes and the fact that she “veered away from his species” were major indicators that whoever was after her now had something to do with her past.

“Wanna share?” Rami pressed.

“Nope, that’s all I’ve got.” Regardless, that was all he would have been willing to say at this point. Even though Rami was the most dependable person in his circle, it wouldn’t be right to tell him anything more about Savannah without her permission. He just hoped like hell it didn’t come down to him having to betray her trust. They needed answers, and quickly.

“I was thinking,” Rami said hesitantly. “It’d be really good if we had some intel on Lionsgate. Someone who might have connections inside.”

Toth froze. “You mean Nash?” He knew very little about his four brothers, but Nash had once been an enforcer for Lionsgate. Nash hadn’t confirmed that information, but that was the word on the street—Rami had asked around as soon as Toth told him about his long-lost siblings.

“Yeah.” Rami’s cautious tone told Toth that his partner wouldn’t push him to reach out or blame him if he didn’t.

Temptation tugged at his heart. All he’d ever wanted was brothers. He’d given them the space they’d asked for, but Nash had seemed somewhat open to communication. Nash wouldn’t ghost him if Toth went to him for help. Well, probably not. His nerves jumped. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Wrapping up the call, Toth returned inside. All the food was on the kitchen island and Savannah was washing vegetables at the sink, her back to him. With the water running, she probably couldn’t hear him.

Light coming in through the window touched her golden strands, and he could see part of her profile. Small, turned-up nose, high cheekbones with a few scratches and bruises from yesterday’s accident. He let his gaze wander over her back. She wore a fitted long-sleeved white shirt and light-gray yoga pants that hugged her hips. Desire kicked inside his belly and his skin heated. He needed to keep his thoughts in check. Just walk a straight fucking line for six more days and he’d be in the clear.

Easier said than done. His palms burned to touch her, his mouth tingled with the need to kiss her neck. He wanted to fold his body around the defined sculpture of hers and breathe in her calming jasmine scent.

She glanced over her shoulder. “What did Rami want?”

After placing a handful of raspberries onto a piece of paper towel, she turned to face him. She’d tied back her hair, and the effect made his heart trip. Her bright green eyes stared at him expectantly, and although her body language was casual, something else sparked in her gaze.

He’d had way too many women not to recognize that she was attracted to him. And

damn if that didn't drive him wild. Her full lips were a deeper shade of pink than they'd been earlier, as if she'd been eating the fruit before he came in.

His cock tightened. Jesus. He was jealous of a berry.

A dent formed on her brow. "Something wrong?"

God, she was beautiful. "Nope. Still trying to figure out the connection to Lionsgate."

She shrugged. "I'm telling you, it's a dead end."

It took all his control not to drill her for answers. If she clammed up again, he'd lose all the progress he'd made getting her to open up. He picked up an apple and took a bite, then a couple more. The crisp, tart fruit squeezed his tastebuds but did nothing to distract his mind from her lips. "You could be right," he said, between bites. "But I don't want to overlook something. If your dad goes out and starts a war with Red Eyez and meanwhile the real enemy is someone else, we'll have bigger problems."

She folded her arms across her chest. "He knows what he's doing."

That's exactly what I'm afraid of. Toth bit back the comment. Savannah didn't need to know he was questioning Danny's motives. He lifted a shoulder. "Just being careful."

She nodded, and her gaze drifted over his chest then shot back up to his face. A pink tinge touched her cheeks and her throat moved on a swallow.

This was too much. He couldn't spend all week fighting the urge to touch her, wanting to kiss her, to see her naked body. He either had to give in to the pulsing need to have her or get his head on straight. There was no in-between.

Her teeth dragged over her bottom lip and his blood turned to flames.

“So,” she began. “Tell me about you and Rami. Was he in the Marines with you?”

Toth opened and closed his fist at his side and chomped another bite of the fruit. He pulled his feet from the spot on the floor, dumped the apple core into the trash can, then went to the fridge and pulled out a bottle of sparkling water. He needed something stronger to calm his nerves but didn’t dare add alcohol to the equation. “Yup. We’ve been friends ten years. He left a year after I did and we went into business together.”

“Does he have family here?”

A burst of jealousy struck him. He shook off the sensation. Stupid. He had nothing to be jealous about. Savannah wasn’t his and he shouldn’t give a flying fuck if she was interested in his friend. But for the love of god, he’d kill Rami before he let the guy touch her.

Whoa.

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A bolt of awareness lit the synapses in his brain. He didn't want to get involved with Savannah for many reasons, but the idea of her being with someone else—especially Rami—drove him wild.

He half grinned. “Why so curious about Rami?” All right. He was pathetic. If she was into someone else, he'd have to stand back. Maybe switch places with Rami, or—

“He's slightly terrifying,” she said solemnly. “I figure he has a dark story.” No sign of attachment rang in her words. Just curious indifference.

“Don't we all.” He cracked open the bottle and drank the bubbly liquid, wishing it'd do more for him than wet his throat. “Why's he terrifying?”

Her eyes rounded. “Besides the face tattoo, he's just—I don't know. Looks like he hates everyone and is a loose cannon.”

Toth let out a laugh. “Bingo.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “He's that bad?”

Toth set down the bottle. “He's not if you're on his good side. Rami is intense, and... scarred. But he's loyal and stands up for what he believes in. He's alone. His only family, a sister and a cousin maybe, are overseas. But dude cooks a mean Lebanese meal.”

Her mouth quirked. “Somehow I don't see either of you cooking.”

“You underestimate me.”

A coy smile played at her lips. “Wrong. I’ve got you perfectly pegged.”

Interest flared in his gut. “Go on.”

She feigned an expression of outrage. “No way. I’ll keep that to myself, thank you. Besides, you think you have me pegged too, so unless you want to open that door...”

He snorted. No, he absolutely didn’t. If he started talking about what he thought of Savannah, he’d have her naked on the kitchen floor.

He had it bad.

“We’d better not.”

Her face turned somber. “Wise decision.” She swept her gaze around the kitchen as an awkward silence fell around the room. She shoved her hands in the back pockets of her yoga pants, the action thrusting her chest forward. A deep rumble formed in his throat at the sight of the outline of her nipples.

“I should probably call my dad. I’m sure he’d like to hear from me.”

Now that was a surefire way to shoot down a guy’s erection. “Sure.” He dug out his encrypted phone and passed it to her. “Just be careful what you say. My line’s secure but we know his is questionable.”

Her fingers brushed his as she accepted the device. “Thanks.”

“Don’t say anything about Lionsgate,” he said.

Her gaze turned as sharp as glass. “Why?”

Shrugging, he pushed his hands into his front pockets. “I don’t want your dad to think we’re doubting him. Besides, we need to be careful what we say on the phone.”

“Okay,” she said, drawing out the word. “I’ll be outside.” She flashed him a smile and made her way across the kitchen then opened the back door. Pausing with one foot outside, she peeked around the door. “Oh, I meant to ask. Does your hot tub work?”

Lust made his dick hard again. “Yeah,” he said, before his brain could stop his tongue.

She made a face. “Shoot, I forgot about the stitches. Tomorrow, maybe.” She slipped outside, and he set the bottle on the counter and ran his knuckles over his jaw.

Now he had to break the fucking hot tub.

He was fighting a losing battle.

CHAPTER 12

Before calling herdad, Savannah phoned Lach. Men’s voices in the background told her he wasn’t alone, so she kept it quick and told him she was fine and she’d talk to him soon.

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Then she dialed her dad's number and lowered herself into one of the deck chairs. The mountain air swirled around her, and although it wasn't cold, a chill touched the back of her neck as the line rang in her ear. Her nerves hiccupped, and the sensation had nothing to do with the wind or her father and everything to do with the G.I. Joe man inside.

"Hello?" her dad said gruffly.

"Hi, Dad," she said, her tone a little terse. She was still annoyed he'd sent her off, but after being nearly killed twice, she couldn't blame him. More or less she just hated the situations he always managed to put her in. Not to mention he'd tried to make her leave with Mark, as if she were just another one of his products and not his daughter.

Anger simmered at the back of her throat.

"Savannah," he said brightly. Some of her frustration ebbed away. "I'm glad you called. I know you're upset with me."

"You mean for trying to get Mark to drag me out of your office?" she said dryly. "Why would that upset me?"

"Honey. I didn't want to do that, believe me. But you wouldn't go with Toth, and, well, you're safer with him." There was an edge to the statement that piqued her awareness.

"What do you mean?"

“He was in the Marines, for starters. Secondly, I can’t trust anyone inside Sinners Cartel right now. He’s an outsider, and that’s what we need.”

“So then why’d you almost send me with Mark?”

“Because I knew you’d go with Toth over him. I didn’t expect Toth to break his arm. That was unfortunate.” His words held no hint of regret.

Savannah pushed away the irritation buzzing inside her. He’d manipulated her and Toth, but that was just who her father was. He wouldn’t even see it that way if she pointed it out. He believed he acted for everyone’s own good and usually had little to no remorse for how his choices affected people, including her.

She sighed. “Well, I just wanted you to know I’m okay. We’re somewhere safe. I’m eager to come home Wednesday.”

Silence stretched. “Sweetheart, I don’t know if I’ll have everything taken care of by then. I promise I’ll do my best.”

Fury flashed in her vision. “I have to go.” She hung up and set the phone down next to her.

He’d never stop controlling her. For once, she wanted to be in charge of her own life. While she had her own apartment and business, none of that mattered when her father could interrupt her freedom at any given time. And working for him was a must. He wouldn’t allow her to quit, and if she tried, he’d probably force her to live under his roof, where he could keep her under his thumb.

She wrapped her arms around her midsection. She’d have to sell her apartment and run away. But even if she did all that, he’d find her... and figure out a way to keep her under his control. While attending college, she’d lived with friends off campus and

later learned that her father had bought the house they were renting and paid her friends' rent. They'd thought him some kind of hero, but she knew the truth—he was as ruthless as they came, and he'd stop at nothing to ensure he always sat in the driver's seat. She wouldn't be surprised if he'd set up Jace to date her.

Oh my god.

She pressed the tips of her fingers over her eyes. Of course he had. Had she really thought anything was spontaneous in her world? Even her meeting Toth washisdoing. Everything was by Danny Carrington's design.

Nausea rushed from her stomach to her throat. She forced down the tsunami of tears that wanted to pull her into an abyss.

She was stuck.

Toth propped his feet on the coffee table. He stared at the fire. Alone. Savannah had gone to bed early. After speaking with her dad, she'd been withdrawn and sullen. They'd had steak for dinner, and for this meal, he'd kept the conversation mild.

But shit. He wanted her to confide in him more. She'd boarded herself up again and it bugged the hell out of him. His phone buzzed in his pocket and he pulled it out. A text from Rami.

Any luck?

Toth heaved a sigh. All afternoon, he'd played with the idea of calling Nash. Part of him urged him to just do it, but he'd already been rejected. He wasn't a lost puppy hoping people would take another chance on him. That said, Nash was their only in

with Lionsgate. Rami's request was valid. Surely Nash would see it as that, too.

Opening Nash's contact, he hit call. The line rang in his ear and he cleared his throat.

"Yeah?" Nash asked, his voice guarded.

"Hey. It's Toth." He leaned forward as angst sizzled through his muscles. Unable to sit, he got to his feet. The warmth from the fireplace heated his bare chest as he hovered near the flames.

"Dude. Why'd you block your number?"

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“I didn’t. I’m calling from an encrypted phone. Is this line secure?”

A beat passed. “No, this is my personal cell. Text me your number and I’ll call you back.” Nash hung up.

Toth sent him the number to his encrypted phone and a few minutes later it rang. He swiped to answer as he made his way to the kitchen.

“We’re good,” Nash said abruptly. “What’s up?”

“Do you know anyone inside Lionsgate Kinship?”

Silence stretched. “How do you know about that?”

Working his jaw, Toth weighed his words. He was the outsider. Not trustworthy as far as his siblings were concerned. If he wanted Nash’s trust, he had to put his own ass on the line first. Discussing any job was unethical. Disclosing a job while it was ongoing, let alone one of this caliber, was even worse. He’d keep as many details to himself as possible to protect Savannah.

“Just the word on the street,” he said, needing to cut to the chase. “I’m on a job right now. Watching over someone for the next six days or so. We were told a gang was after her, but some new details have come to light and it seems someone inside Lionsgate is trying to kill her.”

Nash scoffed. “That’s interesting. Lionsgate’s dead. I mean, I’m sure you read about the bombing in the news.”

“That was Cole?” That information had also been in the news, and Cole was presumed dead. He’d faked his own demise.

“Yeah.” His voice was terse. “This is the first I’ve heard that Lionsgate’s up and running. I can ask some old friends, but I can’t imagine they’d be operating here. In another state, sure. But Cole took out a lot of bigwigs. They were already crippled from previous arrests.”

“Meaning when you got Conrad on the hook for child trafficking?” Toth asked.

“That’s right. Lexi—my wife—and I did.” Nash made a clicking sound with his tongue. “Look, I want to help. I’m gonna need some more information.”

Toth tunneled his hand through his hair. He didn’t have much choice. The odds of Rami being wrong were slim. The guy was nothing if not thorough, and he wouldn’t risk the job unless he was damn sure there was something amiss. “Someone’s trying to kill Danny Carrington’s daughter—”

Nash cursed. “The Sinners Cartel leader?”

“That’s the one.” And damn if he didn’t growl the words.

“Hell,” Nash breathed. “That’s war.”

And he was in the middle of it. “No shit.” Keeping his voice low, he filled Nash in on the details.

Nash exhaled. “This sounds messy and dangerous. If Lexi weren’t due to have the baby any day now, I’d get more involved.”

A pang struck Toth’s chest. He’d have a niece or nephew. A kid who probably

wouldn't know him and who'd have three other uncles—Toth wouldn't be missed. "Congrats," he mumbled, then cleared the thickness from his throat. "I understand. I wouldn't want to endanger them."

"I've got one person I think I can trust, even if Lionsgate's up and going. If he doesn't know anything about this, no one will. Gimme a day or so."

"Thanks. I appreciate it."

Nash disconnected and Toth pocketed his phone.

Gratitude relaxed his muscles. Nash didn't have to help. He could have told Toth to fuck off but he hadn't. Hell, they might not establish a sibling bond but if they had each other's backs with shit like this, that was good enough.

He dragged his gaze to the fire crackling in the living room. He'd never been a romantic. Dates didn't really interest him unless they involved a few drinks before a roll in bed. Surely a therapist would have a whole lot to unpack regarding why he didn't like commitment, but right now... right now he wanted Savannah in front of the fire with him. And not just so he could explore every inch of her body, not just so he could kiss her, but dammit, so he could get to know her.

A lethal combination.

The deep rumble of Toth's voice stopped, but Savannah's aching loins craved to hear his voice some more. God, she'd never gotten off from a guy's voice—hell, he wasn't even talking to her—but she was close to getting the sheets wet.

Pathetic.

She was an adult. She wanted sex. And she was hiding in the loft out of fear he'd sense her wants. Massaging her collarbone, she listened to the fire snap and pop, almost calling her to its warmth.

He might not even touch you.

As he'd explained earlier, the hell he'd anticipated wasn't being around her but not being able to have her. Because of whatever code of ethics he lived by. That fact should have satisfied her to leave well enough alone, but instead, it excited her. Like maybe she could tempt him. Push him to his breaking point and give them both some really hot, once-in-a-life-time kind of sex.

Or he'd shut her down.

In her twenty-eight years, she'd slept with only one guy. He'd turned out to be a complete sociopath and had ruined her in more ways than one. She not only avoided men—she feared them. Because everyone in her world was owned by her father.

Except Toth was an outsider. She'd had to persuade him to take the job of babysitting her. A job whose details she'd had no idea of. God. It was even more humiliating that she'd flounced around his office making veiled threats on her father's behalf so Toth would watch over her.

Before she let that humiliation drag her into the ground, she steeled her spine and flipped the covers off. Three years of celibacy was enough. She didn't want to spend the rest of her life without intimacy, and with her luck, her vagina would probably dry up. Use it or lose it.

She could do this. She could have detached sex with a man she barely knew—especially since he checked all the boxes when it came to the things she did know. Hot.Check. Protective.Check. Tattooed and rippled with muscle. Alsocheck.

And the biggest check of all: he'd clearly taken this job under duress and didn't want anything to do with Sinners Cartel.

CHECK.

She stood and smoothed her hands over her black tank top. Without a bra, her breasts moved freely and her nipples were undoubtably visible beneath the almost-sheer cotton. A little ball of anxiety spun in her stomach. Ridiculous. She wanted him to strip her naked and she was worried he'd notice her nipples? Sheesh. She really was out of the game.

She made her way down the stairs, her bare feet padding on the pine. She reached the main floor as Toth strode into the living room from the kitchen holding his cell phone. His upper body was shirtless, leaving his tantalizing, tattooed muscle on display. He wore light-gray jogging pants and his feet were bare. A thin line of words was blazed into the flesh over his heart. Other designs covered his chest, stopping above his sculpted abs. Both his arms were decorated with artwork, all the way down to his knuckles. She dragged her gaze back up the length of his body and her mouth went dry.

Who'd have thought one look at Toth half naked would bring three years of pent-up sexual need surging to the surface? She moved her tongue over the roof of her mouth as she stood frozen on the spot.

She wanted him. His hands on her body and in her hair. His lips on her skin, his fingers caressing her everywhere.

He inhaled as he stared at her. His eyes were dark and hooded, his jaw beneath his beard tense and... stressed? No. Something else. He flicked his gaze over her face and his free hand twitched at his side as if fighting the urge to grab her.

Oh, yeah. Sex with Toth would be one-hundred-freaking-percent worth the risk.

He set his phone on the coffee table but didn't sit. He watched her with his sharp, hawklike gaze. "You okay?"

A few feet separated them and it was too many. Her body hummed with energy. Was charged with need and desire. She pushed her hair behind her ear, nervousness almost stealing her power.

His eyebrows lifted and he held her stare. Then concern furrowed his brow. "Savannah?"

Summoning all her courage, she took three steps forward and rose onto her tiptoes. A quizzical expression passed over his face and then was gone. Her core lit on fire with the feel of his torso against hers. He caught her in his arms and his gray eyes lit with hunger.

"Sav, what're you doing?" His low voice was filled with both need and warning.

He dipped his head to look at her. Even when she was on her toes, the top of her head only reached his chin. Her breath expanded her lungs and heat pulsed the lips between her legs.

"This," she breathed, her voice bold and brazen. She cupped the back of his neck and pulled his mouth down to hers.

CHAPTER 13

Electricity shot from Toth's tongue to his dick. Molten desire pervaded his senses. His body stiffened. He didn't dare move and break the spell.

Savannah's soft, plump lips moved over his. Her fingers dug into the skin at the nape of his neck, sending goosebumps over his flesh. Need oscillated through his body, the urge to get inside her so great it almost dissolved his composure. Almost shut down the screeching warning bell in his head.

Off-limits. That meant no kissing, no touching, definitely no fucking.

Christ, Christ, Christ.

He could keep his hands to himself as long as the ball was in his court. But now, she'd taken possession of the entire fucking game.

A deep craving spread through his body. He'd gotten hard when he spotted her coming into the living room. In her tight pants molded to her supple thighs, with her nipples pressing against the thin fabric of her black tank...fuck.

She ground her pelvis forward, putting pressure on his groin. He let out a guttural groan. She swirled her tongue around his. Her warm, slightly fruity flavor filled his mouth. Urgency squeezed his chest, threatening to stop his heart. She made that same motion with her hips and he cupped her waist, anchoring her in place.

"Honey," he growled, breaking the kiss but keeping his face scant millimeters from hers. He couldn't put more distance between them if his life depended on it. "If you don't stop that I won't be able to control myself." His voice sounded foreign to his own ears. Strained. Pleading.

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Out of character.

She dragged her hand from his neck to his cheek and smoothed her thumb over his jaw. “That’s what I want, Toth. I want you to lose control... with me.”

His mind spun faster than a slot machine, elevating his blood pressure. Earlier, he’d had an abundance of reasons why he shouldn’t bang Savannah, but now, for the life of him, he couldn’t come up with one. “You said you stay away from men.” It was weak. A straw to grasp at.

Her eyes bored into his. The orange glow from the fire beside them lit up her irises, making the green that much more dangerous. All-consuming. Her lips softened and she moved her hand again, flattening her palm between his pecs. “I’ve stayed away from men for a long time, Toth. Too long.”

Ah, hell. He was going to be one of those fucks for her. One born of desperation. He was the person who’d connect the dots between her previous and next roll in the sack. But why did he care? If he got to taste her, be inside her, did the terms matter?

Short answer was no.

Long answer was one he didn’t intend to evaluate.

He dropped his head back to stare at the ceiling because it was the only fucking thing that didn’t turn him on right now. The fire, the couch, the floor—all of it screamed “Just get her naked.”

Savannah's light, nervous laugh broke through the fog. "Is that a no?"

He dropped his chin and met her stare. "Fuck no, it's not a no. Do I look dumb?"

Her eyes widened but amusement flashed in them. "Okay," she drawled, moving her hips again. "Why were you looking at the ceiling then?"

"Because I—" He lifted his palm and swiped it over his face. It didn't clear the lust pushing against his breaking point. "Because I don't want to hurt you. Because I don't want to fuck up this job or have things be weird between us."

She squinted, her dark eyelashes barely concealing the gleam in her eyes. "I didn't take you for a gentleman."

He snorted. "I'm not."

She swallowed, and hurt flashed in her eyes as she flicked her gaze away. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come on to you." She cleared her throat and let her arms fall.

Regret replaced rationale. He wasn't a knight in shining armor. Wasn't the dude who would take her away from her scheming father. He was no hero. But he'd be damned if he caused her an ounce of pain or made her feel unwanted.

He swept his arm around her waist, stopping her retreat. She gasped, the soft intake of breath parting her perfect lips. He'd had the way out—could have let her walk away. Doing so, he'd have likely saved his business, his reputation, and his fucking neck.

She darted her gaze around his face. Waiting. Hope shone in her eyes, those beautiful green orbs burrowing into his soul and marking him. His gut twisted. There was no way in hell he could walk away from her now. He'd sealed his fate the moment he'd accepted the job. There was no more fighting it. And if it cost him his life, god help

him.

He brought his lips to hers and slipped his tongue between her teeth. She gasped then gave a small moan and melted against his chest. Once again, her taste intoxicated him. The fruity flavor of what had to be her toothpaste wafted to his nose. He dove his hand into her hair as he massaged his tongue over hers. Her head fell back trustingly into his palm as he reveled in the softness of her mouth.

Her hands went to his waist, exploring the bare flesh of his abdomen. Her cool, small fingers made him clench his muscles. Need pulsed through him, hot and demanding. He swept his hand under her shirt, over her ribcage, and cupped her breast.

“Ah,” she breathed against his mouth.

He brought his thumb to her nipple, and the little bud turned hard as he gently rolled the flesh. Her breath picked up and she trailed her hand over the outside of his pants. She gripped his cock, and his member throbbed in her grasp.

Heat filled his head as blood pumped through his dick. Jesus Christ, she'd barely touched him and he'd already lost his fortitude. If he didn't bridle the situation, he'd embarrass himself and cum in his damn pants. He snagged her wrist, stopping the twisting action she'd just begun.

Holding her hand still, he brought his mouth to the skin beneath her ear. “Not so fast, babe,” he said softly, as he kissed then licked her flesh. The jasmine scent of her hair floated around him.

She made a huffing sound and wriggled her arm, but he didn't let go. “Why?” she demanded, as she thrust her hips forward against his thigh.

He pulled away slightly to look down at her. A pink tint colored her cheeks, her eyes

smoldered with desire, and her nostrils flared with veiled annoyance.

He hitched his mouth up in a smirk. Sonofabitch, he'd never witnessed anything so fucking sexy, tempting, and amusing in his life. "Because this isn't going to be a one and done, got it? If we're doing this, we're doing it my way."

Her throat bobbed. "And that is?" A tremor shook her voice, but damn if it wasn't excitement.

"I want you, Savannah Carrington. All of you. All fucking night. Can you handle that?"

She blinked twice.

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“Tell me now,” he said, his tone slightly heavy. If she backed out, he’d rather it be now, but Jesus, he’d never walk away from this in one piece if she left him hanging.

Not breaking eye contact, she nodded. “Yes.”

“Yes what?”

Her eyebrows inched closer together with a bit of determination. “Yes, I can handle it.”

Satisfaction grew inside him. “Good.” He released her hand.

He brought his palm to the satiny skin of her belly then slipped his fingers inside her panties. Her warm wetness coated his fingers and he said a prayer as he pushed two inside her.

She withered.

Christ.

Savannah’s loins clenched as Toth sunk his digits inside her. His mouth returned to her neck, and his tongue flicked in a similar motion as his fingers inside her vaginal wall. A small cry caught in her throat.

She gripped his forearm, her fingers biting into his thick skin as pleasure ping-ponged

through her system. Oh god. It'd been so long since a man had given her an orgasm, so long since a guy had even touched her intimately. She'd agreed to be his for the night, but if it felt this good, she wouldn't last.

She didn't want it to end here, at his fingers. She wanted all of him deep inside her. She wanted to be one with him and have his body cover hers as she lay naked beneath him. But what he was doing felt way too good to tell him to stop.

She closed her eyes, savoring the solid strength of how his arms anchored her, supporting her weight and also driving her mad with desire. She brought her other hand to his jaw, rubbing the prickly bristles as his mouth moved from her neck to her cheek before finding her lips again.

He brought his thumb to her clit and her legs buckled. His soft laugh penetrated the veil of need surrounding her. "Are you okay?" he asked, moving his thumb away.

"Uh-huh," she wheezed, between kisses.

He returned his thumb to the same spot, and this time a jolt shot from her center and carried her higher. She pulled on his wrist, needing more of something, but lord, she couldn't verbalize what. He sensed her unspoken words and began moving his fingers in a steady rhythm and applying pressure to her nub at the same time.

Ecstasy turned her body to air. She gasped. Colors exploded behind her closed lids as she came, letting out a sharp moan. Wetness drenched her thighs and her insides vibrated with every thrust of his fingers. Her legs wobbled as the orgasm ebbed away. Part of her mourned its absence.

She needed more. How could she possibly need more already?

Slowly, he slid his hand out of her pants. Her cheeks blazed with heat. She didn't let

go of his forearm or his face for fear he'd slip away.

"Sav," he said softly. "Look at me."

She opened her eyes to find his gray irises studying her, cautious but also desperate.

"We're not done."

She gave one nod. "I know."

His eyes blazed. "Good." He brought his fingers to his lips and sucked off her wetness.

Her eyes rounded involuntarily. Holy hell. The action excited her all over again. She swiped her tongue over her bottom lip. He caught her hips in his palms and pushed her pants and underwear down her legs.

Without missing a beat, she kicked off the material then wrapped her arms around his shoulders. He lifted her with ease, drawing her legs around his waist and pulling her sex tight against him. Her tank top was the only thing separating their upper bodies. His mouth nuzzled her neck as he knelt on the carpet next to the fireplace. The wood crackled and sparks snapped against the metal grate.

She let her back rest against the rug and Toth loomed over her, his fists pressed into the woven tapestry near her shoulders. Carnal lust scorched the energetic waves between them. She took in his large, tattooed form. If it were anyone else overtop of her like this, she'd be a little scared.

But not now. Not with Toth.

His mouth touched her cheek then her jaw. She arched her back, bringing her groin

closer to his. His hand traveled between their bodies, once again finding her folds. “You’re still so wet,” he said. His breath hot on her skin.

All the moisture evaporated from her throat and she let out a small cry. “Toth, I want you.” The words broke in her throat.

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His fingers touched the bandage near her hip. “I don’t want to hurt your stitches.”

“I don’t care,” she breathed.

He let out a growl, stretched toward his bag, which lay near the hearth, and dug in a pocket. A second later the crinkling of a wrapper mingled with the fizzle of the fire.

He shoved down his pants and briefs, not even taking them all the way off. He tore the foil with his mouth and then brought the rubber between their bodies.

Her breath caught in her throat as she glanced down at the length of him. The firelight illuminated every contour of his frame. Her arousal made everything about him more pronounced, including his cock, which jutted out from his body. Hard and ready.

A tremor shook her insides. He was large, and it’d be a stretch for her to fit him. But anticipation made her even wetter. His chest covered hers again and her body responded. Her legs dropped open to welcome him.

He guided himself to her opening and his mouth came down on hers. She gripped his shoulders as he pushed into her. Her flesh stretched and she gasped as he filled her.

A deep groan rumbled from his throat. He rocked into her. “Sav, you feel so fucking good,” he said, against her lips.

She wrapped her arms around his neck. Desire built inside her. She licked her tongue into his mouth and the minty flavor of toothpaste combined with his heady scent brought her tastebuds to life. She moaned as his hands roamed beneath her shirt,

cupping her breast and capturing her nipple in his fingers again.

Another orgasm bloomed, making her insides throb with heat and wetness. “More,” she wheezed.

He slid in and out then went deeper, making the rest of his length touch her center. She cried out, the friction against her clitoris driving her wild. She lifted her hips with his next thrust, and the next.

A curse fell from his lips as his mouth broke away from hers and landed on her neck. His tongue touched her skin as he pulsed into her.

Pleasure tickled her nerve endings. Her inner walls clenched his shaft as he penetrated her in a steady rhythm. “Oh god, Toth. Yes!” she cried. His name lingered on her tongue like a prayer.

Her limbs trembled as she met Nirvana on his next thrust. A deep moan emerged from her chest with her release. Toth’s motion picked up speed, and a loud groan came from his lips. His limbs turned to solid weight as he heaved on top of her. He kept his face burrowed into her neck, his fingers gently toying with the hair at her temple and then grazing the top of her ear.

Satisfaction filled her. Her arms and legs hung loosely around his torso and shoulders. Relaxation vibrated along her flesh. She was so content and fulfilled that her heart fluttered.

Never in her life had anyone made her feel so... complete.

“Holy shit, Sav.” He kissed her again.

She chuckled.

“Are your stitches okay?” he asked.

“Feels fine.” Not that she’d be able to feel anything besides the bliss she coasted on.

Slowly, he pushed himself up. He leaned back on his knees as he discarded the condom into a tissue. She propped herself up on her elbows. In their haste to get busy, she hadn’t even taken off her shirt. The material was shoved up to her ribcage and damp with their sweat.

He reached over and swept a strand of hair behind her ear. “You okay?”

She fought a grin. “Better than okay.”

“Jesus, I didn’t even take my pants off.” He laughed and glanced at his joggers, still wrapped around his ankles. His gaze went to her torso, where her shirt was still askew. “And you—”

His face fell.

He caught her hip, holding her in place, his focus on the skin above her pubic bone.

Panic kicked the breath from her lungs. The blood drained from her face.

No.

He’d seen it.

She’d been careless. Why hadn’t she thought of the scar?

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His sharp intake of breath confirmed her fear. “You had a C-section?” His expression intent as if he were figuring out calculus.

She heated with shame but just as quickly, a chill followed, turning her blood to ice. Her chest constricted with pain so tight that she couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t move. Couldn’t do what every cell in her body told her to do:run.

Toth drilled her with his scrutinizing focus. Confusion rippled his brow, but more concerning was the pity and maybe even accusation lighting the gray tones of his eyes. “You have a kid?” he breathed.

The question undid her. Tears filled her eyes, and a sob squeezed out of her throat as she pushed herself to her feet, panic lighting her veins on fire.

CHAPTER 14

Toth scrambled to pull up his pants as he stood. He caught Savannah’s biceps as she tried to breeze past. Angst pressed against his windpipe. It didn’t take a genius to identify a C-section scar, but dammit he probably could have broached the question better.

Savannah jerked in his grip. “Let me go,” she cried. Her hair fluttered around her face. The glow of pleasure that had lit her cheeks was now gone. Sorrow contorted her features and tears collected on her eyelashes. A sob ripped from her chest. “Now, Toth. Let me go.”

Guilt festered in his gut. The fact that he’d upset her and brought so much pain to the

surface made him want to kick in his own teeth. He didn't let go. Couldn't. She'd run away, and he didn't want her to be alone.

Hell, he couldn't pin her down either. She pushed at his chest, her desperation to flee turning her devastation into rage. He wouldn't invade her personal space or make her feel threatened. She'd had enough of that in her life. But his heart was cracking in his chest.

The rational part of his brain told him to give her what she wanted, but the other part told him to comfort her. Helplessness stole the strength from his muscles, and he dropped to his knees in front of her, bringing his face level with her belly.

Surrendering to her.

Savannah stopped thrashing. Surprise froze her in place. Her arms remained rigid in his hold, but she stopped trying to run. Her lip quivered.

"Honey," he breathed. The pleading tone came from an aching cavern in his chest. Never in his life had he wanted to absorb someone's pain as badly as he did right now. "You don't have to tell me anything. I'm sorry." Sorry she was hurting. Sorry he'd asked. Sorry he'd pushed. It didn't matter why. He was just so fucking sorry.

Slowly, he let go. When she didn't run, he brought his arms around her waist, cradling her abdomen to his cheek. She brought one hand to the top of his head, the other to his cheek. He kissed her palm and held her.

With that, her body shook and her broken cries filled the room, carving another pathway of sympathy through him. If he moved, he might send her running again, but he couldn't just let her stand there and cry. Gently, he pulled her to his lap.

Her body folded against his. Her face pressed into the crook of his neck, and her legs

curled on top of his thighs. He circled his arms around her and kissed her hair.

The fire hissed as the flames died down, but he didn't care. Her gut-wrenching wails made his eyes burn with emotion. He held her as if she'd float away if he didn't. Minutes went by. Gradually, her crying turned to ragged breaths.

He stroked her temple gently and steadily. He could feel her heartbeat knocking against his chest. She sniffed and wiped her eyes. Questions burned his tongue, but he'd already done too much damage.

She sucked in a shaky breath. "I never named her." The statement came out small and fragile.

A daughter. She'd had a girl. He didn't speak. Just waited.

"I couldn't. It's like... naming her would have made it all too real." A beat passed. "I regret that."

He closed his eyes at the tiny confession. "You can name her now."

She scoffed. "What kind of mother doesn't name her dead child?"

He covered her cheek with his hand, tilting her head so she was looking at him. "One who's hurting too much. One who loves her baby."

Tears filled her eyes again, but the hysteria didn't return. God, he wanted to know so fucking much. Wanted to take away her pain. To kill whoever hadn't saved Savannah's daughter.

She lowered her gaze but didn't pull away. "Her third birthday would have been next week," she said, her voice distant.

He glided his thumb along her cheekbone, urging her to reveal more before he combusted.

“She was so tiny.” Her chin dipped. “I held her for as long as I could, but...” Tears leaked out of her eyes, and his breath stilled in his lungs.

There was a lot he didn’t know about Savannah. God, she’d endured so much. Never had it crossed his mind she’d gone through the grief of losing a child. “Did she come early?” The question blurted from his lips.

She nodded. “I was twenty-six weeks pregnant with her when—” Her voice broke, and she pressed her knuckles to her lips.

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He pulled her back against his chest and rocked her. He wouldn't push her. If that was as far as this story went, as much as she was willing to share, he'd let it go. But Jesus, he wanted to help her. Holding her might have to be enough.

She sucked in a shuddering breath.

"You don't have to say anything else if you don't want to," he said, close to her ear. He suspected she didn't confide easily, and the fact she'd trusted him with this much of her story made his heart expand.

She straightened out of his embrace but stayed on his lap. "I need to tell you. She deserves to have someone else know what happened."

Her words hit like a fist to the gut. Someone else. Who else knew? He'd bet it was someone she didn't trust or who didn't comfort her. Anger tapped against his temples but he forced it away. He wouldn't react until she'd told him everything.

Her eyes met his. Her tears had mostly dried but anguish still strained her green orbs. "My ex," she began, her voice a little breathless. "Jace. We were together five years. Looking back, I honestly don't know how I stayed with him that long. He was so... unpredictable. Anyway." She cleared her throat. "I met him when I was twenty. My dad had just hired me to help him acquire businesses, and he wanted to form an alliance with Lionsgate's drug division."

Blinding-white rage rimmed Toth's vision. What kind of vile motherfucker sent his only daughter into a drug ring? Danny Carrington, of course. The ruthless, cutthroat bastard.

I'll fucking kill him.

“Jace and I started dating, and I kind of felt I was stuck with him.” She shrugged. “I loved him, I think, but more than anything it made sense to be together. My dad liked him and it made business easier.”

Revulsion hit the back of Toth's throat. He forced back the comments that wouldn't make her feel better and intertwined their fingers. She glanced down at their joined hands and a smile touched her lips. She met his eyes, her gaze now charged with more confidence.

“I suspected for a while that Jace was using some of the product.” Her eyes grew cold. “I realize I'm not the most upstanding citizen, but after I found out I was pregnant I just couldn't stand the idea of bringing a baby into a household with drugs.” She swallowed, her eyes small. “Jace and I started to fight more than we ever had. I'm sure I became a nag, but his temper grew worse and worse. Probably due to the cocaine use.”

Toth breathed in and out through his nose. The effort it took to keep his demeanor passive made it almost hard to listen.

“Finally, he agreed to stop using and dealing. Things got better, or maybe he got better at hiding it. I was twenty-six weeks along and we'd just got done painting her nursery the night before.” Her voice caught, but she cleared it. “I was cleaning the bathroom and I wiped my hand along the surface of the counter”—she made the motion—“just to see if it was dusty. I felt a gritty, powdery texture. It just seemed weird to me, so I smelled it. It was cocaine.” Her eyes darkened. “To be clear, I've never touched the stuff. But being around it as much as I was, I knew what I was looking at.”

He nodded so she'd continue.

“I confronted him. God, I was so angry.” She shook her head, and fresh tears blurred her eyes. “That’s another thing that upsets me. One of the last things the baby felt was my anger. She would have heard me and her father fighting.”

Toth’s insides twisted violently. “Go on,” he said softly, needing her to finish more than he needed his next breath.

“Jace was already in a bad mood. We yelled at each other in the hallway upstairs. He tried to deny it, but... I told him I was leaving him. That I didn’t want him around the baby until he was clean. He grabbed me at the top of the stairs and... I’ve never seen him so mad.”

Anger made Toth’s vision waver, the need to find the cocksucker and kill him so great it nearly had him on his feet. His breath hissed through his teeth. “What’d he do?”

Her gaze flicked to his. “He had me by the shoulders and was shaking me. Calling me all kinds of names. Then he let go, pushing me.” Her voice grew tight. “In his defense, I don’t think he realized how close I was to the stairs. I stumbled backward. I saw him reach for me, but it was too late. I fell.”

She covered her mouth with her hand and a sob leaked out. “It felt like... like a nightmare. The fall just seemed to last forever. After that it was a blur. There was so much blood.” Tears flowed freely down her cheeks.

“Jace called an ambulance and they rushed me into surgery. But it was too late.” Her face tightened with grief, and the red tip of her nose matched the red around her eyes. “There was nothing they could do,” she whispered.

He pulled her to his chest. Her body shook in his arms, so damn small. Jesus. He wished he could go back in time and know her then, somehow save her from the

heartache. He pressed small kisses to her temple and held her. Time slipped by. It could have been ten minutes or it could have been an hour. Didn't matter.

She shifted in his embrace and wiped her eyes. "I guess you know everything now," she said, on a soft, awkward laugh. Her eyes studied his face as if searching for signs of judgment.

"Not everything," he said, combing her hair behind her ear.

She straightened but stayed rooted to his lap. "What do you want to know?"

He wasn't going to mince words. "I want the motherfucker who hurt you. Where is he?"

Toth's question hung in the air as a lead ball formed in Savannah's stomach. As much as she hated Jace for what he'd become and what he'd done, he'd still been someone she'd once cared about. She screwed her lips to the side and then moved them back. "He's dead. My dad killed Jace shortly after the accident."

She gave Toth a sympathetic smile and stretched out her legs so her feet hung off his lap and closer to the hearth. Only small flames licked around red embers—not enough to generate much heat, but Toth's body did more than keep her warm. "So you see, our history with Lionsgate died that day. They're not involved in this."

Part of her hated that her past had ruined the night. But she felt as if a set of barbells had been lifted from her chest. She never talked about what had happened that day with Jace. She'd told her dad when he visited her in the hospital, and her explanation had been brief. A couple of her closest friends knew as well, but she never talked about it. Kept everything to herself. Tried to bury it deep. But the grief had always

eaten her from the inside out.

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Now, having told Toth the full story, she felt she'd honored her baby girl and the new mother who'd never gotten to experience life with her child.

Toth scratched his beard. "We can't rule out Lionsgate completely. It's possible your dad has had other business with them since." His eyes turned sad, but instead of pity they held compassion. "I'm sorry that happened to you. You would have been a great mom."

She dipped her head and chortled. "You don't know that. A great mom wouldn't have been in that position while pregnant in the first place."

Toth's hand caught her chin, forcing her to meet his stare. "Don't." The word came out harshly. "Don't do that to yourself. The whole thing never should have happened. Jace should have protected you and her." His fingers dropped to graze her stomach, which had once been swollen with her sweet baby. "If I'd been there. If I'd known you then..."

Her heart fluttered in her chest as warmth spread through her. "What?" she asked, needing to hear more.

He threaded his fingers into her hair. "I'd have protected you." His voice was rough, pained. And dammit, she believed him.

She smiled. "I wish things could have been different. And as crazy as it sounds," she said, with a brittle laugh, "I didn't get the chance to be angry at him." She hung her head. "I didn't get my feelings off my chest before Jace was gone. And while I hate him for what he did, part of me had to grieve his death, too."

Toth rubbed his thumb over her knuckles. Warmth spread through her and she ached to have known him then. Maybe, just maybe, things could have been different.

He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry. I can imagine those are confusing emotions."

She nodded and wiped a tear. "Tell me about it. I just wanted to yell at him, you know? To let out all my anger and have him feel what I felt. I know he was hurting in his own way, and maybe having someone who'd lost the same person as I had... maybe it would have hurt a little less than being alone."

She should have shied away from expressing such deep vulnerability. But dammit, she couldn't. Toth was the first person to see past her tough exterior, the only person who'd even tried to look at her for more than face value. Talking to him had healed her battered soul more than time had since that fateful day.

He rested his palm on her bare leg. She still didn't have pants on, and the feel of his skin sent a thrill along her nerve endings.

"We should head to bed," he said softly.

She hooked up an eyebrow. "I thought we'd committed to the whole night," she said, a playful note in her voice.

He grunted. "We've got a lot of hours over these next few days, and I plan to have you screaming my name for several of 'em. For now, we both need some sleep."

Standing with her in his arms, he slowly lowered her to her feet.

She glanced down at her naked legs and blood rushed to her cheeks. "My pants..." She scanned the floor and scooped them up then stepped into the material.

Straightening, she smoothed the wild strands of her hair. “Sorry things got heavy.”

He caught her around the waist. “Don’t be sorry. I’m grateful you trusted me enough to share.”

She bowed her head then glanced up. “Guess I’ll go up.”

He nodded, letting his arm fall.

She turned but yearning made her swivel back to face him. God help her she couldn’t walk away from him. No way she could just climb into bed as if she hadn’t bared her heart and soul—and body—to him. She needed more. “Will you stay with me?” The question came out on a raspy breath.

The corners of his eyes rounded. Doubt pulled down the courage she’d mustered. Oh geez. If he said no, she’d kick herself. He already said he didn’t want to continue having sex and she’d just—

“Yeah.” He coughed, then his throat moved on a swallow. “‘Course I will.”

His eyes danced and her insides reacted, lurching beneath his gaze. Toth might not be as intimidating as she thought, but he was just as dangerous... for her heart.

CHAPTER 15

After she’d cleaned herself up, Savannah opened the bathroom door and stepped into the main area of the loft. She wore his t-shirt that reached mid-thigh and panties underneath. Toth was already on the bed, an arm bent behind his head, his broad chest tanned against the plush white duvet. Her insides still tingled from her orgasms, her skin branded by his.

Lifting the edge of the blankets, she scooted her bare legs onto the mattress. Toth opened his arm for her, and she pressed against his side. He said nothing, but his gaze stayed glued to her lower body until she pulled the duvet to her chest. She pillowed her cheek in her hand on his pec, and he reached over and clicked off the light.

Darkness shrouded the room and Savannah closed her eyes. Toth's chest rose and fell with his steady breath. Emotional fatigue made her eyes heavy, and her throat still hurt from crying. It'd been years since she cried about that day. Years since she mentally walked through those moments and doled them out.

The result was complete exhaustion. She let out a long sigh.

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Toth brushed his lips over her forehead. “Go to sleep,” he said softly.

With that, her body relaxed more. Her heart rate finally lowered to a normal pace and her nervous system matched the calm of his.

Sleep enclosed her like Toth’s embrace.

Toth squinted at the clock on the nightstand—4:58 a.m. Savannah’s soft, steady breath tickled his collarbone. Her face rested on his chest. Easing back a fraction, he took in her slumbering form.

Her eyelashes sat on her cheeks, her lips were full and pink, and her hair mussed, even though he guessed she hadn’t moved from his side. It’d been a long time since he held a woman all night. Hell, he couldn’t even remember when he’d last spent more than a couple of hours in bed with someone, let alone snuggled without the intention of having sex.

Hearing her story last night and holding her in his arms had undone him. A deep tenderness had surrounded his heart, damn near touching his soul and staying with him all night.

He wanted to hold her and never let her go. Erase every ounce of pain she still carried.

Realization hit him. Holy Christ. He’d never slept with a woman without sex being

involved. Sure, he and Savannah had done the dirty earlier, but the fact remained that he'd been in bed with her the entire night, both of them half fucking naked, and he hadn't gotten between her legs. His empty stomach roiled as more angst piled on top of him.

He'd have stayed with her even if he hadn't gotten in her pants right before. That was the bitch of it.

So? What's it mean, anyway? Absolutely nothing.

He swallowed and slipped from the bed, his bare feet touching the cool hardwood floors. The temperature must have dropped overnight. He made a mental note to turn up the heat a bit when he got downstairs.

Buzz,buzz

His phone vibrated on the nightstand. Snatching it, he silenced the noise without looking at the screen and tiptoed toward the stairs. Savannah needed sleep after the previous night. When he reached the main floor, he glanced at the number. Nash. If he was calling this early it must be important.

He swiped to answer. "Hello?" He kept his voice low as he made his way to the kitchen.

"Hey, it's me."

"Thanks for calling. I've got—"

"Sorry," Nash interjected. "Lexi's in labor. Contractions started last night and I couldn't do any more digging."

Toth pinched the bridge of his nose. Shit. “Uh, congrats. I hope things go well.”

Hell, he’d never talked to anyone in the middle of having a baby. Surely there was something better to say. His gut spun into a ball of nerves. He had no reason to feel concern for people he didn’t know, but so help him, he couldn’t seem to outgrow the little boy inside him who just wanted a brother. “You should probably be with her.”

“She’s with her doula right now. I stepped out of the room for a quick bite and to hydrate. Thought I’d let you know that I have to bail.”

“S’okay. I appreciate you telling me.” He cleared his throat. “And really, I’m happy for you.”

Nash chuckled. “Thanks.”

Although he’d met Nash only once, part of him felt connected enough to his long-lost sibling to sense some nervousness.

“Look, I feel bad about not being able to help. I called Cole—he’s going to be in touch. Hope that’s okay.”

Toth reared back his head as he scooped coffee grounds into the machine. “You sure that’s a good idea? Pretty sure he’d kill me himself if he could.”

“He could,” Nash said, without missing a beat. “That’s how I know he’s got a soft spot for ya. Otherwise, you’d be six feet under just for knowing he’s alive.” His upbeat tone didn’t match the meaning of his words.

“Um, thanks?”

Nash chuckled. “Don’t worry about it. Just don’t piss him off. He’ll help. It’s in his

nature. Besides, he won't want to make Lexi mad."

A smile pulled up Toth's lips. As dysfunctional as they all were, at least his brothers had each other. And their wives. Must be nice not to be so lonely. He glanced toward the stairs. For once, he couldn't say he was entirely alone.

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Soon after he hung up and just as his coffee finished brewing, his phone vibrated again. This time, the caller was unknown.

After swallowing a sip of caffeine, Toth answered. "Hello?"

"Nash asked me to take over," said a sullen voice.

"Preciate it." Toth took another swig. Jesus, the sun wasn't even fully up and he'd already had enough stressful conversations for the week.

"Well, don't." He sighed. "Nash said there's a possibility Lionsgate's making a resurgence. That's the only reason I allowed myself to get roped into this."

"Noted," Toth countered. He quickly filled in Cole on what was happening.

"Does Savannah have any information regarding her father's dealings with Lionsgate?"

Toth drank the last of his coffee then placed the mug in the sink. "Sorta. Danny's got a tight history with a guy named Jace. I don't have his last name. He led Lionsgate's drug division, but Danny offed him three years ago. No idea if someone's taken over his position. It's possible that sector died when you and Nash started taking them down."

Cole let out a low sigh of irritation. "I fucking hate this," he breathed.

The blood buzzed at Toth's temples. He wasn't a fucking charity case. Wouldn't

stand for any bullshit from this asshole who wouldn't accept him. "Look. I never asked for your help. We can end this here." He pulled his phone away from his ear, ready to hang up.

"I wasn't talking about you, shitdick," Cole snapped. "I hate this goddamn lifestyle. I thought Lionsgate was dead. I've got a family now. One that was almost killed by these fuckers. I can't—I won't put them at risk. Which means I can't not be involved in this. Got it?" Fury laced his words.

"All right."

"I'm going to look into Jace's death and go from there. You said three years ago?"

"Yup. Wish I had his last name." He could ask Savannah, but he didn't want to chance bringing up any more trauma.

"Sophia will find it. She's got enough connections from when she was a detective that I'm sure we'll have some answers by the end of the day. Keep your phone close and I'll be in touch."

"Kay." A beat passed. "Cole?"

Silence.

"Thanks."

A few seconds later the line went dead.

Toth slipped his phone into his pocket, but as soon as the device hit his thigh, an alarm blasted from its speaker. He yanked it out and checked the screen. The security system was set to alert him to any intruders on the property, even if his phone's ringer

was off.

Tension amped up his pulse as he tapped the app and stared at the video footage of his property. A vehicle sat at the end of his driveway, near the road. Two men dressed in black exited the car. Each carried a gun. They entered the forest surrounding his house.

Fuck.

Thank god the house was so far from the road. It was the whole reason he'd bought this place. It'd take the intruders a good thirty minutes to cross the terrain and reach them. In a perfect world, he and Savannah would be long gone by then. Problem was, there was only one road in and out of here. He crossed the kitchen to the living room.

"Savannah!" he bellowed, as he pulled a shirt over his head and stepped into a pair of jeans. The loud ring to his voice shattered the serene feeling of the dark, quiet house. After grabbing his gun, he tucked it into his waistband.

She didn't reply. Dropping his phone in his pocket, he jogged to the staircase and then took the steps two at a time. "Savannah," he called again, entering the loft.

She stirred beneath the blankets. "What's wrong?" She scrubbed a hand over her bleary eyes.

"We've been found. Get dressed. We gotta move."

She bolted into a sitting position, tossed back the covers, and leaped from the bed. "Who?How?"

Her questions were the same ones that'd been fissuring his mind ever since the alert went off. No one knew about this property. Someone must have tracked them. But

they didn't have time to discuss.

Savannah stepped into pants then yanked a hoodie over her head. "How long do we have?" She fit socks onto her feet and then raced to stuff her belongings into her bag.

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“We’ve got some time. They’re on foot, near the end of the driveway.”

She quickly pulled her hair into a ponytail then tossed her bag over her shoulder. Her eyebrows knitted together. “Is there another exit?”

He snorted. “Didn’t get that far.”

With her hair tied back and her face free of makeup, she looked soft and pretty. He rested his palm on the column of her throat. “You’re safe.” The promise burned with sincerity on his tongue.

Last night he’d been helpless to heal her hurt and ease the burden she carried. Helpless to protect her from her past. But he’d make damn sure no one ever hurt her again.

Danny Carrington included.

Her tongue moved over her lips as if to hold in words. She nodded. He pulled his gun from his waistband and caught her hand, leading her to the staircase.

Savannah remained silent as they reached the living room. He hoisted his duffel bag onto the coffee table then pulled another gun from inside and passed it to her. “Don’t shoot unless you’re cornered. I don’t want them spotting you.”

She swallowed but kept the gun in her grip. “You say that like you’re not going to be here.”

Cupping her cheek, he locked down the adrenaline and anger that made him want to run through the woods and take out both the motherfuckers. “I’m not leaving you.” The statement came out strong and clear. He couldn’t leave her if he wanted to. “C’mon.”

He slung his bag over his shoulder and made his way to the front door. They shoved on their shoes and then Toth paused and scanned the yard outside. Even if their assailants were running the whole way, they’d still be a good ten minutes out. Nonetheless, he studied the swaying bushes and tall, military-steady trees. “Stay close.”

He pushed open the door, waited for Savannah to close it behind her, and made his way down the steps toward the detached garage. The dewy grass slipped beneath his shoes as they crossed the lawn. Keeping his fingers loosely around Savannah’s wrist, he stopped at the man door at the side of the garage, dug out his keys, and fit the correct one into the lock.

Dust and the faint scent of gasoline hit his nostrils as they entered.

Savannah quickly went to the passenger’s side of the vehicle then paused at the open door when he didn’t follow. “Aren’t you coming?”

He tossed her the keys and her face paled. “Toth,” she hissed. She dropped her bag inside, shut the door, and came to stand beside him. “You said you wouldn’t leave me.” Accusation clipped her words.

“I’m not.” He matched her heated glare. He wasn’t doing a good job of sharing his plan. Maybe because it was only coming together on the fly, or maybe because he couldn’t stand the thought of someone getting a bullet in her.

“Lock the door behind me and hop in the driver’s seat.” He took out his encrypted

phone and handed it to her. “If things get hairy or I’m not back soon, drive out to the road and call the last number that came through. Got it?”

She worked her pretty jaw from side to side, defiance hard behind her glare.

“Savannah,” he growled.

“Fine. Got it.” She lowered her gaze.

He swooped his hand behind her head, catching her ponytail in his fist, and drew her a few inches toward him. “It’ll be fine. There’s only two of them. I’m just being careful, all right?”

Eyes small, she nodded.

He brought his mouth down to hers. Her scent filled his nostrils, and he twirled the silky strands of her hair around his fist. Christ, he’d take her right here and now if he could.

She pulled away and her breath hitched. “Save that thought,” she said, almost pleading.

He brushed his lips across her forehead. “Don’t forget to lock the door.” His voice came out rough and strained. It took all his willpower to back away and step outside.

Savannah blew abreath through her lips and shook off the sensation of impending doom. Of course now that she’d learned Toth wasn’t a douchebag, was good in bed, and made her feel almost whole, he’d run off to possibly get himself shot in her honor.

After locking the man door, she went to the SUV and placed the key in the ignition. If she needed to get out of here in a hurry, she'd only have to turn it. Her blood rushed through her veins, her heart pumping erratically as she paced to the window. She kept her grip on the gun tight. Her other hand trembled at her side. She made sure to stay out of view but close enough to the window that she could see the woods beyond the front of the house.

Fear made her work for every inhale. The side of the house, the driveway, and the woods were clear, from what she could see. Toth had to be close, but maybe hiding. She kept her gaze trained on the forest, waiting for movement.

Nothing.

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The idea that someone had shattered her illusion of safety, had invaded Toth's oasis, put a foul taste in her mouth. Maybe it was a mistake. She hadn't asked Toth exactly what he'd seen, but what if it was someone lost or having car trouble? That was a possibility in this area.

From the corner of her eye, she saw a bush move. She snapped her attention to the far-left side of the window. A man dressed in black crawled out of the forest. The long mouth of a weapon swung left then right as the figure crept toward the house.

Panic and terror mixed inside her—a combustible combination.

Be careful, Toth.

CHAPTER 16

Toth entered the back door and closed it softly behind him. He hated leaving Savannah in the garage, but the newcomers would surely search the house first.

He'd make sure they never found her.

Just how many cocksuckers did he have to kill to end this shitshow?

His boots moved soundlessly over the smooth hardwood. Somehow, this attack seemed more vindictive. More personal. They'd found his property, his hideaway, and fucking tainted it. He stopped at the front window near the door and stared at the woods sandwiching the driveway.

One of the men cut swiftly through the trees from the west corner and another came from the other side. The second person bypassed the front porch, making their way to the back.

Toth unlocked the front door. Better to make the guy's entry silent and easy, so as not to alert his friend.

His military training kicked into high gear. All sounds faded until only the soft, steady rhythm of his breath filled his ears. He was transported back in time to Afghanistan. The thunder of gunshots filled his ears at the memory, sharpening his focus. His pulse slowed to a dull pump as a studious calm settled over him. The weight of the gun in his palm promised retribution.

The first man approached the front porch. He wore a black knit beanie beneath the hood of his black sweatshirt. The wooden steps creaked as he bounded up them, and the doorknob clicked. Toth moved behind the door as the guy entered.

Squeak

The hinges protested the invasion. Toth's breath grew stale at the back of his throat as he brought the butt of his gun down on the man's skull. The guy's head snapped to the side, but he didn't go down. The intruder spun around and aimed his gun at Toth's chest.

Toth grabbed the length of the attacker's weapon, shoving it to the side.

Crack!

A bullet smacked the wall. Drywall shot in all directions. Toth held fast to both his weapon and the intruder's and slammed his own head forward. It connected with the assailant's nose.

“Ahhh!” Blood squirted from the attacker’s nostrils and ran in a river over his mouth. He bent over, covering his nose with his free hand and cursing.

Bang,bang,bang!

The second intruder was breaking into the cabin through the back door. He needed to hurry. He lifted his 9mm and clapped it against the man’s head again, this time striking his temple. The guy went down, his screams instantly silenced.

“Alec!” a voice boomed from the kitchen. Toth moved silently as he skirted close to the stairs to avoid being in eyesight once the newcomer reached the living room. He kept his gun trained in front of him.

A form rushed from the kitchen. Toth aimed and fired.

Crack!

The bullet slammed into the attacker’s chest. The man gasped and his gun slipped from his fingers and clattered to the floor. A pool of blood coated his long-sleeved shirt, and the inky fluid ran onto Toth’s floor.

Using his boot, he kicked the weapon aside and rolled the person onto his back. Vacant blue eyes stared at the ceiling. A moan sounded from across the room, and Toth quickly made his way to the man who was still alive.

Toth dropped his knee onto the asshole’s chest, anchoring him to the ground. With one hand holding the gun at the man’s face, Toth used the other grip the guy’s collar. “Who sent you?” he demanded.

Dazed eyes landed on Toth. Blood still ran from the nose that was quickly turning an ugly shade of purple.

“Fuck you,” Alec spat.

Toth pressed the mouth of the gun to the guy’s shoulder. “Try again.”

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“All right, all right.” Fear flashed in his brown eyes, and he lifted his hands in surrender. Toth made a quick note of his description: clean-shaven, scar between his eyes, tattoo of a tiger on his neck.

Alec swallowed. “They’ll kill me.”

“I’ll kill you, dummy.”

Alec huffed. “They’ll torture me.”

“I’ll do it quick.”

Slowly, Alec shook his head. “You can’t run from them.” A teasing smile danced on his lips.

“Who the fuck sent you?” He also wanted to know how the hell they’d found his place. He’d get answers from Alec if it took all day.

The memory of Savannah in the garage flashed in his mind. He didn’t want her to witness a torture scene, and he sure as shit didn’t want her out there alone a minute longer than necessary. “Start talking.” Menace thickened his voice.

Some of the fear in Alec’s eyes was replaced with venom. “Lionsgate Kinship.”

Toth’s stomach bottomed out. His brain worked at warp speed, trying to click the puzzle pieces into place. Savannah had said her father’s only business dealer with Lionsgate was dead. That meant Danny was working on something Savannah didn’t

know about, or...

He tapped the gun against Alec's jaw. "Gimme a fucking name."

The soft chirp of a cell phone notification sounded from Alec's pocket. The motherfucker smiled. Smiled.

Rage threatened to break Toth's control. He never lost his cool. Especially not on the job. But this sonofabitch knew something he didn't. Toth rocked his jaw back and forth. "What?"

"They're here."

Confusion with panic hot on its heels rushed through Toth's brain. He yanked the phone from Alec's pocket and read the message. Do you have her?

Beep,beep,beep

The shrill alarm now blaring from Toth's phone confirmed the worst. One glance at his screen showed an SUV barreling down his driveway.

Oh, shit.

Alec laughed. "You dumb—"

Toth fired at the man's chest.

Crack!

Pocketing his phone he made a dead run for the garage.

Savannah tangled her fingers in her ponytail, just as Toth had moments before. Anxiety ripped through her, every instinct in her body telling her to run inside and help. Multiple shots had been fired. Toth could very well be dead.

That realization made her eye sockets burn with grief. If something had happened to him because of her...

He'd told her to leave if things got hairy, but there was no way she could drive away and leave him to fend for himself—if he was even still alive.

A figure rounded the front porch and her heart leaped into her throat. She brought both hands to the gun and aimed through the window. Then Toth's face came into focus and she let out a pent-up breath.

Ohmigod, ohmigod. He's okay.

She unsnapped the lock as he reached the man door. He stormed inside then clicked the lock behind him. "Get in the car." Sweat coated his face, and he was panting as if he'd just run a mile. Grabbing her shoulder, he steered her toward the vehicle.

"Are they still alive?"

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He opened the passenger door and nodded at her to get in. “The guys in the house are dead. The ones racing down my driveway right now aren’t.”

Her mouth popped open. “Shit.”

“We need to go now.”

She wet her lips, staying rooted to the spot. “They’ll come looking for us, like the last people did. We can—”

“They’ve probably tried to call their friends already and know something’s up.”

“So they’ll go to the house first. Let’s wait until they arrive and as soon as they go inside, we’ll drive out.”

“They’re going to follow us. I need you to be ready to shoot.” His voice held a note of defeat, as if he’d somehow failed.

She smoothed a hand up his bicep. “I’ll drive. You shoot.”

He nodded and breathed through his mouth. “Yeah.” His eyes grew small. “I thought we were safe here. I let down my guard.”

She shook her head. “You couldn’t have known they’d find us.”

“I’ll find out how. I fucking swear to god.”

Something was off with him. Yes, their circumstances were dire, but the panic in his eyes and the signs of exertion on his face didn't make sense. He'd carried her through the forest after their accident and had remained as calm and steady as a captain who'd navigated hundreds of ships through stormy seas. Something had sparked fear in him.

Savannah rounded the car and got in the driver's seat.

The rev of an engine split the air outside the garage. "Get ready," he said.

She quickly buckled her seatbelt. Toth stood by the window. The slam of two car doors echoed around the garage.

"They're going in the house," Toth reported. "Start the car." He hopped into the passenger seat and smacked the garage-door button.

Her hands went clammy as she turned the key in the ignition. The vehicle fired up, the rumble of the motor as loud as a jet plane. She winced. Terror nipped at the base of her spine. Any second they'd come shooting.

The garage door rattled open. Savannah shifted into drive, waiting as the metal moved at a snail's pace. She lifted her foot off the brake.

"Not yet," Toth cautioned. Back was his reassuring tone, although a hint of unease made his words short.

"Someone's in the garage!" a voice boomed from the house.

Savannah stomped on the gas pedal. The vehicle shot forward.

"Shit!" Toth yelled, as they soared toward the half-open door. He covered his head with his arm and Savannah ducked.

The SUV sped through the opening, metal grating on metal as the hood scraped the garage door. A man and a woman ran after them. Bullets popped off the vehicle's bulletproof exterior as Savannah steered down the driveway.

Toth blew out a curse. "You just about took our heads off."

"Sorry," she muttered. "Are they coming?" She sent a glance at the rearview mirror, but tree branches blocked her view of the house.

"Yup," he said, as they made their way around the bend in the road. "Just saw them get into their car."

The driveway snaked through the forest. It would be pretty if it weren't slowing them the hell down. She sat ramrod straight in the seat, her hands gripping the steering wheel. Her heart beat ferociously against her ribcage.

She glanced again at the mirror. Their assailants were in hot pursuit.

"Keep the car steady. Try not to jump if they shoot at us. Our biggest concern is them blowing out a tire. The glass and body are protected."

Even though she'd already known the vehicle was bulletproof, hearing him say that gave her a little bit of comfort. There wasn't much she could do to protect the tires aside from driving really, really fast, though.

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Toth motored down his window and wind whipped inside the vehicle. He positioned himself on the window frame as Savannah took another tight turn. “Be careful,” she called. The plea was ridiculous. She was traveling at fifty miles per hour as he hung out the window while being shot at.

If either of them survived it'd be a miracle.

Ping,ping!

Bullets pelted the back of the SUV. She urged the vehicle to go faster.

Crack,crack,crack!

Toth returned fire. The blast of each bullet was like a clap of thunder. More gunshots sounded, and Toth ducked inside. He hissed sharply.

“Are you okay?” she cried.

“Fine. Just a close one. The road should be up ahead.”

Sure enough, the trees cleared and a road appeared at the end of the driveway. She lifted her foot off the gas pedal just slightly, made sure no one was coming, then gunned the car to the right and peeled onto the road.

Crack,crack!

A bullet smacked Toth's side mirror. She let out a scream and ducked. Sweat

dampened the back of her neck. The steering wheel grew slippery from her slick palms. The road was straighter than the driveway, allowing her to pick up more speed, but that also worked in their killers' favor.

Toth grunted as he angled himself out the window again and fired.

Crack,crack,crack!

Savannah looked in the rearview mirror. She'd driven her foot down to the floor, but the car behind gained on them.

"They're getting closer," she moaned.

"It's okay. Just keep 'er steady," Toth replied. But a tremor shook his voice.

She watched as he reloaded his weapon. All the moisture left her mouth. She focused on the road, willing herself to put as much distance as possible between them and the car gaining on their ass.

Toth cursed as he climbed back out the window. She checked the mirror again, and the bumper of the other vehicle filled her vision.

No!

"Toth—"

"I know."

The car switched to the left lane then shot forward, so its passenger window lined up with her window. The barrel of a gun stared at her.

“Get down!” Toth reached for her.

Crack!

She stomped on the brake. Toth flew backward, his back connecting with the dashboard. He let out a cry as the SUV skidded to a halt. The vehicle chasing them barreled forward.

“Holy shit,” he wheezed.

She hit the gas again, and her back molded to the seat. “Get their tires!” she yelled.

He climbed out the window, this time facing forward, and let off three shots rapid-fire.

Crack,crack,crack!

The car’s back tire exploded with a loud pop. Savannah let out a whoop as the driver lost control and the vehicle rolled into the ditch.

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Toth dropped into the seat next to her. Sweat rolled down the side of his face, and his eyes held the hint of a shadow. “Remind me to never let you drive again.”

Savannah laughed but didn’t slow as they left their pursuers behind.

CHAPTER 17

Savannah got comfortable in the passenger’s seat, more than willing to hand over the steering wheel. She’d driven for another half hour, while she and Toth had both come down from the crushing high of adrenaline. They’d stopped at a gas station to use the restroom, and now Toth filled their tank while she clicked her seatbelt into place.

He hung up the pump then got in the vehicle. His gaze searched her face. “You okay?” His question was soft and a little too caring. If he touched her, she might crumble into a million pieces.

She nodded once. “Fine. You?”

He brought his fingers to the keys dangling at the ignition but froze. She waited, holding her breath, but he just glanced outside as if the weight of the world had settled on his shoulders.

“Did something happen?” she asked.

He brought his attention back to her face. “What do you mean?”

“In the garage. You seemed... rattled. Scared, almost.” She didn’t want to emasculate

him, but she couldn't come up with better words to describe what she'd seen scrawled on his face.

He scratched his knuckles over his beard. The scruffy hair needed a trim, but it gave him a look of ruggedness and depth. "I guess I was scared." He spoke slowly. "Funny, because I don't remember ever having that kind of experience. Even in the Marines. I mean, yeah, shit was nuts, but there was a bit of... detachment, I guess. It wasn't so"—he squinted, glancing out the window, and then brought his laser-focused stare back to her—"personal."

A shiver of anticipation touched her neck. "What do you mean?" She shouldn't ask questions. Shouldn't take anything he said to heart in such an emotionally charged situation. But part of her needed to hear more.

He rested his arm on the console between them then entwined his fingers with hers. "You," he said, his voice as smooth as glass. His gray-ember eyes glowed at her. "You made this whole thing personal, Savannah. All I could think about was that I wasn't going to get to you in time." He licked his lips as if to prevent the next words. "And I couldn't fucking bear it."

A lump formed in her throat. The world around them fell away and an ache of longing spread through her chest. Her whole life, no one besides Lach and her mother had shown they cared for her. Of course her father loved her, but his motives had always leaned in his favor.

Never had anyone but her mom put her first.

"I got another alert about an intruder on the property and all I could think was that I'd failed."

Her heart expanded. She wanted to throw her arms around his neck, to reassure him

that he'd done more for her in the last two days than her father or Jace had ever done. "You didn't fail, Toth."

He nodded and his mouth slanted into a smirk. "I know. Never ran so fucking fast in my life."

She laughed, running her thumb over his. "Thank you."

He snorted. "Don't thank me. You just about got killed in my hideout. I should have taken you farther."

She sat forward. "You saved my life," she said breathlessly. "I trust you completely."

For a second, she expected him to negate what she'd said. Instead, his gaze warmed, and he lifted their joined hands and kissed her knuckles. "Good. But there's someone we can't trust. We need to figure out how they found us. That'll point us to the mole."

A thought struck her, and she was suddenly riddled with guilt. "It must have happened when I called my dad." She shook her head. "Or Lach."

"You called Lach?" His voice rose a notch.

She shrunk a bit in her seat. "Yeah. I mean, I was already allowed to call my dad. I didn't see how calling Lach would make a difference." A beat passed and she groaned. "Oh god. It's my fault."

He let out an exasperated breath. "No, no. It's not your fault. It's just that the more lines we open, the more chances there are of being traced."

She covered her mouth with her hand. "If someone was with Lach when I spoke to him, that could be the mole. Maybe he traced your number somehow."

“Well, we can’t risk another call right now.”

“Did the men in the house say anything?” Surely he’d gotten some kind of information before he killed them.

Toth started the car and pulled out of the parking lot, his expression dark. His jaw was tight as he stared out the windshield. His left hand looped over the top of the steering wheel, the other stayed on the console between them. With his jean-clad legs bent, he appeared too large for the vehicle. His thick thighs strained the faded denim. Was there any area of his body that wasn’t stacked? God, he must be one of those gym rats or something.

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“He mentioned Lionsgate.”

Her lips parted. “What?” The question came out on a raspy, incredulous whisper. “Who from Lionsgate would come after me? And why would my father tell us it was Red Eyez? It doesn’t make sense.”

“Well.” Toth sighed. “Danny either knew it was Lionsgate from the beginning and is lying, or there’s something else going on.”

She shook her head. “Dad doesn’t make mistakes. He said Red Eyez made threats against me and that’s why he wanted me removed.”

“Maybe Lionsgate’s coming after you for retribution for Jace’s death.”

“But why tell me the threats came from Red Eyez?”

Toth flicked his gaze toward her then back to the road. “A guy who attacked us at the house said Lionsgate sent them. That’s all I know. Then he laughed. He knew others were coming for us.”

Savannah leaned back in her seat and pressed her knuckles over her lips. “I can’t believe this. Not only is Lionsgate as powerful as ever, but there’s the possibility my dad was working with them after Jace. After everything that happened, I just... I can’t believe he’d do that.”

Toth grunted. “Money usually outweighs morality.”

She shook her head again, more fervently. “He wouldn’t do that.” The declaration burned like a lie on her tongue. “He killed Jace. Don’t you think his involvement after that would just cause more beef?”

Toth tilted his head in consideration. “You’d think. Unless your dad did something to sweeten the pot.”

A deep growl shook her throat. She wanted to scream her father’s innocence with the utmost certainty, but the more the facts lined up, the more the truth became glaringly obvious. “I’m so stupid.”

“No, you’re not,” Toth said firmly.

She pressed her lips together, tears stinging her eyes.

“You’re not stupid. He’s a piece of shit. I know he’s your dad, but he sure as hell doesn’t act like one.”

She nodded, swallowing the thickness growing in her throat. “I shouldn’t be surprised.”

Toth’s hand covered her knee. “You should be able to trust him. He broke that trust.” They were both silent for a moment. “We need to find out who’s running Lionsgate’s drug division now.”

She slid her fingers over his knuckles, joining their hands. “Should we ask Nash?”

Toth made a face. “I forgot to tell you. Nash isn’t helping us right now. His wife went into labor last night.”

“Oh my god,” she cried. “Are they okay?”

“Nash sounded pretty calm. I spoke to him this morning right before we were ambushed. He enlisted help, though.” Toth’s tone held resentment.

“Doesn’t sound like that’s a good thing.”

“Well, he hooked us up with my oldest brother. Cole. He’s the one who threw me out,” he said, the words coming out strained. “But he’s got his own vendetta against Lionsgate, so we have a common interest.”

Wariness filled her. “I’m sorry. That’s awful he doesn’t accept you.”

Toth’s shoulder lifted, and he flashed her a smile. “Who needs ’em? I’ve made it this far without my brothers.” His tone was lighthearted, but sadness etched lines in his face. He might claim not to care, but his demeanor said otherwise.

“Should we call and let him know what’s happened?”

“Yeah, I need to talk to Rami first.” He grabbed his phone from the cupholder and tapped the screen.

A second later the phone rang over the speakers. “Lo.”

“Hey,” Toth said smoothly. “We’ve got a problem.” He quickly told Rami about the attack and that one of the men had admitted to working for Lionsgate.

“Fuck.” Rami’s curse rode on a wave of fury. Then again, he always emanated a dark wrath. “I knew it.”

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“Sorry,” Toth said, casting a glance her way. “We had every reason to believe Danny ended his business with them three years ago. Also, I want you to talk to Lach. Find out who was with him yesterday when Savannah called him.”

“All right,” Rami said, dragging out the words with curiosity. “Where are you now?”

“Heading back to Seattle. Wish I had somewhere else to go but right now I think we’ll have more protection there.”

“That reminds me,” Rami said. “I’ve got some guys to consider for expansion.”

Curiosity struck Savannah, but she kept her lips shut. She was already sitting in on a call she shouldn’t be, or at least it felt as if she were eavesdropping.

“Kay. I’ll text you when we get in and we’ll talk some more.” He hung up.

“What does he mean by expansion?” The question blurted from her mouth.

Toth slid his hand from the top of the wheel and rested his fingers loosely at the bottom. “Right now, Backcountry Protection Services is just Rami and me. We’ve had to turn away a few jobs due to lack of manpower. Neither of us is comfortable hiring just anyone. He must have come across some people he thinks are a good fit.”

She nodded slowly. “Is this what you’ve always wanted to do? Protect people?”

He shrugged. “Not much else I can apply my skills to. I like making my own hours and running my own business. Rami’s a good partner. He has more desire to grow

than I do, but I guess it'd be nice to have guys working under us and less work on our plates."

She rested her head on the seat. "You mean so you don't have to babysit women like me?"

He chortled. "Yeah, it's been unbearable." Sarcasm dripped from his words.

"Well, I highly doubt getting shot at and killing people is fun for you."

"It ain't dull, honey. That's for sure."

She chuckled. "Guess not."

He intertwined his fingers with hers. "Spending time with you hasn't been too bad either."

"Mmm. I agree."

His fingers grew hot on her lap and her core clenched at his proximity to the V between her legs.

Easy, girl.

Her attraction to Toth was superficial. Had to be. He'd saved her life, and that drew her to him as if she were lost at sea and he were a beacon. Meanwhile, she'd brought nothing but death and destruction to his door—when he realized that, he'd turn and never look back.

But for now, she'd soak up every drop of affection.

After ordering roomservice, Toth hung up the hotel room phone and propped his feet on the table. The one-bedroom suite overlooked Elliott Bay and the sprawling harbor. Mountains peaked in the backdrop. He couldn't have picked something more romantic. Hell, maybe some subconscious part of him had selected the upper-class hotel for that reason. Savannah standing at the huge window and staring out with a soft smile on her face was an even more beautiful view.

The bustling downtown was a sharp contrast to the seclusion of the woods, and normally he'd pick his little cabin in the mountains any day. But now he had to have bodies removed from the damn place—discreetly at that—so it'd be a while before he could return.

Savannah glanced at him. "We could have stayed somewhere less fancy."

He crossed his ankles and took a sip from one of the two complimentary bottles of water he'd found in the room. "You know I'm not broke, right?"

She pursed her lips. "I don't assume anything about your financial status."

"I run a business with one partner, so I'm sure it's crossed your mind."

She took one of the chairs next to him. "Not really, no."

He lifted a shoulder. "Well, a few nights here won't break me." He nodded at the ships. "Besides. It's pretty. Lots of security and witnesses, so that doesn't hurt either."

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“I appreciate it,” she said, vehemently.

He looked into the depths of her green eyes. Her skin was smooth and even without makeup, reminding him of her all cozy and au naturel in his arms last night. “Why do you say it like that? It’s just a hotel, babe.”

She flitted her eyelashes as she rolled her eyes. “I’m not talking about the hotel. I’m talking about killing those men back at your cabin and getting us out safely.”

Pressure built in his chest. He’d managed to keep his composure for the remainder of the drive, but the confirmation that Lionsgate was involved was doing little to settle his mind and his nerves. This whole thing was so much bigger and deeper than he’d imagined.

He forced a smile. “Pretty sure you were the one driving.”

Very few people knew Lionsgate was still active. That meant that the process of finding the individual behind the attack on Savannah wouldn’t be clear-cut. Danny probably had a good idea who was after her, but knowing that Sinners Cartel had a mole made Toth want to stay far away until they had a better handle on the situation. He might have kept Savannah safe up until this point, but who knew how long it’d be before she could return to normal life. Before he could return.

Amusement flared in her eyes. “Slamming on the brake saved the day.”

He grinned. “Smart and beautiful.”

Her lips pursed again and then flattened. She stood slowly and moved close to his chair, brushing her fingers over his shoulder. A channel of fire blazed across his chest and down his abdomen to his ready-to-burst cock.

He was like a man starved. Her body was imprinted on his brain, the sweetness of her slick pussy blazed into his psyche, the memory of her urgent little cries of pleasure like a song on repeat in his goddamn head.

He needed help.

No, he needed her. For more than one round, like they should've had last night. Then he'd be able to think straight.

"I'm going to have a shower before the food gets here," she said. Her husky voice drew his cock to its solid, hard length. "A long, hot one."

Christ. Was that an invitation?

Her glossy lips begged him to follow her, but dammit he needed to talk to Cole. "All right." His throat tightened on the words. "I'm just going to make a call."

She shrugged. "Okay." A minute later the bathroom door closed, and he wanted nothing more than to chuck his phone out the window and get lost in the plush bedsheets with Savannah from now until she begged him to stop.

With everything that had happened in the last few hours, he hadn't gotten to do all the things to her that he'd wanted. He'd rectify that today.

When he heard the water turn on, he snatched his phone from the table.

Cole answered brusquely. "Yeah?"

“It’s me. We need to talk.”

“Damn right we do.”

Toth leaned forward, resting his elbow on his knee, his brother’s tone drawing his attention away from the sound of the water running off Savannah’s naked body.

“Whaddya mean?”

“Dare did some digging. Jace wasn’t the only one neck-deep in Lionsgate’s drug division. There was another guy, Brett Schlueter. Word on the street is he fell off the face of the earth for a couple years—coulda been brought in on charges, who knows—but he resurfaced three months ago and is dealing meth. It’s possible he’s got beef with Danny and is coming to collect.”

Toth’s muscles seized. This was it. Had to be. “Sounds like he’s our fucking guy.”

CHAPTER 18

Savannah stood under the warm spray in the glassed-in shower. Steam clouded around her, and she inhaled the thick, moist air. She’d managed to keep her shit together, but her system was stuck in fight-or-flight mode. Tension bunched all the muscles in her neck, making her upper back as stiff as a brick wall. The terror of standing in the garage, waiting while Toth went in to face murderers, was a terror she’d never shake. Not to mention she’d driven them out with shooters on their asses.

Tears lodged in her throat. She hated this. Hated that she’d been thrust into this turmoil. Hated that her survival had taken over Toth’s life too.

What a friggin’ mess.

The bathroom door opened and she watched through the fogged-up glass as Toth

strode toward the shower door. A delicious sense of anticipation made her already wet parts that much wetter. She gulped down her anxiety and pushed open the door.

Toth's shadowed gaze met her eyes. He opened his mouth to speak, but then his focus dropped to her bare breasts before traveling the rest of the way down her body and back up. He rubbed his knuckle along his chin.

“Everything okay?” she taunted.

He groaned. “You made me forget why I came in here.” His long, tanned fingers curled around the door as if to prevent him from launching into the shower with her.

She swept her tongue over her bottom lip. Water pelted her back, and the cold air from the bathroom blew over the front of her body, drawing her nipples into hard nubs. “Coming in?” She was tempting fate, playing with fire. But good lord she couldn’t help herself. She needed Toth’s hands on her in a bad way.

He stood still, and a prickle of unease touched her spine. Was he having regrets?

In one quick movement he fisted his shirt behind his neck and peeled the material over his head, revealing thick, tattooed muscle.

Her legs trembled with need. He kicked off his jeans and briefs and entered the shower. She backed up to allow him room, but his hulking form ate up most of the space. He towered over her, his body inches from hers, heat blazing from his flesh.

He didn’t touch her.

Standing there with him, naked but not in contact, was incredibly erotic. She expelled a breath, waiting several beats. If he wanted her to make the first move, so be—

He cupped her hip, dragging her forward. The friction of his leg hair on her groin made her want to spread her knees and climb around his waist. His eyes bored into hers and his lips parted a fraction. Droplets of water dotted his chest to trail down his

torso.

Once again, she sensed something had shifted in him. The hard line of his jaw remained clenched, his body stiff. A tiny whistle of warning went off inside her, but if something was wrong, she didn't want to know.

Not right now.

“Kiss me,” she said, loving how strong and brazen she sounded.

Need flashed across his face. He snaked his other arm around her lower back and drew her against him. She pressed her palm to his abdomen, reveling in every hard-earned ridge beneath her skin. Without a word, he bent his head and captured her mouth.

She gasped as his tongue sank between her teeth. His warm, heady flavor made her mouth tingle. She let her hand slip from the wall of his front—all the way down. She circled her fingers around the girth of the pulsing appendage touching her belly.

She wanted all of him. Every inch deep inside. His mouth moved from hers to place kisses on her cheeks, then fell to her neck. The hand he'd kept on her hip slowly caressed her ass, his fingers roaming lazily along her cheek.

Her knees knocked as he fit his hand between her legs from behind, touching her folds. “You wet for me, Sav?” Humor laced his words. He'd surely felt her slickness.

“Yes,” she choked out, not caring how pitiful she sounded.

She twisted her wrist, wringing the length of his cock. A guttural groan erupted from him. He slapped his free hand against the shower wall, keeping himself upright. “Jesus. You're going to make me bust or pass out.”

A shiver of delight ran through her as she repeated the motion. He caught her wrist and roughly yanked her hand away then pinned it to the wall next to her. “Do you like playing with the devil, babe?”

She chewed the corner of her lip, majorly turned on by him meeting his breaking point. “I like playing with you, Toth.” She arched her back against the wall, needing him to touch her.

The warm-gray hues of his eyes swallowed her up. He held her there, not blinking, his chest not moving. The gentle hum of her body’s vibration synched with his, locking the two of them together in an invisible dance.

She inhaled, breaking the spell. When he didn’t budge, she wiggled her wrist in his hold.

“Tell me what you want,” he whispered.

“You. I want all of you.”

His mouth quirked. “Be specific. Do you want me to lick you? Fuck you?”

Her pulse skittered. “Both.”

“Good.” He dropped to his knees in front of her and cradled her hips in his hands. He pressed his lips to the skin above her belly button then slowly made his way to her bikini line.

The shower became an inferno. Sweat mingled with water as Savannah kept her back pressed to the wall, her legs shaky as he nudged open her knees. He glanced up at her and brought his lips between her legs. The scruff of his beard brought an entirely different sensation, the soft scratch of his hair a sharp contrast to the smoothness of

his lips.

His tongue flicked over her sensitive flesh. She gasped as the warm wetness of his mouth grazed her folds. Pleasure shot through her, and her knees buckled.

He positioned one hand firmly on her thigh, pressing her into the wall to secure her in place. He buried his face once again, his tongue moving in deliberate strokes. Her erratic panting echoed off the chamber around them, but she didn't care. All her dignity was on the table, but she wanted nothing more than to come.

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Knotting her fingers in his hair, she held on while he licked and stroked as if he had all day. Pleasure swarmed in her womb as she came, hot and fast. One cry after another pulled from her throat while he drank from her.

Her awareness returned to the present moment. Steam was sticky on her face and body. Her chest rose and fell rapidly. Toth stood to his full height and braced his arms on either side of her so she didn't sink to the ground. "I like playing with you, too," he said, with a sly smirk.

He caught his dick in one hand and then hiked up her leg with the other. He'd already given her two orgasms last night, and while she was ready for the second round, she wanted to even the score.

She shimmied from his hold.

He frowned in confusion. "Are you sore from last night?" His fingers brushed her hair away from her cheek.

"No. But I'm not done playing." Fisting her hand around his length, she lowered herself to her knees.

He watched her, unblinking. His Adam's apple moved on a swallow as she brought her lips to his penis. Taking him into her mouth, she swirled her tongue around the silky skin.

He groaned and leaned back against the wall. She worked her hand in a steady rotation while licking and sucking his knob.

“Jesus,” he breathed.

His hand came to rest on the back of her head, not pushing or guiding, just going with her movements. His body tensed. His thigh muscles clenched. She continued the rhythm, pulling at his flesh while taking him deep.

He let out a loud grunt and she moved faster. His gasps came out sharp and hard until his orgasm filled her mouth. She continued stroking until his body relaxed.

“Savannah,” he hissed. “Holy hell.”

She pulled away and rinsed her mouth with water from the spray. He caught her hands and dragged her to stand in front of him.

He pressed his forehead to hers, his chest heaving. “I could play with you all day,” he whispered.

She chuckled and pressed her hand to his face.

He was an ass.

He brushed a kiss on her palm and one on her lips before stepping out of the shower. A question flashed in her eyes, intensifying his guilt. The cool air hit him as he snagged a towel from the rack, deliberately keeping his back to Savannah. If he even glanced at her body, he’d be hard all over again.

Savannah needed to know what Cole and Dare had found out. She needed to know Brett could be the one behind this.

Reluctance twisted its searing knife into his side. The last thing he wanted to do was bring forth the same devastation she'd endured last night when talking about her past. There was a chance she didn't know Brett, but if he'd been working for Danny at the same time as Jace, it was more than a possibility. He should have told her immediately.

But Christ. Seeing her naked had been his undoing. No way he could have delivered any news while staring at her glorious body. Now, he had to confess to why he'd really interrupted her shower.

"How's that cut?" he asked, glancing back and gesturing to her injury as she stepped out of the shower.

She lifted a shoulder. "I checked beneath the bandage before I got in and it seems to be healing okay. No sign of infection."

"Good." He gave a curt nod.

"Is everything okay?" Her voice sounded small behind him.

He turned as she swiped a towel around her body and tucked the material between her breasts. Her long hair tumbled in wet waves over her shoulders, and her skin was glossy and pink from their intimacy. He sucked at locking down his emotions around her. That or she was just really damn good at reading him. No one else in his life had been good at seeing past his prickly exterior.

Well, maybe his mother. The thought stung.

He cupped her cheek, swiping his thumb over the contour of her cheekbone. "Never better. But we need to chat. Get dressed and—"

Knock,knock

“That must be the food.” He quickly shook out his pants and discarded the towel as he stepped into the worn denim. He exited the bathroom, closing the door behind him.

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“One second, please,” he called. Not bothering to put on a shirt, he grabbed his gun from the table and tucked it into his waistband at his back. Then he moved to the door and checked the peephole. A woman dressed in a black uniform held a tray with silver platters. He cracked open the door. “Sorry ’bout that.”

“Not a problem,” the woman said with a smile. A pink blush touched her cheeks as her gaze swept over his torso.

He accepted the tray then set it down on the table near the door. He pulled out a few bills from his pocket and handed them to her.

The young woman’s eyes widened, and she hesitated.

He thrust them forward. “Appreciate it,” he added, with a note of finality.

She curled her fingers around the money. “Thank you.” She bowed her head and stuffed the money in her pocket.

He let the door click shut then fastened the lock. A second later, Savannah exited the bathroom. She’d put on a white tank top and gray yoga pants that coated her figure like a second skin. Her hair was pushed over one shoulder. Her gaze zeroed in on the tray. “Oh my god, that smells amazing. I’m so hungry.”

He scooped up the tray and led the way to the dinette table tucked against the wall of the living room. “Good, ’cause I ordered a lot.”

She took one of the chairs and he sat next to her. He opened the lids and passed her

the pasta and salad she'd asked for. He'd gotten a burger and fries but had ordered a side of sweet potato fries in case she wanted more food. He took a bite of his burger and the greasy meat, salty cheese, and sweet pickle hit his tastebuds.

Savannah unrolled one of the napkins filled with cutlery and took out a fork. She twirled the fettucine around the prongs and brought it to her lips then closed her eyes and moaned. "So good. Okay, so what did you want to tell me?"

His food hardened in his esophagus, and he grimaced. "You should probably eat first."

Her eyes widened. She set down her fork. "Toth. Tell me what's going on. Now." Reproach bit her words.

He wiped his fingers and mouth on a napkin then covered her hand with his. Her eyes shifted, and panic made her sit forward.

"It's about Lionsgate."

Her shoulders slumped with relief. "Oh jeez. I thought you were going to say something happened to my dad or Lach. You scared me," she said, with a light laugh. "What about them?"

"Do you know Brett Schlueter?"

She blinked. "What?"

"My brother Dare found out he worked for Lionsgate's drug division around the same time your dad worked with Jace."

All the color drained from her face, and she lifted her shaking fingers to her lips. "Oh

my god. Brett was Jace's best friend."

Hell. That made things worse. More convoluted. "Would Brett come after you to pay back your dad for killing Jace?"

She swallowed and looked away. Doubt contorted her features. She let go of his hand and pressed her fingers to her eyes then got up to pace. "Jace and Brett were childhood friends, and Brett and I didn't like each other much, so yeah. I could see him trying to get back at my father. I just don't understand why he's been silent so long. Why wait until now?"

Toth shrugged. "Who knows. He could've been hiding. Could have been in jail." He snorted. "If Brett was such a problem, your dad probably should've killed him too."

He stood and caught her arms. "I'm going to find out if Danny knows more about Brett." He rocked his jaw from side to side. "As it stands, it looks like he's the one who's after you."

Her eyes grew small. "Brett's a nasty human being. He's hurt women. Gets a kick out of torturing people. I can only imagine what he'd do if he got me."

His grip on her arms tightened. "He won't come within one hundred yards of you. I can fucking promise you that."

So help him, he'd kill the bastard upon seeing him.

CHAPTER 19

Revulsion gurgled around the creamy pasta sauce inside Savannah's stomach. She wanted to scream. To lash out. To tell her father how much she hated that he'd brought this upon her. Jace might have pushed her down the stairs, but he'd been high

on her father's product.

Memories of being in the hospital flooded her. Jace sitting next to her bed, his eyes bloodshot from crying, the gravity of what he'd done so clear on his thin face.

Even as she'd lain there, empty and broken, hating him for what he'd done, she'd felt sorry for him—he'd carry his guilt for the rest of his life. She'd known in that moment that once she had the strength, she'd tell Jace to leave and never come back. But she'd been too deep in grief, having just had her lifeless baby girl taken from her arms. Jace had comforted her because no one else had been there.

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Then, with the suddenness of glass shattering, her brother had stormed into the room. She'd witnessed Lach mourn after their mother died, she'd watched him fight until his opponent couldn't stand, she'd seen every emotion she'd thought existed. Until that day. That day, he'd sobbed for her. For his niece. And for what she'd have to endure forever. She'd been so wrapped up in Lach's emotional embrace that she'd been oblivious to her father's men quietly escorting Jace from the hospital.

Four hours later, her dad had finally shown up and delivered the news that Jace wouldn't return. "I'm sorry, sweetheart," he'd said. "I couldn't let him live after what he'd taken from this world... from this family."

She hadn't known or understood at the time that she needed to mourn Jace. That day, all she knew was that losing her boyfriend made her even more alone.

More reliant on him.

The all-powerful Sinners Cartel leader.

"I hate him," she said, her voice raspy.

Toth's fingers caressed her arms. "I promise you, Sav. I'll find the sonofabitch and—"

"No." She shook her head violently, courage building from the base of her spine and drawing back her shoulders. "I hate my dad."

Toth's eyebrows met over his nose, and his lips firmed. "You have every right."

“I’ve never said that before,” she said with a chuckle. “Isn’t that weird? You’d think throughout my childhood or teenage years I’d have uttered those words, but nope.” She shrugged. “I guess I’m more afraid of him than I thought.”

“You don’t need to be afraid of him anymore.”

Tears filled her eyes, and she shoved a hand through her tangled, still-damp strands. “It’s wild. I mean, god. I’ve never even acknowledged how much he scares me. Maybe because I wanted to believe his lies.” The tears overflowed her eyelids and rolled down her cheeks. “I don’t know if he’s ever once told me the truth.”

Toth pulled her to his chest. “We’ll find the answers, okay?”

She didn’t nod. She couldn’t. Instead, she let herself sink into Toth’s hold and inhaled his basil-and-pepper aroma. The bare skin of his chest scalded her cheek, warming her to her core.

“Thank you,” she whispered. Tipping back her head, she stared into the eyes that had become familiar, trustworthy, and devoted in such a short time. But interpreting Toth’s actions as anything more than a kindness or a job he took super seriously would be reckless.

Even though he’d slept with her. Even though he’d kissed her as though he wanted to own her. Even though the solidity of his arms made her feel safer than she’d ever felt in her life...

He wasn’t hers.

He guided her back a few inches. “I need you to tell me everything you remember about Brett Schlueter.”

Half an hour later, Savannah had some color back in her cheeks and the lines of fear that had creased the skin around her eyes were gone.

He'd sat on the bed, elbows on his knees and fingers laced, while she paced and fed him every detail she could remember about her ex's friend. As Toth listened, he tried to put himself in Danny Carrington's shoes and imagine why the man would condone Savannah's being with a douchebag like Jace. He came up empty-handed. Nor did Savannah's recount offer any clues.

Savannah stopped at the window and wrapped her arms around her waist. The news of Brett had rattled her.

He got to his feet and ran a hand down her back. "You okay?" He stared at the feminine arches of her cheekbones and the gentle slope of her nose.

Her lips twitched. "Yeah." She lowered her lashes then turned from the window to meet his gaze. "It always kind of bothered me that my father killed Jace. He didn't give me a say in the matter, and I never got the chance to let Jace know how much he hurt me. How much I hated him. So much was stolen from me that day."

Toth's throat constricted, and he couldn't stop his face from contorting.

Savannah continued. "Brett's resurgence is like... I don't know. A message from Jace. Does that make sense? It makes me uncomfortable. I won't be able to look at Brett without seeing Jace in my mind." She lifted a trembling shoulder. "But maybe confronting Brett will free the demons that chain me."

Jesus. He grabbed her arms. "I can't let you near him."

Her eyes were large. Searching. If she disagreed, she didn't say so.

He couldn't explain the feeling of possessiveness overtaking him. Couldn't put into words how viciously angry Danny and Brett made him. "The guys should be here any minute." He'd texted Cole, Lach and Rami the name of their hotel and their room number an hour ago. As much as he wanted to keep Savannah hidden and outside lines of communication limited, they also needed to get this shitshow over with.

"Does Lach know about Brett?" she asked.

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He shook his head. “Not that I know of.”

She nodded, but her features tightened.

“What?” he asked.

“Well, to say Lach and Brett are enemies is an understatement. Which is why—I don’t know. Not much happens in town without Lach knowing about it, so I can’t help but wonder if he knew Brett was around but didn’t say anything.”

Knock,knock,knock

The soft rap of knuckles on the hotel room door made Savannah tense. He rubbed his hand up and down her arm then strode to the door. “That must be one of them.”

Nonetheless, he checked the peephole. Seeing the brother who’d cast him out two weeks ago bunched Toth’s nerves. He unsnapped the lock and swung open the door. “‘Sup man. Thanks for coming.”

Cole’s gaze roamed beyond Toth to survey the hotel room as if he expected to be ambushed. His eyebrows were sewed together in a perpetual frown. His sharp jawline, similar in shape to their father’s, clenched. A vein bulged in Cole’s forehead as he moved into the room. If Cole had wanted to make his reluctance obvious, he’d done a good job.

Cole’s gaze landed on Savannah and his eyes softened a touch.

“Cole, this is Savannah Carrington.” He nodded in her direction. “Sav, this is my, uh”—he cleared his throat as he closed the door—“brother. Cole.”

Savannah inched away from the window. She folded her arms across her chest, and part of him was glad she didn’t try to shake hands with the prick who didn’t want a damn thing to do with him.

“Thanks for coming,” she offered.

Cole shoved his hands in his front pockets. “Won’t say it’s a pleasure.” He grimaced. “I didn’t mean that as an insult.” A muscle jumped along the skin where his jaw met his ear. “I’ve got a family. I don’t want this shit endangering them.”

Savannah knotted her hands in front of her.

Toth’s temper racked up. “Look—”

Cole held out a hand. “Let me be clear. If Lionsgate is active, my family is already at risk and I have an obligation to be here.” He cut his gaze to Savannah. “This is going to end. Quickly.”

Savannah nodded. “Good.”

Another knock at the door sounded. Toth moved behind Cole, checked the peephole again, and opened the door.

Lach walked in with Rami on his heels. Toth shut the door and mumbled introductions. Not that any of them cared about getting to know each other.

Lach nodded at Rami then made a beeline for Savannah. “Holy shit,” he said, as he pulled her into his arms. “Rami filled me in on everything that’s happened. I’m glad

you're safe."

Savannah eased out of her brother's arms then sent a look to Toth and the other guys then back to Lach. "We need to talk."

Anxiety ping-ponged inside Savannah as all four men stared at her. Rami's dark eyebrows were crunched low over his eyes in a scowl. Cole looked as if he'd stepped on an ant hill.

Blood hammered through her veins, taking her pulse to a dangerous level. Toth moved to her side, but Lach didn't budge from the spot in front of her.

Rami took a seat in one of the dinette chairs and Cole braced his arms in front of his chest. Toth's warm, steady palm connected with her lower back.

Lach's interested gaze sizzled from her to Toth. "What's going on?" he demanded.

"I need you to be honest with me."

"The hell are you talking about?" Lach drew back his head as if she'd punched him.

She twisted her fingers together and rocked her weight to the outsides of her feet. "Brett's working for Lionsgate. He's the one behind this."

Lach's eyes rounded.

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Savannah cocked her head. “You’re not surprised.” The statement echoed through the room.

Lach’s upper lip twitched. “What’s with the third degree? You think I had something to do with this? Are you crazy?”

“Hey,” Toth snapped.

She turned and held up her palm. “We’re not here to gang up on anyone,” she said, looking pointedly at Toth. Swiveling back to face her brother, she squeezed his arm. “Of course I know you’re not involved. But Brett being back on the streets would cause a lot of uproar. I was surprised you hadn’t heard anything. That’s all.”

Lach relaxed, and some of the defensiveness left his face. “I thought it was weird he just vanished after Jace died. I don’t doubt he was pissed about what Dad did. But I didn’t know he was around. Haven’t heard a damn thing. He must have been lying really low, otherwise word would have gotten back to me.”

“He’s selling meth,” Toth interjected.

Lach curled his lip. “Shocking. We’ve gotta find this sonofabitch.”

Toth folded his arms across his chest. Although every guy in the room had tattoos, Toth’s seemed much more prominent. His glare was formidable and determined. “Any idea where to start?”

Lach shook his head, his gaze hooded. “No idea. I can ask around, but I don’t want to

alert Brett we're onto him."

Cole strode to their circle. "Someone knew where to find Savannah and Toth." The statement boomed around the room.

Savannah's heart lurched in her chest as she stared at Toth's oldest brother. His jaw was shadowed with the hint of a beard, his eyes were small and lethal, his hands clenched. Everything about the man screamed that he was ready to attack.

Lach appeared to be sizing up Cole as well. His green eyes flicked down Cole's body then back up, and then Lach's shoulders bunched and he jerked up his chin. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Nausea combined with anxiety hit the back of Savannah's throat, reminding her of their morning from hell. Good god, there was enough masculinity in the room to start a football team. "Can we quit the inquisition? I think we're all on the same side."

Toth gave a sharp nod. "Agreed."

Cole shrugged but didn't take his glowering stare from Lach. Meanwhile, her brother looked ready to launch himself at Cole.

They'd be lucky if they made it through this without killing each other.

CHAPTER 20

"One thing we need to know," Toth said to Lach. "Who was with you when Savannah called yesterday?"

Lach cocked his head. "I was just with Dom, my dad's manager."

Well, shit.

“That doesn’t mean it’s Dominic,” Savannah interjected. “Someone could have listened to my calls, or even traced my location.”

“Did you tell anyone where you were going?” Lach asked.

“Rami’s the only person who knew,” Toth said, nodding in his partner’s direction. “And he’s more than trustworthy. Somehow Lionsgate’s men found us at my cabin, and if we can find out how, that might give us insight into who’s working from inside Sinners Cartel.”

Cole rolled his eyes. “Or maybe you just named the culprit.”

Toth shot a fiery look at his brother. Sure, Cole didn’t want to be here, but he wasn’t making matters easier by attacking Lach and Rami. The guy was getting on Toth’s last nerve, and he sure as hell wouldn’t let the asshole insult his friend.

Rami lifted his chin in Cole’s direction before Toth could speak. “Who’d you say this prick is?”

Toth pressed his tongue to the back of his teeth. “My brother.” He focused on Cole. “As you already said, we don’t have time for this shit. You got a problem with him you got a problem with me. Understood?”

The corner of Cole’s mouth twitched, almost as if the sonofabitch enjoyed the clapback. “Noted.”

“Good.” Toth turned his attention to Lach. “Same goes for you. My brother’s an asshole, but we’re not here to make friends. Ignore each other if you have to.”

The word brother tasted foreign on his tongue, almost as if it were a lie. But the more he said it, the more he liked it. My brother.

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Lach's eyes grew small. "I want Brett. End of story."

Toth gave a sharp nod. "Me too."

"First step, we'll need your phone," Cole said, his gaze on Lach. At least his tone held less hostility.

"Why?" Lach asked.

"'Cause we need to scan it for malware. See if you're being watched." He held out his hand, waiting for Lach's device.

"Hand it over," Toth commanded.

Lach mumbled something beneath his breath but slapped his phone into Cole's hand. "When will I get it back?"

"I need to take it to someone." He shot a look at Toth. "To Dare. He'll be able to uncover anything on here that shouldn't be."

Anticipation built inside Toth. Nash had been less disapproving of Toth than Cole had been, but maybe his other two brothers, the ones he hadn't met, Dare and Dallas, would want a relationship.

Stupid.

Regardless, the idea clung to his brain like a burr to dog's fur. Why he was so

goddamn hung up on having a connection with these guys was beyond him.

Savannah's gaze on his face was curious. He winked at her and caught her fingers, not giving a fuck if Lach didn't like it. "Next up, we need to examine the men closest to Danny."

Savannah scoffed with impatience. "We need to visit my father and tell him what we know. He has to know about Brett, and if he doesn't, he'll be able to find him."

"I agree," Toth said. "But don't know who we can trust, and if we're not careful we'll lead Brett and his men right to us. Better to be on the offensive and find out who the mole is first. Then we'll know how to go about this—and maybe get to Brett without needing to involve your dad."

Her shoulders slumped a little and he couldn't blame her. He wanted nothing more than to ride up with guns blazing and put Danny Carrington in his place. But they couldn't be careless.

"I'll go stake out Danny's warehouse. See who's coming and going," Rami volunteered.

"Good call," Toth said.

Rami and Lach discussed amongst themselves and then the two of them left.

"What are you going to do?" Cole asked, as he pocketed Lach's phone.

Toth massaged his neck. "Once we've got a lead, I'll confront Brett. I'm going to call a couple buddies. See if there's any talk about where he's hiding. Someone knows where he is."

Cole nodded at Savannah. “And her?”

She frowned. “What about me?”

“No offense,” Cole said, lifting a shoulder. “But we can’t exactly bring you along when we find Brett.”

She positioned her hands on her hips. “Why the hell not?”

Toth fought the urge to roll his eyes. While he agreed with his brother, the delivery hadn’t been great. “He’s right.”

Savannah squinted at him. “Brett will talk to me. Not you.”

Toth curled his lip. “I don’t plan to do much talkin’, honey. He tried to kill you more than once. There’s not much we need to say.”

She pursed her lips. “You’re going to kill him?”

Dammit. He tried not to let her question get to him. Tried not to examine its sharpness. Thing was, he wanted to kill Brett more than he wanted to stay out of jail. Not just for what he’d done to Savannah, but also for sending him over the edge of a mountain.

When he got his hands on the cocksucker, he’d make sure he suffered. “I’m going to make sure he never hurts you again.”

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“My girlfriend, Sophia, can stay with her.” Cole’s statement broke the tension.

Toth met Cole’s stare, not hiding his surprise. His brother had been clear that he didn’t want his family in danger, and having Sophia watch over Savannah would put her in the thick of things. “She’s law enforcement?”

“Was.” Cole sidled closer to them. His hard expression lost some of its intensity. “I’d like to have Dare or Dallas here, too, but Sophia is capable of protecting Savannah.”

Savannah folded her arms across her chest. “I appreciate that, but you said you don’t want your family endangered,” she said, speaking what was on Toth’s mind.

“I don’t. But I want to end this sooner rather than later. Besides, Sophia is probably safer here in the hotel than at home alone.” Cole scratched the back of his head. “That okay with you?”

Savannah’s eyes grew small. “Um, yeah. Sure. Thanks.”

“All right. I’ll take Lach’s phone to Dare, fill in Sophia, and we’ll come back later.”

Toth held out his hand. “Thanks, man.”

Cole stared at his palm. Two seconds clicked by. Toth almost kicked himself for trying to find any common ground with the asshole. He was about to pull his hand away when Cole slapped his palm into it then retracted it as if he’d been scalded. “Thank me later, kid.”

Toth snorted. “I ain’t a kid.”

Cole made his way to the door and smirked. “You are to me.” He lifted his fingers in mock salute, but something about his tone was almost friendly. Nah, that was a stretch. More like less grudgeful.

He’d take it.

Toth watched Savannah head to the door and move the security bar into place. Turning, she searched his gaze. “He seemed to warm up to you.”

He made a face then sat on the sofa. “Cole? I doubt it. He probably just got tired of being a dick.” Nonetheless, the banter had felt... right.

She sat down beside him and tilted her head. “You want to be part of their family, don’t you?” Her voice was soft with understanding.

He caught her fingers and pulled her onto his lap. Besides Rami, he had no one in his life to confide in. And he and Rami didn’t talk about their feelings much. They had an understanding, more or less. They didn’t peel back the layers.

Her soft body molded itself onto his lap, her legs curling over top of his and her shoulder resting beneath his arm.

“I guess you could say that, yeah,” he said.

“You said you knew about your brothers growing up but they didn’t know about you?” She tipped back her head, and he stared at the warmth of her eyes.

When he’d first met Savannah, months before she’d all but threatened him in his office, he’d gotten the impression that she was a hard-ass, stuck-up mafia princess.

Hell. He couldn't have been more wrong. He stroked a stray lock of hair from her face. Her tough exterior had been a cape to cover her battered soul.

"That's right."

"That must have been hard, having siblings you knew about but couldn't talk to."

He nodded and floated back in time. "We used to have a tree in our backyard. A big maple. I'd spend all day out there, pretending I was playing with my brothers."

Savannah's face softened. "How old were you?"

He lifted a shoulder. "I dunno. Eight or nine maybe. Just a pip-squeak."

"I can't imagine you anything but big."

He folded his hand over her hip. "I was a runt until I turned fifteen. Had a big growth spurt and then enlisted with the Marines at eighteen."

"Why didn't you look for your brothers sooner?"

He tapped his fingertips on the buttery material of her yoga pants. The question was one he'd asked himself a million times. The answer had burrowed itself deep inside him and he'd been too fucking chicken to examine it. "Guess I was scared they'd reject me." He let out a loose laugh. "And I was right."

Savannah rested her palm on his cheek and dragged her thumb over his scruffy beard. "Their loss." She smiled. "Maybe they'll come around, though. I mean, finding out you have a brother you never knew about is probably quite the shock. Maybe with time you'll find a place in each other's lives"

He shrugged. “I don’t really care—”

She tweaked his hair.

“Ouch.” He chuckled and caught her hand. “What was that for?”

“Lying to me.” She leaned forward and kissed his mouth. “You care, Toth. And I love that about you.”

Satisfaction churned inside his core. Savannah’s words touched an abyssal, tender area uncharted by his awareness. He sighed. He was getting in over his head. Caught up in all things blond and sexy. But he couldn’t bear the thought of putting distance between Savannah and him.

Well, fuck.

He’d have to unpack that shit later. “Not much gets past you.”

“Nope.” She chewed the corner of her mouth, and her smile faded.

“What’re you thinking about?”

“Everything,” she said with a shrug. “Brett, my dad...” Her faraway look tainted the sweetness of her gaze and made his heart ache.

“It’ll be over soon. I promise.”

She chortled. “Yeah, that’s what I’m afraid of, I guess. How it will end. And Brett, well, I have conflicting feelings about him.”

Toth’s muscles bunched. He clenched his jaw to keep his expression passive. To make it look as if what she’d said hadn’t cut him to the heart. Which was dumb. She had every right to feel confused, but fear clouded his rational mind. He needed to know one thing before he lost his fucking head.

“Do you still think about Jace?” He shouldn’t have asked. Who fucking cared? The guy was dead. But shit, he needed to know where her heart lay. All of it.

Savannah’s eyes bugged out, and she grimaced. “God no. Well, not in a good way. I think about how things could have—should have been different. But I don’t miss him. Not in that way. Does that make sense?”

Toth traced the edge of his beard with his thumbnail. “I understand, yeah.” The answer was weak. Fact was, he hated the idea of any other man occupying her thoughts.

“Good.” She stared at her knees. “Part of me is happy he’s dead. The other part of me wants to lash out at him because I never got that chance. But that’s just something I’m going to have to learn to let go.”

He covered her hand with his but waited.

“The only good thing about what happened is that I wasn’t doomed to spend the rest of my life with him. Or coparent.” She let out a shaky, brittle laugh. “Ohmigod. I can’t even believe I’m saying that. I would give anything to have her back... to have her at all. I just—”

He caught her chin, holding her face inches from his. “There’s nothing wrong with

being grateful you didn't have to struggle with that loser. I know you'd give anything for her to be here. That's not diminished by being glad he's not in your life. Okay?"

Her lip trembled and she nodded. "All my life, well, since my mom died, all I wanted was to be a mother. I thought I'd somehow fill that gap in myself. Then she was taken from me, too." Her voice broke, straining every heartstring in his chest. A sob broke from her throat.

He pulled her to him and buried his face in the crook of her neck. "You're still a mother, Sav. She'll always be part of you."

Never in his life had he ached to consume someone else's pain. He'd always been so caught up in his own.

If it cost him his last breath, he'd make Brett pay.

CHAPTER 21

Savannah's muscles vibrated as she sat in the hotel living room. The need to do something productive was almost all-consuming. Toth's voice carried from the bedroom, where he spoke on the phone. She dragged her fingers through her hair and then weaved the strands into a side braid. At least she'd gotten to shower and felt somewhat human.

Knock, knock

The sharp rap on the door made her freeze. But Brett or his men wouldn't announce themselves.

Toth walked briskly out of the bedroom. "Call ya back." He disconnected and slipped the phone into his pocket then checked the peephole.

His shoulder blades pulled back and his body turned rigid. He withdrew the gun from the waistband of his pants and pointed it at the ground before pressing his back to the wall beside the door.

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Savannah rose, and her hand fluttered to her chest.

“Get in the bedroom and lock the door,” he whispered.

Knock,knock,knock

This time, the beating on the door was more insistent. She skirted around the coffee table and slipped into the bedroom.

“Who is it?” Toth demanded.

“It’s Dare. Cole sent me. Open up.”

Savannah hovered at the threshold of the bedroom. Toth shot her a hesitant glance then looked through the peephole again.

“One sec,” Toth called out. He pulled out his phone and checked the screen then glanced at her as he repocketed it. “Didn’t realize Cole sent a message saying Dare should be here soon.”

He lowered his weapon but didn’t put it away. He unlocked and opened the door.

“The fuck took you so long?” A man about Toth’s height breezed into the room. He wore dark jeans and a heather-gray T-shirt. He sent Savannah a curious glance as he waited for Toth to close and lock the door.

Dare’s ebony hair waved back away from his forehead, and the scruff on his face was

a little thicker than a five-o'clock shadow. He had the same strong jawline and straight nose as Cole and Toth. While the two men had their physical differences, the family resemblance was clear.

She relaxed her shoulders and stepped out of the bedroom. "I'm Savannah." She held out her hand, and he accepted it without pause.

"So I've heard," he said, his tone even but not unfriendly. He turned his attention to Toth. "You must be the youngster."

Toth's throat moved. "Guess so. Toth."

Dare held out his hand and smiled. "You look a lot like the sonofabitch. Probably why Cole doesn't like ya."

Toth shook his hand. "Can't help my genes. You guys look like him, too."

Dare let go and then moved to sit on the sofa. "Yeah, I guess we got one good thing from him." He rested his elbows on his knees, his expression pensive.

Toth walked hesitantly to one of the dinette chairs and Savannah took the other. It was like watching two alpha wolves meet in the woods—would they attack each other or become allies?

Silence thickened the air. The tension in the room was palpable. Toth rubbed his knees.

Dare flicked his gaze up from the floor to look at his brother. "I want to make it clear that I—we—didn't know you existed. I'm sure you're aware of that. But had we had any fucking idea you were born, we would've found you."

Savannah's throat burned as emotion overcame her. She watched Toth's face change from guarded to stunned. The fact that Dare had acknowledged Toth's misery, acknowledged that he'd have been welcomed a long time ago, made relief for Toth wash over her.

Toth scrubbed his hand over his face, his jaw tight and his eyes dark. "Thanks," he said. "I appreciate that." He cleared his throat. "I wish things could've been different."

Dare shrugged. "You're here now. I'm not goin' anywhere."

Savannah pressed her folded hands to her lap to stop herself from getting up and wrapping Dare in a hug. He'd accepted Toth. He seemed to actually care. Her heart swelled.

"That means a lot," Toth said slowly. He scratched a spot above his ear. "That's all I wanted. Didn't mean to cause any trouble by showing up. Sure as hell didn't mean to piss anyone off."

Dare snorted. "It doesn't take much to piss off Cole, so don't let that get to you. I've known him my whole life and he's still the biggest asshole I've ever met."

Savannah let out a light laugh and Toth grinned.

"He'll come around," Dare added. "We all went through hell when they left us, but Cole carried a heavier weight, being the oldest. He probably feels some guilt, too, about not knowing about you. Believe it or not, the guy has a heart. He just doesn't know what the fuck to do with it."

Toth chuckled. "I got nothin' but time."

Part of Savannah wanted to reach for Toth's hand, to rejoice in this moment with him. He'd finally been accepted, at least by one of the Holmes brothers. But this wasn't about her. She'd wait until they were alone.

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“Dallas, his twin, is more reasonable,” Dare added. “You might meet him today.” Dare leaned back on the couch and stretched his legs in front of him. “I’ve got some questions, though.”

“Shoot,” Toth said with a nod.

“Where are they now? Mom and Dad.” Dare’s voice suddenly had a hard edge, making the acid in Savannah’s stomach burn.

She swung her gaze to Toth. The same question burned inside her, but she hadn’t had the chance to ask.

Toth’s gaze grew distant. “Mom lives in Portland. Dad, well, I dunno where the fuck he is. He took off when I was younger. Probably a good thing.”

Dare’s face was somber. “Did he still hit her?”

“Here and there. Most of the time he was too drunk. I think he was out screwing around a lot. Sometimes he didn’t come home. I asked Mom about it once, and she just said she hoped he didn’t come back.” Toth rubbed his thumb and forefinger together in a circular motion. His gaze drifted and locked on the wall. “He wanted her to get rid of me. I heard him say it to her more than once. Even said that one day she’d come home and I’d be gone. Don’t know why he didn’t do it.”

Dare’s nostrils flared. “What’d she say?”

Toth gave his head half a shake and refocused on his brother. “She said she’d kill

him.” The words dropped like a grenade, leaving silence in their wake.

Savannah massaged the skin at the base of her throat, using all her resolve not to ask questions and break the bond forming between these men.

Toth coughed. “She also said she hated him for taking her other babies away. That she’d never forgive him.” He brought grave, stony eyes to Dare. “That was the last time I saw him.”

Dare blinked and looked toward the large window facing the serene harbor. The sun was setting and the silvery water was smooth as glass in the afternoon sun. His throat bobbed. “I hate that she didn’t try to find us.” He shot his gaze back to Toth. “When’d you see her last?”

“Couple months ago.”

A shadow crossed Dare’s face. Regret? Longing? It was too hard to read him. A beat later he stood. “Don’t tell Cole or Dallas any of this, all right? Not yet. When all this is over.”

Toth nodded. “Sure.”

Dare’s mouth slanted into a smirk. “Good. Cole doesn’t need another reason to want to kill you.”

An hour later, Toth’s chest swelled as he stared around the now-too-small hotel room. Strangers, but family by blood. Dallas and Dare sat on the sofa and Cole sat in the armchair with Sophia perched on his lap. Everyone chimed in about how to get to Brett.

Toth stayed close to Savannah. Her tight brow told him she was a bit overwhelmed by the scene.

“That’s ridiculous,” Sophia said to Dallas. “You can’t use her as bait.” She gestured to Savannah.

“Absolutely not,” Toth choked out. He hadn’t even heard Dallas’s suggestion.

“It’s not bait if she’s not alone.”

“I agree with Toth,” said Cole. His voice carried authority and finality. “She stays here with Sophia and one of you dipshits.” He nodded at Dallas and Dare.

“Hold on,” Savannah said, commanding the room. “You guys are talking like you know where he is. Do you?”

All eyes swung to land on her, but Savannah didn’t shrink. Instead, she folded her arms across her chest and stared down the group.

Cole met Toth’s gaze, Dallas and Dare looked at each other, and Sophia chewed the side of her cheek. “We have an idea,” she said.

Savannah didn’t miss a beat. “Where?”

Toth pinched his earlobe as uncertainty flooded him. The last thing he wanted was Savannah chasing her drug-dealing ex-boyfriend’s best friend. She was safe here. But he also couldn’t ignore her desire for revenge.

“I tracked him,” Dare said.

Sav’s eyebrows inched up. “Tracked him? How?”

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Dallas smirked, Cole snorted, but Dare's expression held steady. "Let's say I've got a lot of software."

Sophia nodded. "Thanks to Dare's software, I got my baby girl back after she was kidnapped a few months ago."

Toth had heard bits and pieces of the story, but it hadn't occurred to him that the detective whose daughter had been kidnapped was the same detective Cole had fallen for. Toth's muscles bunched at the thought of some scuzzy, trafficking cocksuckers getting their hands on a little girl. "Lionsgate?" He knew the answer but asked for Savannah's benefit.

Sophia met his gaze. There was a heart-wrenching look in her golden eyes. "Yeah," she said, her voice cracking. Cole smoothed his hand up and down her back and she relaxed. She turned and smiled at him. "I should say thanks to Dare's software and you, of course."

Cole didn't smile. "I'd do it again in a fucking heartbeat."

"I know," she said. "I'm worried about when Bella starts dating in ten years."

A smile cracked his older brother's stoic expression. "Fuck." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "She's gonna hate me."

Sophia leaned back on Cole's shoulder. "Never. She adores you."

"All right," Toth broke in. "So Dare's got software—what kind?"

“Facial recognition,” Dare answered. “I’m also able to hack into street and surveillance cameras. The last location I had on Brett was at a motel downtown. Seaside Inn.”

Toth shot a glance at Savannah. “Any reason why he’d go there?”

Her lips turned down in a frown. “Nope. Probably just hiding out is my guess.”

“We’ll start there.” Cole stood and deposited Sophia on her feet. “Dallas and Toth, you ready?”

“I’ll swing by Dare’s and check on the status of Lach’s phone,” Dallas said.

Dare nodded. “Probably won’t be done yet, but go for it.”

“I want to see Danny after we go to the motel.” Toth picked up his phone and put it in his pocket. The weight of his 9mm at the small of his back assured him of its presence.

Savannah’s hot glare singed his cheek. He met her eyes. Agitation shot from her electric greens. He caught her hand and pulled her to him, not giving a damn that everyone in the room was watching. “What’s the matter?”

“I want to come.” Her eyelashes lowered. “I need to come.”

Christ. He wanted her to be able to face her demons. Didn’t want to take that from her, goddammit. But they were moving in on a situation they hadn’t prepared for. They had no idea how many men would be with Brett. He couldn’t jeopardize her safety. “I’m sorry.” He knew the words were flimsy and would do nothing to ease her pain.

She turned away. “It’s fine.”

“No, it’s not.” His knuckles coasted over the smooth satin of her cheek. “But I need to keep you safe.”

She wrapped her arms around his waist and pressed her cheek to his sternum. Cupping the back of her head, he inhaled the calming scent of jasmine.

“Be careful,” she said.

He snorted. “You don’t have to worry about me.”

She fit a strand of hair behind her ear. “Probably not, but I’d prefer you don’t die.”

He brushed his lips over hers and then brought his mouth to hover at her ear. “Not a chance. You and I are nowhere near done.” He pulled away and watched a tantalizing blush creep up her face.

She sent a nervous gaze around the room, but electricity still arced between them. He wasn’t lying. There were a million fucking things that needed sorting out in his head when it came to Savannah, but whether he’d get back into bed with her wasn’t one of them.

“Stay put.” He winked and followed Cole and Dallas to the door. Before leaving, he looked back. Savannah stood with her hands clamped in front of her. The color in her cheeks matched that of her lips, and all he wanted to do was grab her and drag her to the bedroom.

First things first.

“We’ll be fine,” Sophia called, as she waved.

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Why did it feel like he was trusting Sophia and Dare with his life?

“Any word on Lach’s phone?” Toth asked, glancing at Cole in the driver’s seat.

They’d ridden in silence for the last few minutes. The upscale hotels and chain restaurants had become apartments then run-down dwellings and local food joints. The afternoon sky was now overcast. Gray clouds blocked the sun, making the day chilly. They approached a building with a sign that read Seaside Inn.

“There it is.” Toth pointed.

“Got it,” Cole said. “Dallas texted. It’s free of malware so they found you guys some other way.”

Toth nodded. At the way things were going that didn’t surprise him. Nothing about this was easy.

Cole grunted. “I still think we’re doing this too soon.”

“Why’s that?” Toth shot back.

“Because I’d like to know who the mole is first.”

“I don’t see why that’s relevant when we’ve found Brett.” Toth nodded at the motel as Cole steered into the parking lot.

“We don’t know shit right now. All we know is that this is the last place he was spotted.” Cole unbuckled his seatbelt. “I’d prefer more intel before we make a move, but whatever. I’ll talk to reception.”

Toth held out his hand. “Let me do the talking.” Cole narrowed his gaze. Damn, the guy really didn’t like being out-alpha-ed. “No offense, but I might have more luck getting answers.”

Cole lifted a shoulder and grunted. “Fine.”

Toth slid out of the passenger seat. They crossed the parking lot, and Toth reached for the door to the office. A young woman sat behind the desk. Her red hair skimmed her shoulders, and she wore large black-framed glasses. Her eyes landed on Toth then darted to Cole. “Um, how can I help you?”

Toth pulled his card from his wallet and passed it to her. “I’m Toth, with Backcountry Protection Services. I’m looking for a man who was here earlier today. He may or may not be going by the name Brett Schlueter.”

The girl thumbed the card then swiveled in her chair to face her computer screen. She moved the mouse and moments later frowned. “Sorry, I don’t have anyone registered under that name.”

Cole stepped forward and held out his phone. “Have you seen this guy?”

She pushed her glasses higher on her nose and leaned forward to squint at his screen. A flicker of recognition flashed on her face. “I can’t say anything.” She sent a glance over her shoulder and chewed her lip. “But if you’re here to visit a friend, you could try room 109.” She handed back his card.

Awareness tingled in Toth’s spine. He glanced at the nameplate on the desk. “Nadine,

are you aware of who these people are? Are you in any danger?"

Nadine's gaze locked on his. A look of fear overtook her face. "There was a group here last night. Loud and disorderly. We had several complaints. When I went to speak to them, one of the men threatened me and told me not to call the cops." She straightened her spine. "I don't know who they are, but if you're here to remove them, I'll put on my headphones and keep my head down."

Toth and Cole exchanged a glance. This was it. They had Brett, and the sonofabitch wasn't going to see tomorrow.

CHAPTER 22

Savannah stared out the window at the harbor. She shouldn't be mad that Toth had gone off to find Brett without her, but dammit, she had the right to see the man who wanted her dead. To face the enemies from her past. As messed up as it was, maybe seeing Brett would give her some closure, would allow her to release some of the anger she'd buried for three years.

Brett was a huge tie to her past and her life with her ex. He'd been around almost daily. His snide remarks had caused more friction between Jace and her than there otherwise would have been.

He'd disgusted her then, but she despised him now.

"Mind if I sit?" Dare approached one of the two lounge chairs positioned in front of the large picture window.

She waved her hand at the seat beside her. "Not at all." She'd quickly come to appreciate this Holmes brother's less-intimidating manner. She couldn't say much about Dallas, as he hadn't been too chatty, but even so he'd still been more likable

than Cole.

Dare sat and cast his gaze out the window. Then his gray eyes landed on her. On the couch, Sophia spoke on the phone softly to her daughter.

“Do you have any more information?” Savannah asked.

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His face was somber, and a sense of heaviness surrounded him. “Are you aware that your dad spotted Brett a kilo of ice about three months ago?”

Her stomach churned in a violent sea of unease at the mention of crystal meth. Distaste coated her tongue in a clammy film. “No,” she said flatly. “I had no idea Brett was around at all. How do you know?”

“Apparently Brett defaulted on the loan,” Dare said dryly.

She knotted her hands in her lap. She was mostly numb to her father’s business dealings, but once in a while she saw her world through an outsider’s eyes and it made her a little sick. Knowing what her father did for a living was one thing. Having it read aloud to her by a stranger was another. There wasn’t anything she could do about her dad’s awful career.

Besides, she’d learned a long time ago that this was the way of the world. People bought and sold drugs, and while she didn’t have a part in that exchange, she wasn’t oblivious to it either. And she was far from innocent. Her role in Sinners Cartel didn’t involve selling drugs, but cornering small businesses into accepting work wasn’t high on any morality lists either. “Do you think that’s what caused this? Not Brett trying to get revenge for Jace’s death?”

He leaned forward and laced his fingers in front of his knees. “Could be.”

She sighed. “I want to see my father.”

Dare nodded in understanding. “I bet you do. When this is all done, Toth can take

you to him.”

She exhaled through her nose and stared at the sun dipping below the mountains. They could be gone all night. “Maybe if we confronted my dad, we could move things along faster.”

Dare’s eyes sharpened. “That’s not a good idea. We’re staying here.”

She smothered a growl of frustration. “I’m a prisoner now?”

“No. But it’s not smart for us to leave and put everyone at risk.” His words carried the weight of warning—he wouldn’t endanger Sophia. Not that she could blame him. Cole would probably have his head. “We’ll wait until they get back.”

Savannah swallowed. “All right.”

“If Brett’s there, we won’t have to wait long.” Dare winked and stood. “Hang tight.”

Toth’s body vibrated as he walked down the sidewalk. His brain registered each door number as he moved.

105, 106, 107...

He reached behind his back and snagged his 9mm. Cole followed suit a beat later. Toth stopped a few paces away from room 109’s window and slid his focus to Cole.

“I’m going to the other side.” Cole moved swiftly past the door and plastered his back to the wall, gun in hand.

Sweat tickled Toth's neck, the cool dampness wetting his shirt. His nerves jumped like a Doberman chained in a junkyard, waiting to attack an assailant.

Cole jerked his head toward the door, giving Toth the go-ahead to bust it open. The evening sky was a shade of indigo. There were only two cars in the parking lot, and the place was quiet except for the constant buzz of insects.

Cars whizzed by on the busy road fifty or so yards away.

"Psst," Cole hissed.

As far as avoiding civilian endangerment went, this mostly vacant area was probably the best they were going to get. Toth gave a nod, angled himself in front of the door, and lifted his leg. He stomped his boot into the wood and the cheap door bounced open. "Arms up!" Toth barreled into the room.

Cole came up behind him, fast and steady. Toth swept his weapon around in the tight space, taking in the dirty room. The scents of urine and rotting food made him curl his nostrils. Empty takeout containers and beer bottles were piled on the dinette table, and more shit covered the nightstands and the floor around the bed.

"Ugh. Christ." Cole bent his face to his elbow.

Toth fought down the urge to retch. The place was empty. The covers were in a heap on the floor and clothes were scattered around the room. "Fuck." He lowered his weapon.

"Hold up." Cole nodded at a pair of shoes near the front door.

Toth jerked up his gun and advanced on the bathroom. The door was slightly ajar. Using the toe of his boot, he pushed open the flimsy wood. "Jesus." This time he

ducked his head into the crook of his arm.

Cole stepped up beside him and grunted.

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Brett lay sprawled on the floor, his skin white and stiff looking, his eyes staring vacantly ahead. One blood-crusting bullet hole ate up the center of his forehead and a knife was stabbed through his hand, anchoring the extremity to the floor.

“What the fuck?” Toth wheezed.

Questions buzzed around in his mind as he stared at the dead man he hadn’t had the opportunity to kill. A rush of anger hit him. The motherfucker had tried to kill Savannah and had almost killed him in the process. He’d wanted vengeance. He’d wanted to make Brett pay, to carry out the act on Savannah’s behalf, but the bastard was already dead.

“The knife.” Cole pointed. “That’s a Sinners Cartel calling card.”

Toth’s stomach knotted. “Danny.”

“Right.” Cole took his phone from his pocket and snapped some photos of the corpse.

“This doesn’t make any fucking sense.” Toth backed out of the bathroom and tugged on his shirt collar. “The girl at the desk confronted Brett yesterday, and by the looks of things, his death isn’t too recent. He must’ve been murdered last night.”

“So why the hell hasn’t Danny called you?”

The muscles in Toth’s face tightened. “I don’t fucking know.”

But he’d damn well find out.

“What?” Savannah blinked as she stared at Toth.

He and Cole had returned much quicker than anticipated, and although she was glad he hadn’t been involved in a shoot-out, the news of Brett’s murder sat like lead in her stomach.

“Yup.” Toth peeled his gun from his waistband and set it on the dinette table then took a seat. “Was dead when we got there.”

Sophia looked worried. Dare maintained a blank expression, his eyes on his brothers.

“Hold on,” Sophia began. “This is a good thing. If he’s dead, then there’s no one out to kill Savannah—”

“We don’t know that for sure,” Toth interrupted.

“But it’s promising. I know you wanted to pull the trigger, but maybe this is for the best.”

“Except for one thing,” Cole said, his voice rough. He took out his phone and approached Savannah, holding the screen so she could see.

Brett’s body was slumped against a light-green bathtub. She closed her eyes and looked away. “That’s him.”

“Look at his hand,” Cole commanded.

“Leave her be.” Toth smacked Cole’s arm down.

“No, it’s okay,” she said, grabbing Toth’s bicep as if it were a lifeline. “Let me see.”

Cole studied her then shot Toth an annoyed glare and handed Savannah the device. Fighting to keep her focus off Brett’s lifeless face, she stared at his right hand. The handle of a knife protruded from it.

A ball of nausea grew in her stomach, puffing out like a balloon until the pressure hit her esophagus. “Oh my god.” The implications swirled around her, pulling her into a vortex she didn’t want to enter.

Toth’s arms circled her waist, pinning her to his chest. His palm covered the back of her head and she sucked in one ragged breath after another until his musky scent settled her.

“I take it that looks familiar,” Cole said dryly.

She nodded.

“Do you think your dad had that done?” Toth asked.

She’d witnessed her father’s ruthlessness. Had observed his wrath on more than one occasion. And she was well aware of Sinners Cartel’s ways: a knife through the hand prior to a bullet between the eyes.

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“Yeah.” The syllable came out meekly. “That was ordered by him. I’m sure of it.” She pulled away from Toth’s chest but stayed in his embrace. “I need to see my dad. Now.”

Toth’s hands were warm on her back. His fingers twitched, and she watched as his gaze slid around the room then back to her.

“Probably not a good idea right now,” Dare said from the couch.

Annoyance simmered inside her. She glanced over her shoulder. “I did what you guys asked. I sat here and waited. Well, I’m done.” She zeroed in on Toth. “I don’t need your permission and you don’t have to come. I’ll go by myself.”

He rubbed his palm over his beard. A spark lit his eyes. Appreciation, maybe. He cupped her chin. “You’ll be the fucking death of me.” Amusement played in his words.

She fought a grin. “Let’s go.” She turned and shoved her feet in her shoes. “Who’s coming?”

Toth crossed the room to rest his hand on the door handle, but his face was grim.

“I need to get Bella from Bart’s,” Sophia said, glancing at her watch.

“I’ll take you,” Cole offered.

Dare grunted. “Guess that leaves me.” A smile softened his statement.

Toth waved him off. “We’re good.”

Minutes later, nerves jumbled in Savanna’s stomach as she and Toth drove in silence through the downtown area. Night had long since fallen and dim stars glimmered over the harbor. If it weren’t for the bright city lights, the stars would have been more visible, as the sky was now free of clouds.

“You sure he’ll be at the warehouse?” Toth’s question pushed through the wall of anxiety in her head.

“Yeah. He’s always there Saturday nights. He likes to oversee distribution on weekends. Product gets picked up on Sundays.” As unsettling as it was to be part of Sinners Cartel’s workings, it was what she knew. She could no more easily learn to fly a plane than forget her dad’s business schedule.

They soon approached the familiar red-brick building. Toth steered down the alleyway behind the warehouse to the parking lot. Several cars were stationed beneath light poles, confirming that work was proceeding as usual.

He pulled into one of the reserved stalls near the front door, next to her dad’s luxury sedan. She got out and Toth followed. The memory of him tossing her over his shoulder when they left the building two nights ago hit her, and she fought a smile. Had it been only forty-eight hours ago that she’d wanted to kill this man? She’d found him infuriating, handsy, and annoyingly sexy. Now, she wanted nothing more than to return to the little cabin in the woods and get lost in ecstasy and forget the ugly reality of her world.

He opened the door and she went in ahead of him, but Toth quickly reached her side as they breezed down the lit cement hallway.

Her time with Toth had been a dream. For once in her life, she’d been someone’s

everything. He'd made her feel adored, wanted, and, dammit, loved. Which was ridiculous. But in all the years she'd been with Jace, he'd never made her feel valued the way Toth had. She'd been nothing more than a convenience to him, and someone he'd barely respected.

Now that Brett was dead, she no longer needed Toth's protection. That realization hit her like a bolt of lightning, zapping away the fuzzy warmth. She'd stupidly believed her world was no longer the dark, sordid place in which she'd been raised just because some guy had gone down on her and held her while she cried in front of a crackling fire.

"What the hell do you want?" Mark's glowering stare met them when they entered the main floor of the warehouse. He stood watch, hands clasped in front of him. A cast covered his knuckles to his elbow.

Beside her, Toth snickered.

Savannah swallowed over the rock forming in her throat and straightened her shoulders. "I'm here to see my dad." The explanation rang with a note of obviously.

Fury grew on Mark's face as he stared at Toth.

"Looks like that hurt," Toth said with a chuckle.

Savannah groaned and sent him an abolishing glare over her shoulder. "Let's get through tonight without any fights, okay?"

Toth held up an innocent hand. "Me? I'm cool, 'slong as he doesn't lay a hand on you."

Mark rocked his jaw back and forth and took a step away from the doorframe. "You

know where to find him.”

Savannah hooked her arm through Toth’s and pulled him past the rows of shipping containers packed with drugs. A group of guys sat at a table playing cards, and the acrid stench of cigarettes burned her throat. One man shouted and another laughed. The clank of beer bottles echoed through the room.

“Hopefully we can make this quick.” She led the way down the hall, passing another of her father’s men, Frank, who recognized her and nodded.

They reached her dad’s office, and she rapped her knuckles on the door. “Dad, it’s me.”

“Come in,” he called.

She pushed open the door and he stood. A cigar dangled from his lips and a short glass of scotch sat in front of him on his desk, next to his open laptop. Papers were scattered over the mahogany surface.

“Honey, I’m glad you’re back,” he said, his expression tense. “You’re early, though.” He looked at Toth accusingly.

Anger simmered in her blood. The fact that he stood there assuming she didn’t know about Brett made her temper flare.

She shut the door behind her. “What have you done?”

CHAPTER 23

Toth watched Danny’s demeanor change under the weight of Savannah’s allegation. His smile quickly morphed into a frown, and his eyes became glittering stones. Danny had two personalities: doting father and cold-blooded killer.

No in-between.

Toth fought the urge to step between Savannah and her father’s unrelenting stare. Doing so might make the situation more tense than it needed to be. He’d follow Savannah’s lead and if he sensed something amiss, he’d intervene.

“What do you mean, honey?” he said, his tone passive despite his expression.

“You killed Brett.”

Danny’s jaw popped open. He snapped it shut and then straightened, his face guarded. “How the hell do you know about that?” He once again shot his gaze to Toth, instantly dismissing Savannah. “Your job was to keep her out of harm’s way.”

“That’s right,” Toth said, without wavering. “And I’ll continue to protect her no matter where the threat comes from.” Ah, damn. He’d just opened fire.

Danny’s posture turned rigid. “You saying I’m a threat to my daughter, Holmes?”

“I’m saying the threat hasn’t been clear since day one. Whoever you’re feuding with ran us over the edge of a mountain then somehow found us at my cabin. You”—he jabbed a finger in Danny’s direction—“and Lach are the only people Savannah spoke to while we were there. We were forced to leave, and seeing as we don’t know who the mole is, we had to keep our return quiet.”

Danny’s expression quickly changed to one of concern. He rounded his desk and pulled Savannah into a hug. “I’m sorry, Savvy. It’s all over now.”

Toth’s blood pressure lowered a fraction as Savannah’s stance relaxed.

“We need to find out who the mole is,” she said softly, as she pulled out of his embrace.

“I agree. I’ve called Lach and he’s on his way. I was going to tell you about Brett, but I wanted to be sure there weren’t any other dangers lingering.” Danny shifted his gaze to Toth. “You kept her safe and I’m grateful. Give us a few minutes and we’ll get payment squared up.”

The comment was like a boot to his solar plexus. As if he cared about getting paid

anymore. He'd invested everything in keeping Savannah alive. His sanity, his life... and his heart, for fuck's sake. But Danny didn't know that. He had no idea Toth would take a bullet for her here and now and not ask for a penny.

He clasped his hands in front of him and locked gazes with Savannah. "Are you okay with me stepping out?"

She gave him a reassuring smile. "We won't be long. Don't go anywhere."

The constriction around his heart loosened. He nodded at Danny, who was staring at him with disapproval, then turned his attention back to Savannah. She held his gaze for a millisecond, but her face was calm. Still, his feet grew heavy and his gut told him to stay. Summoning his willpower, he retreated to the door. "I'll be outside." He exited the room.

Mark stood outside the office next to the guard who'd greeted Savannah moments before. Toth looked Mark up and down. "Need a hand with something?" he quipped.

Mark's scowl deepened. "Lach wants to see you in the main room."

Toth scoffed and bumped past Mark, moving down the short hallway. He reached the main area, which had been bustling with the card game when they entered. Now it was quiet. Toth's senses prickled. He started to turn around. "Where's L—"

Whack

Something solid slammed into the side of Toth's head. Stars erupted in his vision as he staggered. Rage shot through him, and he battled to focus through the rush of blood to his head.

Five men stood in front of him. Three of them had been playing cards. The other was

Mark and his buddy.

Ah, hell. He'd been up against worse odds than with these coked-out losers, but back then he'd never had Savannah to worry about.

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Toth curled his hands into fists. “Put that down and fight like a man.”

The guy holding the two-by-four smirked. “He’s pretty, ain’t he? I should knock out his front teeth.”

“Give it a try, punk.” Toth motioned for him to approach.

The man took a step forward and swung. Toth dodged to the side, grabbed the two-by-four, and shoved it backward, slamming the wood into the guy’s mouth.

Blood spurted out and teeth hit the cement with a tinkle.

“Fuck!”

Satisfaction arced through Toth despite the pulse of pain across his skull. He smiled at Mark. “You’re next, motherfucker.”

“Get him,” Mark commanded.

The three remaining men charged. The first man swung and Toth caught his fist in his palm and twisted it to the side. The man howled and his knees buckled as bone cracked. The next guy dove for Toth’s middle, but Toth didn’t go down. He brought his elbow down once, twice, three times on the back of the man’s head. His arms went slack and he crumpled to the ground.

Toth snorted at Mark as the man with the broken wrist toddled out of the room and the one with missing teeth staggered behind him. Only Mark and one other guy were

left besides the dude unconscious at Toth's feet. "That all you got?"

Mark grabbed something shiny clipped on his pants and flipped open a blade. The asshole next to him pulled out a gun. "No shots, Frank," Mark said, keeping his eyes on Toth. "We need to make it look like he attacked us before we kill him."

Toth laughed. "Good luck with that."

"Don't worry, the others are coming for her."

Toth blinked as reality clicked into place. Mark wasn't just after him. Mark wanted to take him out so he could get to Savannah.

"You go near her and I'll break every bone in your fucking body." The promise came out with such force it made his voice shake. The driving weight of panic made him want to storm into Danny's office and get Sav the fuck out of there immediately.

Mark turned to Frank and nodded. Frank lunged for Toth and shoved him back two steps before Toth recalibrated, grabbed Frank by his neck, and lifted him off the ground. He slammed him against the wall and drove three punches into his face. Blood spattered on his knuckles.

"Motherfucker!" Mark said from behind him.

He wheeled around, but Mark slashed the knife through the air before Toth could block it. The blade licked through Toth's skin, searing his nerve endings. Warm blood touched his forearm. Toth hissed and grabbed Mark's good arm. "You must have a jonesing for plaster." He bent Mark's arm to the side.

A cry sounded from behind him as Frank latched himself onto Toth's back, forcing his grip off Mark. Frank pulled his forearm against Toth's throat, cutting off his air.

Fury expanded inside him. Toth barreled backward, slamming Frank's back into the wall and pinning him there.

Mark scooped up the two-by-four and advanced. Toth's face heated. All the blood was trapped above Frank's grip. Oxygen leaked from his lungs. He pulled at Frank's arms but the fucker had a death grip. Frank reared back and a guttural sound came from Toth's throat as his need for air fought against his senses.

If he passed out, he'd be done.

Mark lifted the wood slab in his good hand and steadied it with his casted arm. He took a step forward. Toth kicked out, catching Mark in the knee. But the action took too much of his energy when his brain was already struggling without air. Mark growled and swung.

Wham!

Toth lifted his arm, blocking the blow. An ache exploded from his elbow to his neck.

"Fucking ox," Mark said, with impatience and disdain. He lifted the wood again and swung. Toth lifted his arm once more but Mark's swing went over it, striking Toth in the side of the head.

His vision wavered and pain buzzed in his ears. Mark struck again. Toth's knees buckled, and the concrete floor rushed up to greet him.

Sounds from the warehouse traveled to her father's office. And for the second time, the noises made Savannah pause. Her dad's confession had pacified some of her anxiety, but she still didn't understand.

“Just three months ago you fronted him drugs. Why would you do that? He was Jace’s best friend. Did you really think he wouldn’t hold a grudge against you for killing him?”

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Her dad grunted with impatience as he leaned next to her against the front of his desk. “I didn’t want to get involved with Brett, but I needed someone with his connections. He swore he didn’t hold any hard feelings over Jace, and fuck, that was three years ago.”

“So he screwed you.”

He nodded. “I think all of this was to screw me. Why he waited so long I don’t know.” He covered her hand with his. “Honey, everything I do is to protect you. You should know that.”

“Everything you do is to make money,” she countered.

His gaze flickered around her face. “After your mother died, I couldn’t live life the same again. Money and work are all I have besides you and your brother. I don’t know who else to be without her.”

Savannah’s heart softened. She’d spent so much of her life resenting him for controlling and using her to better his business, but he was the only father she had. Memories of how he’d suffered when her mom died struck her. Things weren’t the same after the car accident. She’d never seen him so bereft. He’d spent days in his home office, drunk and sobbing.

She and Lach had pulled him out of the rut he’d been in, and although he’d kept his chin up since, he clearly still struggled.

“I told your mom I’d protect you and your brother at all costs. I might’ve done a shit

job at everything else, but all that matters to me is keeping my promise to her.” His voice broke.

Tears welled in her eyes. “I—”

Bang!

Goosebumps rose on her arms and nausea tossed the bile in her stomach. “Dad, something’s going on out there.”

But he’d already straightened. He placed his hand on her shoulder. “Stay here.” He rounded his desk and pulled a Glock from the drawer.

Bang!

The office door bounced open and two men stormed in wearing black ski masks.

“Savannah, get down!” her dad bellowed, as he aimed and fired at the men.

Shots blasted. She screamed and dove to the floor. Glass shattered and bullets whacked into wood and drywall, sending debris flying everywhere. Fear, hot and pungent seared the back of her throat as she scampered around the desk for cover.

Her dad cried out in pain, and a body hit the floor with a thud. For a moment, she heard only silence. She looked at the ground next to the desk. Blood blossomed from his chest. Everything moved in slow motion.

“Dad!” The squeak ripped from her heart.

She crawled across the distance that separated them and clasped his outstretched hand. She placed her other palm on his cheek. “Dad, please,” she sobbed.

His eyes locked on hers. “Shoot,” he croaked. He shakily passed her his gun. She rose up on her knees from her crouched position allowing the desk to cover her, aimed at one of the men advancing on her dad, and fired.

The shot struck his neck and blood spluttered out to spray the carpet. The man clapped his hand over the wound and dropped. She watched him grapple with his gun and aim as blood gushed through his fingers. She ducked behind the desk. Bullets ripped into the wall behind her.

“Don’t fucking shoot—we need her.” The stomp of boots sounded behind her. Thick fingers snagged a handful of her hair and yanked her to her feet. Another hand tore the weapon from her fingers. Terror climbed up her spine and pinched her nerves. Tears blurred her vision.

She let out a howl as the man dragged her from her father and out of the room. “No!”

He lifted her over his shoulder. “Don’t fight. No one’s coming for you.”

Her wide eyes spotted the man she’d shot, his vacant stare on the ceiling.

The man carrying her didn’t stop to assess his friend. He stormed down the hall, and her gaze took in Mark and Frank. Mark nodded at whoever carried her while Frank mopped blood from his nose and mouth with his sleeve. Two men were on the floor. One she recognized from the card game earlier. Her attention drifted to the other man. Gray T-shirt, built shoulders. Blood oozed from his temple to roll down the familiar chiseled jaw. Despair washed over her and fresh tears burned her eyes.

No!

“Toth!” The scream ripped from her lungs as the man carried her through the warehouse and out the back door.

God, please don't let him be dead.

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A deep throbbing at Toth's temples cinched his skull together. The smell of dust swarmed him and cold cement chilled his cheek.

The shrill cry of his name echoed in the chambers of his mind. The panic in the voice struck a chord in his heart, forcing him out of a state of unconsciousness.

Sav.

She was in danger. They'd gotten to her—all because of him. Anger fissured through him. If they touched her, he'd tear them apart.

"He's alive. Grab him." Rough arms seized his biceps and hauled him to stand.

Toth jerked out of their hold. The action made him teeter from the balls of his feet to his toes, but he stayed standing. A gush of wakefulness pinged inside his head. "Where is she?"

Mark smirked. "Gone."

Something snapped inside him. He lunged at Mark, closing his hand around his throat. Mark grappled at Toth's hold with his good hand. Using all his strength, Toth crushed his fingers together. Something popped inside Mark's throat.

"Let him go." Frank aimed a gun at him. Toth yanked Mark in front of him just as Frank fired.

Crack, crack!

Mark's back jolted against Toth's chest as two bullets entered him.

Frank shouted, and horror crossed his face. Toth threw Mark to the ground and charged at Frank. He gripped the guy's shirt and threw him to the concrete floor. The gun skittered out of his hold as Frank's back connected with cement, making a sickening sound.

Toth pulled back his fist and jabbed Frank in the mouth. Blood sprayed from his already split lip and a dazed look crossed his face. Rage made Toth draw back his hand again, but he didn't let loose.

Frank was the only person who could tell him where they'd taken Sav.

"Where is she?" he demanded again.

Frank shook his head. "I don't fucking know!"

Toth delivered another punch to his face. The back of Frank's head banged off the floor and he groaned. His eyes rolled in his head, and impatience gripped Toth's sanity.

They were wasting time. He leaned over and grabbed the discarded gun then pinned Frank's hand to the floor.

"No, no," Frank said, jerking with alarm.

A steadying calm settled over Toth's nerves. He'd slaughter every sonofabitch who stood in his way. "Tell me what you know."

CHAPTER 24

“Let me go!” Savannah cried, as her captor whooshed out the back exit of her father’s warehouse.

Intense fear sucked the moisture from her mouth, and hysterical gulps punctuated her breathing.

The brick building that had always seemed like a fortress, a place safe and intimidating to anyone who knew who owned it, filled her vision. Now a man carried her from it while her father and Toth, the strongest and most capable men in her life, bled out inside.

No one was coming to her aid. No more shots were being fired, none of her father’s off-duty men were running her way. Just... silence.

Beep,beep

A car door unlocked and then the sound of a trunk opening reached her ears. Terror coated her skin in its cold film. “Help!” she shrieked. “Someone help!”

The man swung her through the air. Her back connected with the floor of the trunk, but before she could retaliate, he wrestled her onto her stomach. She kicked and squirmed, but he leaned inside, placing his knee between her shoulder blades. His clawlike fingers captured her wrists and wound duct tape around them, tying them together behind her back.

A rough cloth sack was rammed down over her head, blocking her vision. He gave her one last shove with his knee, driving her chest into the floor and forcing the air from her lungs.

Clank

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:56 am

The lid closed and darkness surrounded her.

Oh god. Oh no.

Delirium crackled in her eardrums and her throat squeaked on each breath as a scream threatened to erupt from her lungs.

Calm down. Screaming is no use.

She had to keep her shit together and think.

But how could she plan her own escape when her dad had been shot right in front of her and Toth lay on the floor, dead or unconscious?

Emotion rushed through her. She'd never understood her father, but that didn't mean she didn't love him, despite what she'd said earlier. And no matter how angry he made her, she didn't want him to die. She sniffed back tears and swallowed the lump pressing against the walls of her throat.

Toth had done nothing but risk his life for her. She'd made him take her to see her father when he hadn't thought it was a good idea. Had she not been so stubborn, he'd be alive and she wouldn't have been taken.

She hadn't seen a bullet wound on Toth. The only visible injury had been to his head.

There was a chance, albeit a small one, he was still alive.

That maybe he'd pull through and find her.

She closed her eyes on a prayer, but her heart ached with despair. Even if Toth survived, he'd never catch up to them. Never know who'd taken her.

She was as good as dead.

“Hey!” a man bellowed.

Toth jerked up his head and stared at Lach closing in on him, gun drawn and aimed between his eyes.

“What the fuck did you do?” Lach's voice pitched with agitation as his gaze swept the room and then landed back on him.

Toth kept pinning Frank down. “It's not what it looks like.”

Lach approached, and his glare flicked between the two bodies on the floor. “Looks like you took everyone out.”

“They attacked first. I heard shots—you need to check on your dad. And I think someone took Savannah. I heard her scream.”

Lach's face sobered. A look of mistrust crossed it. “You're the only one standing and you expect me to believe you didn't initiate this?”

“Fuck, use your head!” Toth bellowed. “You knew Sinners Cartel had a mole. If I wanted to hurt Savannah, I'd have fucking done it while she was with me the last two days. If you don't help me now, they're going to kill her, if they haven't already.”

The accusing expression left Lach's face as he assessed the events. "Stay here," he commanded. Lach stormed past Toth toward his father's office.

"Shit!" Lach's broken yell reached Toth's ears.

Toth ground the mouth of the gun into the back of Frank's hand. "Start fucking talking."

"All's I know is what Mark told me to do. He was working for someone on the outside. A rival. That's what he said."

"I want a name," Toth growled.

"I don't have a fucking name!"

Toth moved his finger on the trigger.

Crack!

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:56 am

The smack of metal entering bone made a grotesque noise, and blood splattered across the floor and onto Toth's sleeve.

"Ahh!" Frank screamed. His face twisted with agony. Toth pushed down the gun on the fresh wound, making the pussy's legs kick and his body twist as the pain intensified.

"Name."

"I—I don't fucking know!"

Toth clamped his teeth together. "How'd they find us?"

Frank's features contorted as if he didn't want to squeal. Toth pressed the gun down harder and Frank twisted, his eyes bugging out.

"All right, fuck! Mark had me put a tracking device on your car when you and Savannah came to see Danny."

Toth sucked in a breath of stale air. Dammit to hell and back. When he'd picked Savannah up at her apartment a couple days ago, right before she'd been shot at, he'd done a sweep and hadn't found any bugs or tracking devices.

But when he'd had to carry her reluctant ass out of the warehouse and to his car, he hadn't swept again.

Which explained how they'd found them. Lord, fuck.

Lach came out of the hallway, his face stark white. “Dad’s alive. I called an ambulance. He confirmed that masked men came and took Savvy. Can’t say whether or not you were involved, but”—Lach swallowed—“but it makes sense Mark was the mole.”

Devastation crossed Lach’s face, and he brought his fist to his head. “If Dad survives the bullet wound, he won’t recover if something happens to Savvy. We have to find her before it’s too late.”

Toth stood, and Frank withered at his feet. “You deal with him and I’ll make a call.” He grabbed Lach’s shoulder and gave him a shake. “We’ll find her. I swear to fucking god we’ll find her.” The words sprung from a deep cavern in his chest.

Lach’s eyes misted, and he gave a nod. Then his expression hardened and he pushed past Toth and knelt next to Frank. “You’re in for a treat if you think that hurts.”

Toth pulled his phone from his pocket and dialed Dare.

He answered on the third ring. “Yeah.”

“It’s me. They took—” The words lodged in his throat. “They took Savannah.”

“Jesus,” Dare hissed. Silence followed, as if he’d lowered the phone for a second and then brought it back to his lips. “Where are you?”

“Sinners Cartel headquarters.” He gave Dare the location. “But an ambulance is on the way. Danny’s been shot. Cops’ll probably be here, too.”

“Get out of there before you get held up. Come to my place. I’ll text you the address.”

“All right.” He cut his gaze to Lach, who was beating Frank in the face with the butt

of the gun. At this rate, the dude wouldn't know his own name, let alone anyone else's. "Lach will be with me, too."

"That's fine."

Toth hung up then approached Lach. Catching him by the shoulder, he stopped the next blow to Frank's face. "We need to get out of here before the cops arrive."

Lach shot him a look of reproach. "I'm not fucking leaving my dad."

"What do you think he'd want you to do? Find Savannah or give police statements and probably end up in jail?" Toth gestured around the room. "You think the cops won't take advantage of the situation and find out what's in all these crates?"

Lach's eyes turned cold and deadly. Frank's head slumped to the side. Lacerations covered his already purpling face. Lach stood, dragging his hand through his blond hair. Clearly the dude was rattled and couldn't put a coherent thought together.

"Can you access the video footage from the cameras?" Toth asked, gesturing to the many surveillance lenses stationed around the warehouse.

"Yeah. It's all online."

"Good. Then we need to get out of here now."

Lach nodded and followed Toth as he left the warehouse. Piercing sirens filled the night as Toth made his way to his vehicle.

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“I’ll follow you,” Lach said, sliding into his luxury sports sedan.

Toth peeled out of the parking lot, Lach close behind him. He plugged Dare’s address into his GPS and followed turn-by-turn directions as he wove out of the industrial district, through the downtown core, and onto the interstate. He drove on autopilot, his mind a million miles from the road and on one thing only: Sav.

He never should have left her. Never should have fucking assumed they were untouchable in the warehouse or that Danny was capable of protecting her. He’d reduced forces when the stakes were at their highest, and his stupidity might have just gotten Sav killed.

Jesus. The odds of her being alive were slim to none. Whoever had shot Danny hadn’t intended to kill but to render him defenseless while his daughter was taken. Toth’s mind worked at warp speed. With Brett dead, there were a few possibilities. Brett’s men wanted vengeance, Brett had been working for someone else, or, the most unlikely, Red Eyez was a threat.

He hadn’t had the chance to question Danny about why he’d pegged Red Eyez as the culprit, especially if Danny was dealing with Brett. He had to look at this from all angles and not assume it had everything to do with Brett and Lionsgate, although they were the most likely suspects.

The GPS chirped for him to take the next exit. The area was quiet. Large one- and two-story homes dotted the subdivision. Towering pine trees filled the spaces between and behind the houses, making the area seem even more secluded.

The automated voice told him he was at his destination. A brick-and-siding house sat at the end of a long double-wide driveway. Anticipation fired through Toth. Lach's headlights shone in his rearview mirror as Toth rolled to a stop.

He leaped out of the car, not waiting for Lach. A second later the slam of Lach's car door echoed in the night. Toth knocked on the solid wood door. The sound of hurried footsteps reached his ears and the door was yanked open.

"Come in," Dare said, stepping back.

A warmly lit foyer greeted him. Sweeping, wide-planked hardwood floors stretched through the main floor and a staircase climbed to the second level. Toth and Lach removed their shoes and stepped onto the blue-and-taupe-colored area rug.

A woman padded in from the living room, her brown hair pulled back into a high ponytail and her eyes sharp and concerned. She wore an oversized black sweatshirt that looked big enough to be Dare's and neon-pink yoga pants.

"This is my fiancée, Tess." Dare brought his hand to her back.

Tess smiled and shook Lach's hand then Toth's. "Dare told me your girlfriend is missing. We're happy to help."

Girlfriend?

The word, so simple yet so fucking heavy, hit him right in the heart. Part of him wanted to correct Tess, but the fact of the matter was that it felt right.

Except she's not your girlfriend, dumbass.

Ah, well. Things to sort through in his head later.

“Thanks.” He ignored Lach’s curious glare—surely wondering if Toth was banging his sister—and shifted his gaze to Dare. “We need to hurry.”

Dare waved him into the open-concept dining and living room. A large fireplace was the focal point, and pictures filled frames on the wall. Two laptops and some foreign devices were set up on the dining room table.

“What’s all this?”

Tess pulled out a chair and sat then gestured for Toth to take the one beside her. He brushed away the offer. No fucking way could he sit.

She curled in her lips as if she understood.

Dare turned the screen to face Toth and Lach. “I managed to hack Sinners Cartel’s security footage. Hope you don’t mind,” he said dryly, looking at Lach.

Lach grunted. “Saved us some time.”

Dare pointed to three men in balaclavas. “These guys stormed in at 9:22 p.m.” He lifted his wrist and glanced at his watch. “Fifty minutes ago.”

Angst chewed a hole in the lining of Toth’s stomach. He clenched his jaw as he stared at the masked men he’d slaughter later. “Fast-forward,” he commanded.

Dare’s eyes darkened, but he did as Toth asked, moving the clip at a quick pace to show the men bursting toward Danny’s office. Toth’s body was visible in one of the frames, unconscious on the floor. Shame filled him. He’d let two chumps take him down, and in those brief moments, Savannah had been snatched. Had he fought harder, just stayed fucking conscious, they wouldn’t have succeeded.

But they had. Because he'd failed. Hate collided with self-pity, and he balled his hands into fists to stop himself from putting a hole in the wall. With every breath, it was an effort for him to keep his fury in check.

The next few seconds showed one of the men carrying Savannah over his shoulder. "Where's the other guy?"

"Dad's office," Lach said. "He was shot in the neck. Dead when I got there."

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Toth snapped his gaze to Lach. “Did you get an ID?”

Lach pulled out his phone and showed them a picture of the man’s face, his mask pulled up. He swiped the screen. “Here’s his driver’s license.”

“Wendell Lamburg,” Toth read aloud.

“On it.” Tess turned the other laptop toward her and pounded the keyboard.

Impatience racked Toth’s nerves. “Anything else we can do?” He bit back the curses burning his tongue. They were trying, but god help him, if he’d come here just to watch footage he could have viewed from Lach’s phone, he’d lose his shit.

“I got a plate number,” Dare said. “Was just looking it up when you knocked.” He flicked to a different tab and tapped a few keys. “Vehicle’s registered under... holy shit.” He pointed at a name on the screen.

Brett Schlueter.

“The fuck?” Toth leaned in close as Brett’s driver’s license photo popped up. “He was killed last night. I saw the body. You know that.”

Dare nodded. “We’re gonna need some help. We’ve got two names.”

Toth exhaled and dragged his hand down his face. “But we don’t havetime, for Christ’s sake.”

Dare was already on the phone. He hit the speaker button as the line rang.

“Yeah?” Cole said abruptly.

“I need to talk to Sophia.”

“Why?” Cole demanded.

“It’s urgent.”

Cole made an annoyed sound. “Make it quick, dude.” A beat passed. “Here, babe. Dare wants to talk to you.”

“Hello?” Sophia’s soft, curious voice came through the line.

Tension pulled at the muscles in Toth’s neck. If something didn’t give soon, he’d be done. He’d just fucking break. Odds of Savannah being alive, damn near an hour after she’d been kidnapped, were next to zero.

That realization hit him with the force of a baseball bat to his chest.

“We need your help,” Dare said into the phone, his gaze locked on Toth’s. “And it’s messy as fuck.”

No shit. In forty-eight hours, his life had been turned upside down. Just a few days ago, he’d struggled only with the memories of war that came to claim his dreams. He’d been focused on building his business, making money, and enjoying a little downtime with whatever hot piece of ass he wanted.

Now, holy fuck. Now, he had whiplash trying to remember who he’d been before he met Sav.

One thing was for damn sure: he wasn't the same. And if he didn't get her back, he'd never find out who he was meant to be...

Or who he'd been to her.

CHAPTER 25

Savannah greedily sucked in one breath after another. Fibers from the burlap bag entered her nose and tickled her throat. She had to stay calm. Breathing as heavily as she was would only deplete the oxygen in the confined trunk. Her heart beat in triple time, the pounding sharp against her ribcage.

She was still alive—that was a plus, right?

The car had shifted from a stop-and-go pattern to a smooth, uninterrupted ride.

He was taking her out of town.

The realization crashed around her, making her choke on a gasp. He was taking her to the woods to kill her. That was the only explanation. The car went around a bend, causing her to roll onto her side.

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She squirmed to reposition her hands, but with them tied behind her back she couldn't do much. Mustering all her strength, she stretched until her muscles screamed, feeling around the bottom of the trunk for something she could use to cut her hands free. Nothing. She scootched so that her head was facing the rear of the car and her back was along the side.

Sweat dampened the scratchy sack against her face. Her shoulder blades ached and every muscle in her body wanted to give up and rest. But she couldn't. Every second counted. Any minute now he could stop, drag her into the trees, and put a bullet in her head.

Fight mode fired up inside her. She wouldn't leave this world easily. No friggin' way. She ran her bound hands along the wall of the trunk. Come on, come on. Please, God.

Her knuckles brushed a net. She had something similar in her car, to stow items so they didn't roll around in the trunk. Pulling at the strings, she got her fingers over the top of the net and touched something cold and hard. She dragged her fingertips over the handle and down to a pointed end: a screwdriver.

Her fingers trembled as she clung to the weapon. But dammit, she couldn't use it with her hands tied behind her back. She had to free herself. Placing the screwdriver on the floor at her back, she focused her attention on the bindings. All her movement combined with the dampness of her skin had loosened the glue on the tape—but not enough. She stretched her wrists apart, letting out a loud grunt as the tape stayed in place.

She panted, and the material of the bag stuck to her lips, stealing what little moisture

she had in her mouth. She shook her head and struggled to take a few deep breaths. If she didn't get enough oxygen she'd pass out. Then she'd really be screwed.

Summoning all her power, she rubbed her wrists together vigorously. The tape pulled on her skin and fine hair, rubbing her raw. But after a minute or so the glue gave way and the duct tape loosened. Her damp shirt clung to her chest as she wriggled one hand free.

Hallelujah!

Tears of relief misted her eyes as she yanked off the remainder of the tape and brought her hands to lift the sack off her head. The air of the trunk was several degrees cooler than the air inside the bag, allowing her to breathe more normally. She wiped the moisture from her face with trembling hands. Her skin burned and her arms and neck tingled from exertion, but now she had a fighting chance.

The vehicle slowed.

Her pulse shot through the roof. Gravel crunched beneath the tires as the car made a turn. Red-hot panic buzzed through her brain, bringing her near a state of delirium. Her vision waned with fear so great her sanity threatened to snap.

She couldn't lose it.

Blinking rapidly to force away the mind-crushing hysteria, she reached behind her back and grabbed the handle of the screwdriver. The vehicle lurched to a stop, bringing her heart to a screeching halt with it.

She inhaled a breath of stale air, repositioned the sack over her head, and rolled to face the rear of the car so he wouldn't see her freed hands when he opened the lid. She tightened her grip around the screwdriver behind her back. Her sweaty palms

were slick on the smooth plastic.

The car door slammed shut and rocks and dirt crunched beneath her attacker's footsteps. One shaky breath after another wheezed through her nose. His footsteps stopped and her blood pressure skyrocketed.

She had to move fast. Couldn't hesitate.

The lid flung open.

Cool air rushed in, forcing out the sweltering heat. She stifled a gasp as her attacker grabbed her bicep and hauled her into a sitting position. Only the outline of his frame was visible through the cloth on her head. She'd have to take aim and pray. His other hand caught her under her arm, and he hoisted her out of the trunk.

Terror chomped at the base of her spine as she drew her arm from behind her back and stabbed the screwdriver at his neck.

"Ah, Christ!" he howled. He let go and she staggered away, ripping off the sack. The night air rushed against her warm skin as she broke into a run.

"Bitch!"

She clutched the screwdriver as her feet pounded the gravel. Her brain worked in triple-time, taking in her surroundings. A lone cabin stood among the pines in front of her. Familiarity struck her.

I've been here before.

Shoving the thought from her mind, she raced into the shrouded arms of the woods.

Leaping over logs and ducking under needly branches, she didn't stop running. She sent a frantic glance over her shoulder and fear split her sides.

Her pursuer stormed along her path, the ski mask still covering his face. Tears stung her eyes. He was going to kill her. "Help!" The scream ripped from her throat, echoing through the forest. Birds cawed and scattered, fleeing from her torment.

His footsteps pummeled the earth. He was getting closer.

"Someone, help!" she cried again, straining her vocal cords.

Her breath came out in rapid pants, abrading her already raw throat. She wouldn't give up. Couldn't stop running.

She skirted a bush and her arm scraped against a tree, throwing her off balance. A root caught her toe and she went down hard to the gnarly dirt.

His laugh reached her ears.

No!

She scampered on the ground, but a rough hand snagged her hair, dragging her to her knees. Pain scorched her scalp. Twisting, she drove the sharp end of the screwdriver into his thigh. The metal sunk through meaty skin, and he bellowed. She felt her hair slip through his fingers.

Leaping to her feet, she took flight again. But after two steps a weight slammed against her back, sending her to the ground. Damp earth met her cheek and lips. She struggled to brace herself with her hands and push him off.

She let out a cry, but the crushing load of his body made the sound weak. His hand clamped roughly over her mouth, driving mud between her teeth. Dirt and pine invaded her senses.

“I’m going to enjoy every fucking minute of this,” he growled into her ear. His spit misted her skin. He tore the screwdriver from her fingers and threw it into the trees. “You’re mine.” The salacious vow shook her. Alarm blazed in her heart.

He meant it.

Tears leaked from her eyes as he seized her arm and dragged her to her feet, shoving her in the direction of the cabin. Horrific images of what he’d do to her once they were inside blipped through her mind. His promise replayed in her head.

I'm going to enjoy every fucking minute of this.

No, no, no.

If he got her there, she'd never escape.

She pivoted and drove her fist into his face. His head snapped back but he didn't let go. She heaved her weight away from him, but he only clung tighter. "Let me go!" She kicked and punched.

Rage filled the brown eyes beneath the mask. He drew back his fist and punched her in the face. Flaming pain erupted on her cheekbone, and she staggered.

Wham!

Another blow hit her temple, driving her to her knees. Then the man knelt in front of her, slipped his fingers beneath his mask, and tore the material from his head. A ragged gasp escaped Savannah's lips and she covered her mouth with dirt-filled fingers.

Jace.

Disbelief made her blink. No. It couldn't be. "You—But—"

His lip curled. "What, you thought your old man killed me? Nah, he did much worse'n that."

She stared, studying the features that she'd once looked at every day. He'd changed. His normally finger-length brown hair was now a crew cut. His brown eyes had once been soft. Even when he'd been cruel, she'd always seen a glimmer of regret or guilt cross his face. Now, his eyes glowered at her with hatred. His lips were compressed

into a firm line and his once-slim cheeks were fuller, the build of his body heavier.

She shook her head. “I don’t understand,” she breathed.

Tears burned her eyes and terror buzzed along her nerve endings.

Jace is alive.

Oh, god. Her father had lied. But why?

She scooted back a few inches, needing distance from him as much as she needed to be free. The events of the last few days ran through her mind. Being shot at outside her apartment. Run off the side of the mountain and hunted like a pathetic animal. “You did all this?” The question came out shakily.

Jace’s hand grabbed her neck and pulled until her face was inches from his. His eyebrows came together over his nose. “I’m going to make him fucking suffer. When I’m done with you, he’ll wish I’d killed him instead.”

Wham!

The third hit to her head made her vision fade. Jace let go and she fell to her side. The world tilted. The stars became a glittering mosaic beyond the trees overhead. She blinked, clinging to consciousness, but like the tide receding, her awareness faded to black.

“Toth.”

She whispered his name like a mantra as her breath leaked from her lips.

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Toth paced Dare's living room, the blue-and-taupe carpet turning into a dizzying pattern. Adrenaline kicked his nerves into overdrive as his mind spun like tires stuck in mud.

"How long's this going to take?" he finally blurted, pausing to shoot an impatient look at Dare.

Tess stopped what she was doing on the laptop and sent a sympathetic glance his way, but Dare looked a little less compassionate and a lot more annoyed. "Look, we're trying to help. If you've got a better fucking lead, take it."

"Babe," Tess admonished.

Standing next to Dare's chair, Lach opened and closed his fists. "He's right. We appreciate your help, but this is taking too much fucking time. Who knows what they could have done—"

Ring,ring!

Dare's phone screen lit up. He snatched the device off the table and swiped. "Yeah."

"Hey, it's me." Sophia's voice came over the speaker. "I'm still waiting on the names you gave me, but I found out some interesting things."

Toth inhaled, and the ticking of his impatience rapped against his temple. He couldn't stay idle anymore. He glanced at Lach. The guy looked ready to jump out of his skin. An agreement passed between them. They couldn't wait here any longer.

“What do you got?” Dare asked, leaning back in his seat nonchalantly, as if Sav’s life weren’t teetering in the balance.

Slim fingers squeezed his forearm. “It’ll be okay,” Tess whispered. “This is what they do.”

Questions billowed in Toth’s mind, but he didn’t give enough of a shit to ask them right now.

“Like I said, I’m still waiting on intel from my contact at the department. But one thing came up regarding Danny.” Sophia’s voice trailed off, as if she was reading something. “The file we have on him is sparse, which is shocking considering the stuff we know he’s involved with.”

“What came up?” Dare asked.

She tsked. “He was working with Detective Clyde Burrows. I know him, but not well. Looks like these two had an understanding—”

“You mean Burrows was bought by Danny.”

A beat passed. “That’s possible, of course. But what I’m seeing is Danny made some kind of trade. Three years ago, he made a deal with Burrows. Now that’s where things become a little murky. I can’t find out what the terms are exactly, but information was traded. I’m going to need time to track it down—”

Toth threw his arms in the air. Dare sent him an annoyed glare. He pinched the bridge of his nose, using all his willpower not to snap at the only help he had.

“I’m sorry, I know that’s not what you need right now,” Sophia said. “But I have something else.”

Toth dropped his hand. Hope flourished inside him.

“Wendell Lamburg, the guy who was shot in Danny’s office, he was in jail until last year. I’m waiting to find out who his cellmate was, and for a list of people incarcerated at the same time.”

“How long will that take?” Toth asked, keeping his tone flat even though he wanted to yell.

“Twenty minutes. I asked my friend to call me as soon as any details are found, as every minute counts.”

Toth nodded. “Thank you.”

Dare exchanged a few more words with Sophia then hung up. “Sorry, bro,” he said, his face pinched with regret. “I don’t know how to move things along faster.”

Despair washed over him. He’d failed Sav when she was taken from the warehouse and now he was fucking failing her again.

“Hold on,” Tess cried. She waved them over, her gaze glued to the screen in front of her. “I’ve been tracing the plate we got from Danny’s parking lot.”

Toth’s gut revolted at the mention of the moment he’d watched on camera—Sav being forced into a trunk. He gripped the back of Tess’s chair for support. “What am I looking at?” He peered at the grainy photo of a car.

“The last photo of the plate was taken...” She hovered the cursor over the time stamp at the bottom of the image. “Twenty minutes ago, on Coal Creek Parkway SE.”

Toth’s mind clicked the information together in rapid succession. “Lots of forest out

that way,” he said.

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“Yeah,” Lach said, his face pale. “He could be taking her there.”

“Let’s go.” Toth jerked his head in Lach’s direction and crossed the living room.

“We’ll keep a lookout and call if we spot them again,” Dare said.

Toth waved in acknowledgment, but his mind was already ten steps ahead. “Let’s take one car,” he instructed.

Toth got behind the wheel of his vehicle and Lach took shotgun. Seconds later they ripped out of the driveway in the direction of Coal Creek.

“They could be anywhere,” Lach said, as he buckled his seatbelt.

Toth’s vehicle chimed at him to do the same, and he scoffed with irritation as he complied. Fucking techy cars. He stomped his foot on the gas and took the next turn without stopping for the sign.

“If you get us pulled over it’ll slow us down even more.”

Toth grunted. He couldn’t worry about traffic violations when he couldn’t even fucking think straight. “I gotta call Rami. We’ll need backup.”

He called his partner and filled him in on the details. Rami promised to head in the same direction.

“What are the odds they’ll find another camera shot of his plate?” Lach asked, as

Toth merged onto the interstate.

Toth didn't want to acknowledge how few resources they had to go on. Didn't want to think about what could have happened in the twenty-something minutes since the last photo was taken and what could happen in the fifteen minutes it'd take for them to reach that point. Getting to the road the picture had been snapped on would do dick-all if they didn't get another clue really goddamn fast. "Don't know."

"So we're just hoping at this point?"

Toth locked his jaw. "Maybe we need to think like him. I've gone to Coal Creek a few times and hiked in the area. But what else could be out that way?"

"You mean besides a place to dump a body?" Lach asked, his tone derisive, as if Toth were dumber than a rock.

His temper racked up a notch. "Look. Until we know who has her, we have to assume there's a reason he didn't shoot her alongside your dad, right? He could have put a bullet in Danny's head, but he didn't. He could've killed her right then and there but didn't. So the question is why. What's he want with her?"

Lach nodded. "You're right. This isn't about revenge—or at least that's not the only angle. This guy wants something. Has to be money."

A little bit of hope dissolved some of the agony in his chest. They were right. Had to be. Which meant they had time. "Call your dad. Make sure he keeps his phone on in case someone else calls."

Lach pulled out his device. "Shit. I should've sent someone to the hospital to be with him. I hope he's okay." He tapped the screen then pressed speaker.

“Yeah,” a groggy voice answered.

“Dad? Are you alright?”

Danny coughed. “I was shot in the fucking chest.” Then he grunted. “I’ll be fine. Heading into surgery soon. Tell me you found your sister.”

A second clipped by. “We’ve got a possible location. I’ll keep you posted. Keep your phone close in case someone calls for ransom. And let me know when you get out of surgery.” Lach ended the call and slipped his phone into his pocket.

Toth navigated the interstate with his foot damn near the floor. He weaved in and out of traffic, not giving a fuck about the people honking at him. This time, Lach didn’t comment on him getting pulled over. Less than ten minutes later, signs for Coal Creek came into view.

“There,” Toth said, pointing at the next exit.

“Good,” Lach said with a sigh. “I’ve been thinking about Mark and wondering if he was working with Red Eyez or another gang.”

“Yeah. Could be someone else in the organization, too. A disgruntled employee or business, maybe. If you can think of any other names, get ’em to Dare.”

Lach grunted. “Nothing yet.”

Anticipation beat through him. They didn’t have much, but they’d made some progress. Whoever had dared to fucking touch Savannah was going to die tonight.

CHAPTER 26

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:56 am

The knocking on Savannah's forehead spread to her temples. She squeezed her eyes together against the blistering pain as awareness crept into her senses. She was lying on something hard. A floor. The scent of dust and wood wafted to her nostrils.

Memories rushed back at the speed of a rocket. She'd been attacked, no, kidnapped and then beaten in the woods.

Jace. She shivered with horror.

All this time, she'd thought he was dead. The fact that he'd lived and breathed these last three years while she suffered made angry tears sting her eyes. Seeing his face hovering over hers in the woods had been like a violent kick to her senses, sending her back in time three years.

She'd barely survived the last time she'd tried to run from him...

The knocking continued, a ferocious headache. She forced open her eyes and took in a large living room. The brick fireplace near her head and the brown leather furniture were somehow familiar. She tilted her chin slightly. A staircase led to the second floor, and the kitchen beyond had a table long enough to seat twelve. Exposed wooden beams stretched across the length of the house—this feature had always been her favorite. She remembered now. She'd spent the odd weekend here with Jace. Sometimes he used the space as an escape, or for a guys' weekend. He'd inherited the place from his grandparents and had talked about selling it.

When they were dating, Jace had sometimes grabbed her roughly or gotten in her face, but he'd never struck her. Her face throbbed, and she brought her fingertips to

the sore, delicate skin on her cheekbone. The flesh around her eye was puffy. She'd do just about anything for ibuprofen.

No one knew she was here. But she knew the house and the property. Knew the neighbors to the left of the six-acre lot.

All she had to do was get outside again.

She fought to keep from wheezing through her nose. She needed to be quiet. Without lifting her head, she moved her gaze around the room. Where was he?

He'd left her on the floor unbound. Odds were he was close. Her next breath came out on a shudder.

Get yourself together unless you want to die here.

She had to think. And she needed a weapon. Daring to turn her head, she looked around the room. There wasn't much for décor, just whatever items had come with the property. An empty vase sat on a sideboard next to the couch, adjacent to the fireplace. Too far. She needed something closer.

A few feet away, hanging on a hook on the fireplace, was a poker.

Yes!

Footsteps sounded from the kitchen, and she quickly brought her head back to position, but it was too late.

"I see you're up. Thinking of an escape?" Jace strode into the living room and sat on the coffee table parallel to her, his gaze intent. Blood stained the skin on his neck where she'd gotten him with the screwdriver. The inch-long gash hadn't done

enough.

She pushed into a sitting position. The room spun violently. She brought her hand to her head as if doing so would hold the room still.

“You shouldn’t have made me do that,” he chastised.

Annoyance flared inside her. She wasn’t the same girl she’d been three years ago. Hell, she wasn’t the same girl she’d been three days ago. “I made you hit me? That’s funny, could’ve sworn you swung your fist.”

His eyes darkened. “You always have to make things so fucking difficult.”

She dropped her hand. Her surroundings stood in place. “Why are you doing this?”

“Your dad fucked me over.”

She clamped her lips together with the effort it took not to scream at him. Fighting with Jace would get her nowhere. She needed to not be his enemy if she wanted to survive. She swallowed her pride. “What did he do?”

“As if you don’t know.”

She reared back her head and the pain in her skull intensified. “He told me he killed you after you left the hospital with his men.”

His glare was scrutinizing. “I bet you were happy about that.”

The muscles in her throat clenched. She’d wanted to scream and hit him, maybe even kill him herself. But she’d been robbed of that experience.

She moved her tongue around the inside of her mouth, but the cottony texture remained. “No, I wasn’t.” Sticking closely to the truth might be the only thing that kept her alive. “I was mad at him for that. Hurt.” She focused on his eyes. “I hated you for what you did. But I couldn’t properly mourn her because I was so conflicted about how I felt about you. He took that from me.”

Jace stood and stalked to the window. Folding his arms across his chest, he didn’t look at her. “I never forgot her face.” He spoke so softly she could barely hear him. “She looked like you.” A smile touched his mouth then vanished. “You might hate me for what happened,” he said, his voice thick. “But I hate myself more. No one can hate me more than I do.”

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Heat warmed her throat and pain throbbed from her belly. Tears rushed to her eyes. “Sometimes I still feel her,” she choked out. “Moving inside me. And for a moment I forget what happened. I think she’s still there.” A sob broke from her lips. She covered her mouth with the back of her hand. She’d never told anyone that, but somehow telling Jace brought a sliver of closure.

“You know I didn’t want to hurt her. God, if I hadn’t been so fucked up. If I hadn’t touched those fucking drugs.”

Tears flowed freely down her face. She didn’t dash them away, didn’t want to do anything to tamp down the love her daughter deserved to feel.

Silence fell between them. She couldn’t pretend she didn’t hate him. Couldn’t pretend to forgive him for the grave mistake that had taken something so precious from her arms.

Jace sniffed, and the bubble of quiet burst. He turned away from the window. “She’s gone now. I can’t bring her back. I know I’m the one who pushed you, but there was a bigger man in the picture. The one who gave me the drugs. He didn’t give a shit if I got hooked on ’em. He knew I was weak.”

He fisted his hands as he moved toward her. “I’m not now. And Danny’s going to pay for what he took from me. He’ll see what it’s like to lose a daughter.”

Savannah’s heart skidded to a stop and restarted at a ferocious rhythm. “You can’t be serious. It’s not the same thing and you know it. He’ll never see the hand he had in her death.” She scooted until her back touched the hearth.

“I’ve got nothing, Savvy. Nothing, for fuck’s sake.” He spread his arms wide to the sides. “All I wanted was a life with you and her.” Strain creased his forehead and sadness ringed his eyes. He reached behind him and pulled a gun from the waistband of his pants. “I’ll come with you,” he choked. “You and me. We’ll find her together after this.”

Her heart plummeted into her belly and then shot up to her throat. A murder-suicide.

Oh god.

“Jace, no,” she sobbed. “You don’t want to do this. You need help.”

A laugh pealed from his throat and he tilted his head. “Help? There’s no help for me. No help for you either. We’re both suffering. Why fight it?”

“Because I want to live.” She gripped the brick fireplace at her hip. The poker was behind her. All she had to do was turn and reach for it. “She wanted to live, and you took that from her. Don’t take it from me, too.”

A pained expression crossed his face but was quickly replaced with one of anger. “She’ll forgive me when we’re all together.” The finality in his voice shook her.

Savannah turned and yanked the poker from the fireplace. Jace let out a curse.

Crack!

A bullet smacked into the fireplace. Savannah cried out and ducked. Shards of brick exploded.

He was on her in two paces, grabbing her bicep as he lifted the gun again. She brought back her arm and slammed the wrought-iron hook into the side of his head.

Jace let go of her and stumbled. “Ah, sonofabitch,” he hissed.

His caught the fireplace with his hand and stayed on his feet. Blood leaked from the laceration across his scalp. Savannah sucked in a breath and brought the weapon down again, this time on his back, sending him to his knees.

Harsh breaths came in and out between her clenched teeth. Her body trembled with sharp spasms. Instinct told her to run. To get to a phone. But he wouldn't just go away. She needed to kill him. To finish this before he came back for her again.

He groaned.

She lifted the poker again. Another strike to the head would kill him. It shouldn't be so hard. But goddammit she wanted him to suffer like her baby girl had.

His hand shot out and latched on to her leg, dragging her to him. He swung the gun to face her. Panic lit her veins. She slashed the iron down again but missed and struck his arm. His wrist connected with the fireplace and the weapon fell from his grasp.

She reached for it but he grabbed her, pulling her down to the floor and straddling her waist. His blood dripped onto her face and clothes. Bile hit the back of her throat.

“No!” she cried.

His hand came down roughly on her face, crushing her lips. He grunted on top of her, sweat pooling off his face, his skin red from exertion and pain. “You're going to pay for that.” He moved his hand from her mouth to clamp around her throat. His weight bore down on her windpipe.

The muscles in her throat ached and burned beneath the pressure. She kicked and squirmed, her knees connecting with his lower back. He didn't loosen his grip. A

ragged gasp left her lips.

A black vignette ringed her vision, closing in tighter and tighter, like she were looking through a straw.

She clung to consciousness with the skin of her teeth.

“I think that was the street camera,” Lach said, his voice solemn as he pointed at a lens near the light they’d just passed.

Toth swallowed down a mouthful of shame. Pulling the car to the side of the road, he slammed his fist into the steering wheel. “Fuck!” he bellowed.

They’d failed. From here, there was nothing but a road that stretched for miles—right out of state. A road with numerous turns. A road surrounded by woods.

All hope was lost. He sucked in a shaky breath through his nose. Jesus Christ. He’d always protected those he cared about: the men in his unit in the Marines, Rami, his clients. Some people had been friends, others had paid him. Sav was different.

He couldn’t protect her. She was gone, alone and terrified, if she was even still breathing. His only job had been to keep her alive and he hadn’t.

The air in his lungs grew stale. He needed to scream, or better yet, wrap his hands around the fucker’s neck—

“Sav’s a fighter.” Lach’s words broke through the fangs of torment chewing through Toth’s mind. “She won’t go down without a fight.” He thumped his fist to his heart. “She’s alive. I can fucking feel it.”

Toth forced rancid saliva down his throat. He nodded. “You’re right. She’ll raise hell.” He summoned a wave of calm. It was forced, but it helped a little.

He pulled his phone from his pocket and dialed Dare.

His brother answered on the second ring.

“I need you to find something else. Anything, for Christ’s sake.” He didn’t want to acknowledge how broken his plea sounded. If he let the feelings of desperation enter, he’d never put one foot in front of the other.

“Man, if I had anything I’d call you,” he said, pained. “Did you talk to Danny?”

“He’s in surgery.”

“Shit. I’ve been working the street cameras and I’ve got nothing. I suspect they’re now in an area where there’s little to no surveillance. Maybe when they get to a bigger city something will come up.”

“You know that’s not going to happen. He’s not taking her shopping, dummy.”

Dare exhaled through his nose. “Look—”

The line beeped.

“Hang on, I’ve got a call.” He clicked off, and Toth fought the urge to bash the steering wheel again. Dare clicked back on the line. “It’s Sophia. I’m gonna connect us. You’ll wanna hear this.”

Hope surged him forward. He swatted Lach’s arm. The guy was staring at him, riveted. Toth hit the speaker button and held the phone between them.

“Sophia, I’ve got Toth on the line. He’s out near Coal Creek. Figured he’d want in.”

“Hey,” Toth said, not wanting to waste another stupid second on formality.

“Oh, good,” Sophia said. She sounded as if she’d gotten a swell of energy despite the late hour. “I heard back from my contact at the department. Turns out Danny made a trade.” Tension hung in the air. “Danny didn’t kill Jace, Toth. He’s alive.”

Pressure built against his temple. “What?”

Lach mumbled a curse from the passenger seat.

“Jace was charged with possession of an illegal substance. It appears the tip came from Danny, which tells me he offered him up.”

“That sonofabitch,” Toth wheezed. “He told Sav he killed him.”

“He told me that, too,” Lach spat.

Disbelief spiraled through him. The ever-powerful Sinners Cartel leader had lied to his own daughter. The only thing that pissed him off more than the fact that he’d deceived Savannah was the fact that the motherfucker had let Jace live.

“Jace has her,” Toth said. His certainty came with a load of fear. Because if Jace had gone to jail for three years, the bastard would be pissed—and he’d take that out on Sav.

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“I think that’s our most likely bet,” Sophia said. “He was released three months ago. We also think Brett was helping him. I found out that the motel room was rented under Jace’s name. Plus, Wendell was his cellmate.”

All the dots connected. This was it. They had their guy. “All right, so where the hell did he take her?”

Sophia blew out a breath. “As we speak Tess and Dare are digging through everything they can. Not sure if you’re aware, but Dare’s one of the best hackers I’ve ever met. He’s in Jace’s banking system right now.”

“No activity,” Dare chimed from the background.

“Fuck.” Of course it wouldn’t be that easy. “What about properties? Any titles held under his family name? Boats, trailers, shit like that.”

“I’m on the DMV database, Tess is doing a property search. I don’t see him owning any vehicles. The one he used tonight must have been stolen. I’ll see if anything was reported—”

Toth waved his hand in the air. “Nah. That’s not going to help. We need to focus on where he’s taking her. What about plane tickets?”

“Hang on.” The sound of keys tapping came through the speaker.

Toth’s pulse beat faster than Dare’s typing. His skin itched with the need to get out of the car and run. Anything had to be better than sitting here fucking waiting for noth—

“No tickets.”

Toth balled his hand into a fist. He'd never felt so helpless in his life. He stared out the window at the stretch of road he should be dominating right now. Christ, he'd do anything to know where she was. To be on the way to her. To have something constructive to do to help her. Here he was, twiddling his goddamn thumbs. “Try Mark and Brett. Do the same searches for property. If they were working with him, they maybe had a hideout.”

“Good point.” Surprise underlined Dare's voice.

Toth exhaled and stretched out his legs, waiting for what seemed like an excruciating eternity. Every minute that passed was a minute longer that Sav was suffering.

“Nothing,” Dare said heavily.

“Wait,” Tess chimed from the background.

Toth leaned closer to the phone. “What?”

“While Dare was searching, I did a background check on Jace and found his grandparents' names. Looks like a property title was signed over to Jace seven years ago. It's a house in Coal Creek.”

Holy shit.

“Address,” he snapped out. This was it. Had to fucking be.

Hang on, baby. I'm coming.

CHAPTER 27

Darkness swept in and out. Loathing glittered in Jace's bloodshot eyes and spit dangled from his lips as his weight crushed Savanna's spine and the back of her head against the living room floor.

Her dry eyes were wide with agony and desperation, too panicked to blink. Her chest spasmed from lack of oxygen. His hands were still wrapped around her neck.

He's going to kill me.

She knew she had seconds, at best, before she lost consciousness. Sweeping her hand to her side, she felt along the ground for something. Anything. Her fingertips met cool wrought iron. She snatched the rod and rammed the pointed end into Jace's side.

Crunch.

"Ah!" His grip on her throat loosened and air rushed in through her nose and mouth. She greedily swallowed a breath as she drove the poker into his side again, this time with more velocity.

He slumped to the floor and grabbed his ribs. Agony contorted his features and blood ran in rivulets down his face from the previous wound.

She leaped to her feet. The floor tilted beneath her and the room wobbled. She grabbed the sofa to stop herself from going down, using it as an anchor before running toward the kitchen at the back of the house. Her shoes smacked against the laminate floor. Her breath hissed from her chest, her lungs and nose burning. She skidded to a stop in front of the door and unsnapped the deadbolt, still clinging to the poker with her other hand.

Jace's heavy footsteps shook the house. "Come back, you cunt!"

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She screamed as she ripped open the door, burst onto the deck, and leaped down the three steps to land in the grass. Her ankles buckled but she shot forward, tearing across the lawn.

Crack,crack!

Bullets hailed around her, whipping against the trees and sending bark and pine needles flying to pelt her skin as she darted into the woods. Panic tore up and down her back.

She had to hide. She ran her tongue over her dry lips. Had to keep pushing. Had to get to a phone.

Her feet landed on a trail and she glanced behind her.

Nothing.

She'd hit him good. Surely she'd slowed him down. She inhaled deeply, pausing to let her pulse slow before her heart burst from her chest. Questions zinged through her mind, all of them directed at her father.

Why, oh why did he let Jace live?

Anger frothed inside her. Tears blurred her vision. Part of her wanted to sink to her knees and give up. To let Jace come and send her off to be with her daughter. But as much as she'd welcome the joy of finally seeing her baby girl's face, she didn't want to die. Three years ago, she might not have fought so hard. But now... now she

wanted to live. To find happiness, and maybe, just maybe, have another baby some day, if God granted her the gift.

She wanted to lie in Toth's arms again. With him, she'd finally understood what being protected by someone truly meant. She'd finally felt valued and cherished. He hadn't asked for anything, yet he'd given her everything she hadn't known she needed. Emotion opened up in her chest and she welcomed the sensation. Welcomed the honesty.

She'd given part of herself to Toth and she wasn't done. She wanted all of him. Needed him to know he'd revived her after three lonely years of despair.

He'd breathed life into her.

A sob racked her soul and she pressed her palm against a nearby tree. Its cool, rough exterior tethered her to reality. Kept her from losing her mind altogether.

She drew back her shoulders and scanned the woods. She'd hiked these parts only a handful of times and not in many years, but if she was on the right path, the neighbors' house was less than a quarter mile away. All she had to do was make it that far and she'd be free. If she could get to a phone and Toth was alive, she'd be with him in less than an hour. A chill raced over her skin, intensifying the craving for his warmth.

Please, let him be okay.

She lifted her chin and moved quickly along the trail, praying it led to the neighbors'. An engine rumbled. What the—?

The putrid taste of fear coated her tongue as four-wheeler headlights shined through the trees. Terror and disbelief paralyzed her limbs. Then, tearing her feet from the

ground, she broke into a run. She sprung into the bushes, but the headlights lit her body before the leaves shrouded her. The engine roared in pursuit.

No. He'd found her.

"Right there," Lach said pointing through the windshield.

"Yeah, I see it," Toth growled. He turned into the driveway and accelerated over the gravel. A hundred yards or so later, a two-story brick house came into view. Pine trees surrounded the lot. The overgrown lawn and flower beds suggested years of neglect.

"Lights are on."

Toth stomped on the brake and parked behind the sedan he recognized from the surveillance clip. Satisfaction mixed with angst rippled through him. "That's the car." He yanked off his seatbelt and bolted from the vehicle.

Withdrawing his weapon, he crossed the raggedy front yard and bounded up the steps with Lach on his heels. He tried the handle. Locked.

"Back up," he said to Lach. Sav was inside and he wouldn't let a fucking door stand in his way.

He slammed the bottom of his foot once, twice into the old wood near the handle. The frame shook and on his third stomp, the rickety door bounced open. "Jace!" he bellowed, lifting his gun to eye level as he stormed into the house as if on the combat field.

Lach swept into the living room and Toth skirted the sofa and headed into the kitchen. “Back door’s open!” he called. Part of him wanted to charge outside, but they needed to clear the house first. She could be anywhere.

“Toth,” Lach whispered gravely. “Look.”

Keeping his weapon ready but slightly lowered, Toth made his way back to the living room. Lach stood near the fireplace. Small pools of blood dotted the laminate floor, the brick fireplace, and the nearby area rug.

His gut lurched. “Jesus fuck,” he whispered, dropping the gun to his side. Ice froze the back of his neck, and he locked his knees to stop himself from sinking.

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Lach pressed his fists to his temples, gun still in hand. He paced two steps then stopped. "I'm going to fucking slaughter him. I'll—"

Toth held up his hand, forcing another wave of calm over his body. He wanted to scream, to tear Jace limb from fucking limb as much as Lach did, but focusing on that wouldn't do any damn good until he found them. "It might not be her blood. You look upstairs and I'll go out back. Do a thorough search."

Lach nodded, his eyes small with desperation. He stomped to the staircase and took the steps two at a time. "Sav! Call out if you're here!"

Tearing his gaze from the stains on the floor, Toth made his way across the living room and kitchen and pounded down the back deck. "Sav!" he bellowed. The roar of an engine met his ears and a niggles of suspicion hit him.

Pulling out his phone, he flicked on the flashlight to illuminate the poorly maintained property. A large shed sat under a big pine tree, its doors thrown open. He trekked toward it, his gun at the ready. "Sav!"

Something caught his eye. He stopped. Tire tracks carved the tall grass. The motor running in the distance sounded like that of a four-wheeler. Holy shit. He turned from the shed and ran through the grass toward the forest, following the tracks.

Lach appeared on the deck as Toth passed. "What's up?"

He pointed to the markings. "Four-wheeler," he called over the drone. "I think he's got her."

Lach leaped off the deck and landed in a run, meeting Toth's stride. They charged through the forest along a dirt path.

"He's too far away," Lach said, two paces behind.

Sweat soaked the back of Toth's neck, dampening his shirt. He didn't give a fuck how far they were—he'd run for hours if Sav was near.

The engine cut out, and the sounds of nature that filled the void were more terrifying than the roar of the motor. Jace had either caught Savannah or had reached the place where he was going to dump her body.

Surging forward, Toth pushed his legs to their limits, following the tracks. Critters scurried as he dodged and struck low-lying branches. He leaped over a fallen log and grunted as his feet clapped the earth. Lach's footsteps weren't far behind him.

A scream split through the air.

Doom fell around him.

He has her.

"Found you."

Jace's singsong voice made the hairs on the back of Savannah's neck spring to attention. She pressed her back against the tree she hid behind.

The light from his flashlight sliced through the darkness and soaked the trees and ground near her feet in yellow. She swallowed a scream and pressed her knuckles to

her lips. She tightened her fingers around the poker dangling by her side. She'd have to get close to him to use it, which wouldn't help if he shot her first.

Snap!

The crack of a twig breaking echoed around the woods. He was close. She brought her teeth down on her bottom lip, but her ragged breaths were still audible. A creature clawed up a nearby tree, the scratching on bark as loud as nails on a chalkboard. Quiet fell around her in its wake. Her senses fired on high alert, waiting for Jace's next move.

The rustling of footsteps over foliage punctured the air. She molded her spine to the tree, willing it to swallow her up.

"Savvy." The nickname dripped with falsetto. "I can smell your fear, baby. You're making me fucking horny." The tinny taste of horror flooded her mouth at the sound of his heinous laugh.

He was so close.

Her chest heaved as she took quiet, shallow breaths. Her lungs screamed at her to take a deep inhale, but she didn't dare.

She'd have to fight. If she could hit him in the head again before he shot her, she'd have a chance. He wouldn't expect her attack. She adjusted the rod in her hold. This time, she'd strike to kill. She didn't have a choice.

Letting out a wild scream, she leaped out from behind the tree. Jace staggered back and aimed his gun in her direction. Her heart skidded to a stop and her mouth filled with bile. She swung the fire poker and the metal connected with his hand.

The gun careened from his fingers and landed in the dirt.

“Fuck,” he hissed, grabbing his wounded hand. His wild eyes focused on hers, the whites large in the moonlight. He seethed. “You fucking bitch.” He took a step closer.

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She let out a howl and swung again, aiming for his head. He lifted his arm and the metal connected with his forearm. He grunted and spurted forward, fire in his gaze.

His shoulder connected with her midsection and she gasped. The wind left her lungs with a wheeze as her back smashed against the forest floor. A burning sensation buzzed up her spine and through her chest as her brain grappled with how to escape.

Jace straddled her, his chest pressed close to her body. His triumphant laugh sent daggers into her heart. He wrestled the rod from her fingers before she could recover.

No!

He smiled with satisfaction.

“Let me go!” She jabbed her fists everywhere she could reach: stomach, legs, crotch.

Instead of making him angry, it only made him laugh more. “You always had fight in ya. Won’t do you any good now.” He captured her fists in his hold and secured her wrists in one of his palms.

Pinning her hands to the ground, he brought the fingers of his free hand to her throat and gently stroked. “Shouldn’t have ended this way. We should’ve had our daughter. Should’ve had a life together. Remember, the man who stole that from you wasn’t me.”

He compressed his hand around her windpipe and his breath was hot near her lips. She kicked and withered as he cut off her oxygen.

“Just think of our baby,” he said soothingly. “It’ll be over soon.”

There was no way out. She couldn’t move. Couldn’t breathe. Her lungs spasmed and begged for air.

Clarity slipped through her fingers and memories washed over her. Memories of her sweet baby girl in her arms. So tiny. So fragile. Her lips a perfect bow shape, her eyes closed, her expression peaceful.

“What’s her name?” a beaming nurse asked.

Savannah sucked back her tears, confused. The brightness and sterility of the hospital surrounded her, and she settled further into the uncomfortable bed. The baby in her arms was staring up at her with wide, loving eyes. Her little lips twitched as she rooted for Savannah’s breast. Then she latched and suckled.

Savannah stared, riveted by the beautiful image. “Oh, baby girl,” she whispered. “Mommy loves you so much.”

“Her name, love?” the nurse asked.

Savannah didn’t take her eyes off her daughter, whose little hand reached out and squeezed her finger. The love she felt was so great she thought her chest would burst. “Arya,” she whispered.

The little girl blinked sleepily, as if content with the name.

“Sweet girl. I’m so happy you’re here.” Savannah’s body turned weightless and airy as she floated from the hospital room, her baby girl still snuggled happily in her arms. Light, so bright and white, surrounded Savannah and Arya in peace and warmth.

Wham!

The crushing weight on her throat and chest lifted.

“You fucking bastard!” A familiar male voice filled her ears. A rush of air entered her nose and mouth at the same time. There was a crunch of knuckles on flesh. Someone shrieked.

Cold wind touched her cheek and she opened her eyes to stare at the trees whirling overtop of her. The blackness beyond their leaves was speckled with stars.

She lifted her empty arms.

No, no, no!

“Arya!” she gasped. She patted her chest then reached for the ground at her sides. Her baby. She was gone. Taken from her again.

“Savannah!” Toth’s deep, rumbling voice encased her, and then he seized her in his arms, lifting her from the dirt.

He’s alive.

Relief stole her breath as she stared into his face. The chiseled line of his jaw and furrowed brow brought her heart beat to an almost normal rate.

His hand cupped her cheek and he searched her face with alarm. “Baby, what’d he do to you?”

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Tears ran down her cheeks and violent sobs broke through her lips. “Toth,” she moaned. “She’s gone. I—I don’t have her anymore.”

He swept his thumb along her cheekbone, wiping away the droplets.

“Is she all right?” asked another familiar voice.

“She’s confused,” Toth answered. “Savannah, are you hurt? Tell me now.” He started running his hands over her body, but she caught his wrist.

“I saw her,” she breathed. “She saw me,” she corrected.

He froze. His expression changed from one of concern to one of knowing. “She’s a part of you, honey. She knows you love her.”

She nodded, and a smile touched her lips. She’d been given the greatest gift. Near death, she’d been taken to her daughter. If only for a minute, she’d seen her beautiful face alive, had felt the love and joy of being a mother. Arya had known her mother in that moment.

“Her name is Arya,” she said with pride. “Arya Carrington.”

Toth brought his forehead to hers, and his palm cradled the back of her head. “It’s perfect, Sav. Just like you.”

Love exploded through her. She wrapped her arms around Toth’s neck and buried her face in his scent. His heat surrounded her, pushing away the gripping sadness that

wanted to pull her back down to the well of despair she'd lived in for so long.

But she didn't have to go back there. Not now, not ever. She'd named her baby girl, and it was the best moment of her life. The name had come to her from somewhere beyond. She'd felt it, the unspoken communication between her and her daughter.

She'd carry Arya with her for the rest of her life, never forgetting her. Never letting sadness win. She could move forward, Arya's blessing bright within her.

She cupped Toth's bristly cheek and stared into his unwavering eyes. His steadiness filled her with strength, and she felt the power she'd been keeping buried. "Toth," she said, without a tremor. "I love you."

He blinked. His mouth twitched and then morphed into a grin. He brushed his lips over her forehead and cheeks then kissed her lips. "I love you, Sav." He met her gaze. "And now I'm going to take you home."

Home. She hadn't seen his house. But she didn't care.

In his arms, she and Arya were home.

CHAPTER 28

"Whatd'ya want todo with him?" Lach asked, rearing Jace's head backward, clutching a handful of his hair.

Jace lay on his stomach in the dirt with Lach's knee positioned at the small of his back. Just a minute ago Toth had raced through the forest and heard Jace's taunting laugh. Spotting him on top of Savannah had launched his heart into his throat and violent rage into his veins.

He'd run like a linebacker and thrown Jace to the ground. Then he'd allowed himself only a brutal kick to Jace's stomach before he dropped to his knees and scooped up Savannah. Lach had gladly taken over watch of the sonofabitch.

"Give us a minute," Toth called, then brought his attention back to Sav, lying in his arms. Her face held a serene air despite the dirt smeared on it and the bruises and cuts marring it. The bastard had hit her. Anger ravaged him as he gently brought his knuckles to her puffy cheek.

God, he loved her.

It didn't matter he'd been with her only a couple of days. Didn't matter her father was a dangerous criminal. The relief of holding her in his arms validated all the feelings that had been oscillating in his heart since the moment she'd sauntered her sexy ass into his office and demanded he work with her father.

More than attraction. More than lust.

"Am I moving too fast?" she asked, her voice uncharacteristically hesitant.

He smiled. "Honey, you took my fucking heart the moment I saw you in that leather skirt. And guess what? I don't want it back."

Her doelike eyes warmed. She kept her side relaxed against his chest and her hand clasped around his wrist as she faced Jace.

"What do you want me to do with him?" he asked, brushing his fingers under her jaw until she looked at him.

She rolled in her lips and lowered her focus to his chest then back up. "I—I don't want to know. I trust you to deal with him as you see fit and just... leave me out of it

for now.”

He nodded solemnly, grateful for her strength. As much as he loved her, he wouldn’t have been able to not kill him—not even as a favor to her.

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No, Jace would die a painful death. Not just for nearly killing Savannah, but for the suffering he'd caused her and the cross she'd bear for the rest of her life. They'd need to deal with Jace quickly though. The gunshots and the ruckus they'd made had surely drawn attention. He didn't need to ask Lach if he wanted a part in Jace's demise. He knew he wouldn't be able to keep the brute away.

Toth's phone buzzed against his leg, and he adjusted his position to dig out the device. Rami's number lit the screen. He swiped to answer.

"Where the fuck are you?" Rami demanded.

"Woods behind Jace's place. I'll send you the address." He quickly disconnected and did as promised.

"You can't run from me, baby," said Jace with a sneer. Savannah's grip tightened on Toth's wrist. "Go head and kill me. I'll just fuckin' haunt your slutty ass—"

Wham!

Lach's fist connected with Jace's jaw, making his face bounce off the earth. "Shut up," he growled. "You can't haunt no one from hell you dumb fuck."

Toth tightened his arm around her. "Can you stand?"

She nodded, but tremors took over her body and her teeth chattered. "I d-don't know what's wrong with me."

“Shock.” Fury blazed inside him. He needed to deal with Jace. His internal scales wouldn’t be balanced until he unleashed himself. But first he had to see Sav to safety.

He picked her up, holding her to his chest. “I’m going to take her back to the house on the four-wheeler,” he said to Lach. “Rami will be there soon. Then I’ll come back.”

Lach shoved Jace’s face in the dirt. “Hear that? You and me will have some alone time.”

Toth carried Savannah to the four-wheeler and sat her on the seat, nestling in behind her. The positioning was tight and a little awkward, but he needed to ensure she stayed on the vehicle. The key was still in the ignition. He booted up the engine then turned and headed back toward the house on the trail. The screech of the motor split the air and the vehicle’s headlights illuminated their path. A few minutes later, the trees thinned and they broke from the woods into the yard. He steered the four-wheeler along the side of the house. Long, overgrown grass brushed against his legs as they whizzed by. Mosquitos and moths buzzed from their homes.

He stopped at the driveway and cut the engine. Scooting off, he gave Sav the whole seat and stood next to her. “You doing okay?”

She nodded slowly but rested her hands on his sides as if to hold herself up. Her face glowed in the yellow light produced by the four-wheeler’s beams.

Toth inhaled sharply as he stared at the damage Jace had done. “I hate that he fucking hit you.” Fury seeped from his pores as he brought his thumb to the swelling skin around her cheekbone and left eye. The injury was worse than he’d thought.

She tucked her chin. “He struck me a few times.”

Every muscle in his body bunched and he pressed his tongue to the roof of his mouth so he didn't go off the handle. "I'll kill him," he said, when he'd summoned more composure.

"He's battling a lot of demons." Her statement came out as a fact, void of emotion.

"I don't give a fuck what he's battling. That's no reason to hit you."

Her lips tilted up at the corners. "Well, in his defense, I hit him first."

A spark of appreciation calmed him a little. "Yeah?"

"In the nose. And I hit him with the fire poker in the side of the head and the ribs—I think I might've broken a couple."

He snorted out a chuckle and cupped her cheek with his palm. "Good. I'll break the rest."

She smiled and circled her hand around his wrist. "How'd you find me?"

"Couldn't have done it without Sophia, Tess and Dare." The statement came out gravelly because it was true. If he hadn't asked for their help, he'd have been fucked and Sav would've died at Jace's sick hands. He forced that thought from his mind. Couldn't let himself go down that road or it'd be his undoing. "Sophia found out your dad had Jace put in jail on a possession charge."

Confusion furrowed her brow. "My dad hates cops."

He shrugged. "Yeah, well, he probably hated Jace more. Brett was working for Jace, you know that, and Wendell, the guy who was killed in your dad's office, was Jace's cellmate. So he had a little team."

A niggles of unease rolled in her gut at the mention of Wendell. She'd never killed anyone before, but had she not pulled that trigger her dad surely wouldn't have survived. She pushed Wendell from her mind and her brain worked as the rest of the pieces fell into place.

"Don't forget Mark," she added. "He and Brett were friends, so I guess that's where he came in."

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Toth nodded. “Then Tess found out Jace’s grandparents signed this place over to him several years ago, and we had video footage of Jace’s plates out this way, so we had a good guess as to where he took you.”

Her fingers tightened on his skin. “Thank you.”

A dark cloud brewed inside him. “Don’t thank me, all right? Losing you was the worst thing that’s ever fucking happened to me. I couldn’t have handled it if—” Damn, he couldn’t even speak the words. “If he’d succeeded.” He stroked her hair with his palm, ignoring the leaves and sticks that poked him. “Thank you for not giving up and letting him win.”

She bowed her head. “I almost did. When he was on top of me, I passed out and I saw—I was back in the hospital with my daughter, only it was different. I was holding her and she was alive and happy and so, so perfect.” Tears glittered along her eyelashes. “I feel like it was a gift. I felt her. Itwasher. And I almost left with her. The light surrounded us both and I was so content and happy to go with her. Then...” She cleared her throat and her eyes shifted.

“Then I came and took it away?” he asked, his voice rough. Fuck, he’d saved her life but also caused her more pain. More grief. She’d lost her daughter once again.

She gave him a shaky smile. “I’m glad, though. I didn’t want to die. I want to be here... with you.” Vulnerability pulled at her words and melted his heart.

He bent his head to her hair and inhaled her scent, so goddamn grateful she’d stayed. “I need you to be honest with me about something.”

She tilted back her head and studied his face. A new softness surrounded her vibrant green eyes. It was almost as if her moments with Arya had lifted a weight from her shoulders.

“What?”

“I need to know you’re not going to resent me for killing Jace. I need that confirmation before I go back to the woods. Because I can’t fucking promise you he’s going to live, even if you want him to.”

She’d said she didn’t want to know what happened to him, and that was fair, but she’d find out eventually, and if she held that against him, it’d create a rift between them he wouldn’t be able to erase.

She caught one of his hands between both of hers and squeezed. “I don’t ever want to worry about him again. I want the comfort of knowing he can’t hurt me.” She dragged her top teeth over her bottom lip. “But I can’t ask you to kill him for me. I couldn’t live with myself if you carried guilt over—”

“For one thing,” he interrupted, “I’ll never feel guilt over that sonofabitch.” He captured her face between both of his palms. His heart beat steadily, each thump for her. “And I want you to be able to ask me for anything,” he said vehemently. “I’d do anything for you.” He meant it, right down to his bones.

A sly smile touched her lips. “Really? Anything?”

He let a second slip by. “Anything but leave you. That I won’t fucking do.”

Joy sparked in her eyes and she beamed. “I promise I’ll never ask that.”

Heat spread through him and contentment filled his heart. He’d been alone for so

long. Sure he'd had relationships, but he'd never been anyone's everything, and no one had been everything to him.

Savannah was. End of story. He opened his mouth to say this, but headlights lit the driveway and coated them in white.

He tensed and let go of Sav to reach for his gun. Rami leaped out of the large SUV and lifted his hand. Toth relaxed.

"I need you to sit with Rami for a bit, okay? I won't be long."

He pressed a kiss to her head and led her to Rami's vehicle. As he helped her into the front seat, a shiver shook her shoulders. "Put the heat on," he commanded his friend.

Rami got in the driver's seat and switched on the seat warmer and hot air.

Toth grabbed at the hem of his shirt, but she stopped him. "It's okay. You'll get eaten alive by mosquitos. I'll warm up."

"I've got a sweater in the back." Rami reached in the back seat and then tossed the garment onto her lap.

Toth sure as hell didn't want her wearing another dude's clothing, but the sweater would be a helluva lot warmer than his sweaty T-shirt. And anyway, he'd soon take her home and replace all Rami's scents with his own.

He caught the back of her neck, not giving a shit about Rami's watchful gaze. "I'll be fast." He touched her lips with his, and her small moan stirred his cock. He pulled away before she stole his determination to leave.

"Protect her," he growled to Rami.

Rami smirked. “No shit.”

He shut the door and jogged to the four-wheeler. Hopping on, he turned in the direction of the woods and his body hummed with the satisfaction he’d get once justice was delivered.

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Savannah snuggled into the hoodie Rami had given her. It didn't smell like Toth, but the woodsy scent wasn't unpleasant. The added layer and the heat pumping at her from all angles did nothing to chase away the chill, though.

She needed a hot shower, maybe a cup of tea, and Toth's body around hers. Then maybe the shock would abate and she could come to terms with what the hell had happened.

"Need somethin'?"

She glanced at Rami. He was as big as Toth but carried the air of a man who didn't care about anything and surely didn't rest on morals. Or maybe his exterior was just too rough to allow a glimpse at a softer interior. He was dark and guarded, and he probably frightened everyone who crossed his path. Thankfully he was on their side and she had nothing to fear. "I'm okay."

He heaved a sigh and stared out the window with a look that suggested he'd be grateful to be anywhere else.

"Thanks for coming."

He lifted a shoulder. "Didn't have much choice." Then, a second later, "Glad you're okay." The last part was spoken almost grudgingly. Since he was friends with Lach and Toth, he probably didn't want her to think he was an asshole.

She tilted her head and studied him in the overhead light he'd switched on moments before. "You know Toth better than anyone. Do you think he'll carry guilt over

Jace?”

Rami grimaced, making the vertical tattoo over his eye crinkle. “Whaddya mean?”

She squirmed in her seat. “It’s just—I know he’s going to kill him. I’m okay with that. But I’d feel horrible if Toth did it for me and then felt guilty for the rest of his life.”

He let out a light laugh. The sound was almost foreign coming from his lips. “No.” The simple yet confident statement piqued her interest.

“How do you know?”

He turned his shoulders toward her an inch. “‘Cause like you said, I know him better than anyone. Toth’s many things, and stupid ain’t one of ’em. He’ll take care of Jace, and what’s happening in that forest right now,” he said, nodding at the woods, “won’t cross his mind again unless you ask him about it. So, no. He don’t give a shit about Jace.”

She stared at Rami blankly. He’d spoken more words in that explanation than he had in total in the couple of months she’d known him. He must have meant what he’d said. “That’s good to know.”

“But there is one thing that bugs me,” he said.

“Okay,” she said carefully.

He knotted his fist on the console between them. “I want to make this clear: I don’t care that Toth’s in a relationship with you—”

“We’re—”

“Don’t care.”

She pressed her lips together. She and Toth had things to discuss regarding where things went from here on out. She wasn’t about to sit with his best friend and make any assumptions. Yes, she loved Toth, and he’d said he loved her, but people said and did things in dire situations. Until they were home and things had calmed down, she wouldn’t be able to evaluate where they were headed.

“What I want to make clear,” he said, “is that if your dad tries to do anything like what he did to Jace to Toth, he’ll answer to me.”

A sour taste touched her tongue. She couldn’t explain her dad’s actions without going into her past, and there was no way she was divulging the trauma she’d experienced three years ago to Rami. “My dad made decisions that didn’t involve me. But just so I’m clear,” she said, mimicking his wording, “Jace deserved everything my dad did and more. Toth is nothing like Jace.”

“I guess we’re in agreement.” His voice rang with finality.

Savannah nodded. A bright light flashed outside her window, and she frowned and leaned forward to gaze at the cabin. “Did you see that?”

Flames burst from the side of the cabin with a roar, licking out the window and stretching to the second story.

“Ho-ly shit,” Rami drawled.

Savannah gulped. “Um, where’s Toth? They should—”

“There.” Rami pointed.

Toth and Lach were leaping down the steps. The pent-up air left her lungs, taking the pressure of anxiety with it. Toth tossed a set of keys to Lach, and her brother jumped in Toth's vehicle.

Rami turned the key in the ignition as Toth got in the back seat. "Warning would've been great."

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“Just go,” Toth growled. He leaned forward and grabbed her hand.

She turned in her seat as Rami tore out of the driveway. “What happened?” she hissed.

He cradled her hand in both of his and kissed her knuckles. The unwavering gray of his eyes tethered her to him. “It’s done, Sav. You can let him go for good.”

Her shoulders slumped forward and relief spread through her. She didn’t want to know more. Not now, maybe not ever. He’d done the unspeakable for her, and not only could she now forget Jace, she could let herself be free of him.

She blinked back tears. “Thank you.”

“Don’t,” he said firmly. “Just don’t.”

She frowned. “But—”

“But nothing. It’s something I would have done with or without your blessing—okay?”

She wet her lips. He wanted to absolve her of any guilt, and that made her love him even more. He squeezed her hand and his warmth spread to her heart. As they headed down the driveway, she watched through the back window as the cabin went up in flames.

Finally, she could start living.

CHAPTER 29

“I’m not sure I should be here.” Toth stared at Nash’s house. The house he’d been thrown out of almost three weeks ago.

“Come on.” Savannah tugged at his forearm from the passenger seat, jostling the pink polka-dotted bag on her lap. “If they didn’t want you here, they wouldn’t have invited you.”

He grunted. She was right about that. None of his brothers seemed particularly obligated to be kind.

Knock, knock

The sharp rap of knuckles on his window snapped his attention to the dude standing at the side of his car. Cole leaned down and frowned. “You comin’ in or what?”

He opened the door, and Cole stepped back to let him exit. Toth had been so zoned out sitting in the driveway that he hadn’t noticed Cole’s vehicle pull up and park right behind him.

“Where’s Sophia?” Toth asked.

“She had to take Bella to a birthday party.” He glanced at Savannah as she rounded the vehicle and his gaze froze on the gift bag. “Shit,” he mumbled.

“Nice to see you too,” Sav quipped.

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Sorry. Just didn’t get a gift is all.”

Toth smirked. “I’m sure no one will care.”

Cole grunted and walked toward the house, his pace hurried and brooding.

Savannah hooked her arm through Toth's, and they followed.

Nash greeted them at the door. "Hey," he whispered. "Thanks for coming." His hair was disheveled and he looked about three days overdue for a shave. "Dare and Dallas will be here tomorrow. We thought we'd stagger the visits so baby isn't overwhelmed."

Savannah smiled. "Thanks for inviting us, and congratulations."

Nash's tired eyes shone with delight. "Want to meet her?"

Toth grinned and caught Savannah's hand. "Of course."

Cole's face turned pale but he nodded.

Nash led them up the stairs. "Don't mind the mess," he said with a chuckle. "We hired a cleaning company for the next few months, but it turns out they don't tidy. Life's never been so fucking chaotic but blissful at the same time, ya know?"

“Can’t say I do,” Cole said.

Nash made his way upstairs and pushed open the bedroom door. Lexi sat on the made bed, her back up against the headboard. Her long dark hair was pulled into a ponytail, her face was free of makeup, and she wore a cardigan and lounge pants. A small bundle was cuddled in her arms. She smiled. “Hi, come on in.”

Nash perched on the side of the bed and waved Toth and Savannah closer. Toth hesitated, but Savannah inched closer to peer into Lexi’s arms. “Oh my god,” she whispered. “She’s so beautiful. Congratulations, Lexi.”

“She has Nash’s eyes, I think,” Lexi said, smiling at Nash. “Too early to tell the color, but the shape and spacing are him.”

“Everything else is you, though,” Nash said, stroking the little girl’s cheek.

“You didn’t have to get us anything,” Lexi said admonishingly, as she glanced at Toth, who now held the gift bag.

“It’s not much.” Taking that as his cue, he moved closer to peek at the baby. “She’s perfect,” he said. Her sweet, chubby cheeks moved as she jiggled her lips. Her eyes were closed, and she seemed to be dreaming peacefully.

He caught Savannah’s hand, knowing it might be painful for her to see Lexi holding her baby girl. Her hand was tense but her face was relaxed. He was sure no one else would be able to detect the slight sadness in her eyes.

His heart lurched. He should've put off the visit, but dammit, he'd had Nash on speaker when his brother had invited him and Savannah to meet the baby.

Savannah stepped back, and he wanted nothing more than to flee the room and pull her into his arms. Was it fucked up that he wanted this for her? Wanted her to experience the joy of motherhood? Wanted to give that to her?

Yeah, of course it was fucked up. They'd only just expressed their feelings for each other. Their future together wasn't defined. Not yet anyway. If he wanted permanency, he'd have to ask for it.

Cole cleared his throat and approached. Lexi stretched out her hand, and when Cole didn't immediately accept, she wiggled her fingers with impatience.

He sighed, caught her hand, and came closer.

"What do you think, Uncle Cole?"

Surprise crossed Cole's face. "I don't—" He cleared his throat. "C'mon, Lex. I'm not uncle material," he said with a chortle. "But she's beautiful. I'm very happy for—"

Lexi straightened abruptly, and annoyance flared in her eyes. "Don't give me that. You don't get to do that, not here and not with this little girl, okay?"

Toth swallowed. Tension pulsed in the room.

"Uh, honey," Nash began.

"No," she said firmly, still looking at Cole. "You are her uncle and you'll love her just like you do Bella."

Cole dragged his free palm down his face but didn't let go of her hand. "I didn't mean to be rude. And Bella's a kid so it's easier, I guess. I just—I've never been around a baby, okay? I don't know what to do."

The vulnerable statement came out pained. Pity wormed its way into Toth's chest. He clapped Cole on the shoulder. "No one does, dude."

"That's right," Nash chimed in. "You should've seen me changing her diaper for the first time. Holy fuck that was stressful. I'm learning by the minute."

Lexi shifted the little baby in her arms and held her out to Cole. He looked to Nash with uncertainty. "I—"

"Just support her head," Lexi said, with a reassuring smile. "She'll be fine. Come on, you can do it."

He snorted. "You have too much faith in me." But he accepted the baby, holding one hand beneath her head and the other around her little form.

"She's so tiny," Savannah said wistfully.

"Tell that to my vagina," Lexi said with a laugh.

Cole grimaced. "Can you not?"

She shrugged. "That's where babies come from."

He shook his head, but a fond smile pulled up his lips. "She sure is cute," he said. He bounced her gently in his arms as if he'd done it a thousand times. "What's her name?"

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A smile spread Lexi's face. "Aurora Lane Holmes."

Savannah melted against Toth's side and he hugged her to him, wishing he could absorb her pain.

"That's such a pretty name," Sav said.

"I guess now's the best time to tell you," Lexi said to Cole.

"Tell me what?"

"You're her godfather."

His smile fell. "Huh?"

Nash chuckled and wrapped an arm around Lexi. "Whether you admit it or not, you protected me my whole life. And you continue to protect everyone around you. We can't think of anyone else who'll keep her safer than you in the event she needs a guardian."

Toth watched Cole's throat bob. A muscle at his temple jumped, and if he didn't know any better, he'd think the asshole was feeling something.

Cole brought his gaze down to his niece. "I'll always protect her." A few more minutes passed and then Cole handed Aurora back to her mother.

"Do you want to hold her?" Lexi's question snapped Toth to the moment.

He cleared his throat. He barely knew these people, couldn't be more of an outsider if he tried, but god he wanted to be part of something. The fact that he'd been invited to such a special moment gave him hope that everyone would eventually accept him as their brother—maybe even Cole.

“Don't drop her,” Cole growled, as Toth leaned in to scoop up the baby.

He rocked her as he held her warm, compact little body. She yawned and his heart melted. He flicked his gaze to Savannah. Her smile held fast, and there was tenderness in her eyes. “Do you want to hold her?” he asked.

He didn't have the right to offer. And maybe holding Aurora would be devastating for Savannah. But maybe it would bring her some peace and contentment.

“I shouldn't—”

“It's okay,” Lexi said encouragingly.

Gingerly, Sav accepted Aurora, her eyes round with wonderment. “Oh my gosh. Hi, little one,” she cooed. “You're just the sweetest thing.”

Aurora grunted and everyone chuckled. A few minutes later she stirred some more and started to wriggle. “I think she wants her mama.” Sav passed the baby back to Lexi.

Minutes later they left, promising to call after they let Nash and Lexi get settled with their new little bundle. Toth laced his fingers with hers as they walked down the porch toward his vehicle. “You okay?”

She ducked her head and her hair shrouded her cheek. “I'm fine.”

When they reached the passenger door, he turned her so her back pressed against the car. Sliding his hand along her cheek, he forced her to stare at him. “Don’t hide your pain. Not from me. Got it?”

She pursed her lips and nodded. “Okay.” Her shoulders rose as she inhaled then trembled as she exhaled. “That was hard. I mean, seeing Lexi glowing and so beautiful with motherhood was... amazing. I just can’t help but feel jealous, I guess. It’s stupid.” She lowered her lashes and he swept his finger over her cheekbone. The bruise was still prominent. It’d been barely forty-eight hours since they drove away from Jace’s cabin.

“Ain’t nothing stupid about that, babe. I’m sorry. We shouldn’t have—”

“No, I’m glad we went. It makes me happy you’re finding your way with your brothers. And even seeing Lexi and Aurora... that was good for me. Just hard.”

Still, he hated he’d been part of another round of agony for her. “You did good. Better than I would have.”

She smiled through the tears shimmering in her eyes, and even that was like a punch to his gut. So damn brave.

“Thanks for bringing me.”

“Don’t mention it.” He opened the car door and she slipped inside, and then he rounded the vehicle and got into the driver’s seat.

She hadn’t asked about the fire, but the news report yesterday had stated that one man died inside the house. He’d made sure Jace paid. In the end, though, the guy hadn’t even begged for his life. The dude had wanted to die and Toth couldn’t blame him. But he sure as hell hadn’t made the process easy on the fucker.

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He and Lach had roughed Jace up until he barely had a pulse. Then they'd taken him back to the house and set the fire around him. A guardian angel must have been looking out for him because he hadn't woken up throughout the process. Toth and Lach had waited until there was no doubt Jace was dead before they headed out.

Savannah still hadn't faced her dad. That was their next stop. "You still up for this?" he asked, as he backed up around Cole's car and onto the road.

"Let's get it over with."

Savannah was riddled with guilt as she made her way through the hospital. She'd been through a lot since she watched her dad get shot. Still, she should have visited sooner. She'd called yesterday, the day after Toth had rescued her from Jace's house in Coal Creek, and promised she'd come by to see him. He'd sounded strained on the phone, his voice frailer than she'd ever heard it.

Toth's solid presence next to her as she walked down the long, bustling hallway gave her strength. "Right here," he said, nodding at one of the doors. Before she entered, he pulled her close. "Do you want me to wait or come in with you?"

She glanced at the partially closed door. She wanted Toth with her, but she also needed to speak freely, and that meant giving her dad a degree of privacy. "Just give me a few minutes and then you can come in."

He nodded. "I'm going to arrange for someone to take care of the mess at the cabin.

Dare knows a guy.” His lips brushed her temple, and he squeezed her. “Take your time.”

The mention of his cabin brought bittersweet memories to the forefront of her mind. She wanted to return to the serene space, but the thought of the bodies of the men who’d attacked them made her shudder.

She pushed away the stressful thoughts of that day and settled in the knowing that Toth would handle the situation. Then she opened the door and entered her dad’s room. The moisture left her mouth at the sight of him in the propped-up hospital bed. He wore a blue gown and an oxygen tube, his skin was pale and sallow, and he appeared to have lost weight—if that was even possible in such a short time. A white bandage peeked out from the top of his gown.

“Dad?”

His eyes flickered open, and he coughed and struggled to straighten. She placed her hand on his arm, stopping him. “It’s okay, don’t move.”

Machines beeped next to the bed, and a clear liquid dripped into his arm through an IV. In all her years she’d never seen her dad look so pathetic—nothing like the formidable Sinners Cartel leader that had ruled Seattle’s streets. And her life.

Which made it really freaking hard to be mad at him.

He clasped her hand greedily. “Honey, I’m so glad you’re all right. When they took you from my office...” Tears filled his eyes. “That almost killed me.”

Emotion welled up inside her, cracking her armor of determination. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Lach told me everything.” His voice lowered, and he moved his gaze to the door,

still partially open. “I’m glad Toth took care of it. I’ll be sure he’s properly compensated.”

Always about money. “Dad, we need to talk.” She kept her hand in his, mostly because he needed the lifeline more than she did. “Why did you lie about Jace?”

Her father’s eyes grew small. “I wanted him to suffer, that’s why. And I didn’t want you to know he was alive. You needed to grieve and not worry about him coming back.”

She fought down the words that wanted to burst from her lips. Words about the outrage and hurt that she’d felt all these years. Her father had acted from a place of love and a desire to protect her—but the latter was the problem with their relationship. “You took away my right to hate him. My right to be angry and lash out. I know you did what you thought was best, but you meddled where you shouldn’t have.”

He blanched. “Savannah. You think I should have let him free to walk the streets? To hurt you again?”

“Well, he ended up almost killing me.” She inhaled a calming breath. “Where’s Dom? I haven’t seen him.”

Her dad grunted and shifted on the bed to make himself more comfortable. “Dom’s clean, if that’s what you’re wondering. He and Lach spent all day yesterday and last night interrogating each member. I gave Dom a couple days off. He felt guilty as shit for not being there the night I was shot.” He rubbed his shoulder as if the mention brought pain.

Sav nodded. She wasn’t surprised Mark had been working against her father. And Dom had always seemed to be the most loyal.

“I’m sorry about Jace.” Her father’s tone was heavy. “He never should have been released. I was planning on having something planted on him to extend his sentence. Someone fucked up and he was let go on good behavior. By the time I found out, I knew he’d come after you. That’s why I hired Toth and tried to get you the hell away from here.”

“You knew who was behind the shooting out front of my apartment, but you told us it was Red Eyez.”

“Who did it didn’t matter. I needed an explanation, and I couldn’t tell you it was Jace. Not without bringing back all those memories for you.” He choked on the last word. “That I couldn’t do. I love you, Savvy.”

He pulled her into a hug, and she wiped her tears over his shoulder. “I love you, too, Dad.”

A minute later Toth knocked on the door. Her dad straightened and his stony expression returned. He shook Toth’s hand and thanked him for taking care of her. They chatted for a few minutes then she and Toth left after promising to visit him again in a couple of days.

She was silent in the car, her mind drifting in and out of contentment and uncertainty, like a tide on steroids.

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She glanced at Toth's body stretched out in the driver's seat. The sun highlighted his tanned skin, dark beard, and sharp jawline. His black T-shirt was snug around his shoulders and torso, and his jeans-clad legs were tapered.

He was the sexiest man she'd ever met.

Without a word, he moved his hand to cover her thigh possessively, and the heat from his palm jacked up her body temperature a dozen degrees. She covered his hand with hers.

Never would she tire of his affection.

Jace had only touched her when he wanted sex, or if he was apologizing for treating her like shit. Toth seemed to sense her needs on an energetic level. He didn't pry, didn't push, just continually offered his heart. His desire to be close to her warmed every cell in her body.

She frowned as they went over a bridge. The mountains loomed beyond the water, and the sky was free of clouds and contrails—a rare occurrence. “Where are we going?” Funny, she hadn't asked earlier. As long as she was with him, their destination didn't matter.

“I thought we'd go for an early supper. You hungry?”

“Starving.”

He grinned. “So am I.” His intonation suggested that he was hungry for more than

just food and the insides of her thighs warmed.

Fifteen minutes later they were seated on a patio overlooking the harbor. “It’s a gorgeous day,” she said, as she sipped her sparkling water, the bubbles bursting on her tongue.

Toth folded his arms on the table and leaned forward. Being out in public, in broad daylight, was such a sharp contrast to how they’d spent their relationship so far. A thrill raced through Savannah as she stared at the man who held only her in his gaze. He paid no attention to the patrons around them and instead watched her as if doing so fed his hunger. Geez, she’d never felt so wanted in her life.

His tatted-up arms were on full display and his dark hair was slicked back. He’d trimmed his beard that morning, and the strands were neat and scruffy at the same time. The memory of the gentle scratch of his hair on her inner thighs that morning brought heat to her cheeks.

Toth was one fine specimen of a man.

“We need to talk.” He arched his eyebrow.

His words hooked her stomach as if it were a fish on a lure. “About?”

“You ’n me.” His focused stare brought a tingle to her neck.

“Okay...”

“I know you’ve got that nice apartment, but I was thinkin’ maybe you’d consider my place. But if you’re stuck on yours, we’ll make do.”

Her heart beat gently in her throat. “I don’t—what do you mean?”

His grin spread. “Are you going to make me beg?”

She laughed, yet the intensity of his gaze churned her mind like butter. “No, but it’d be nice if you told me what was on your mind rather than stressing me out with all this pussyfooting.”

He guffawed. “Pussyfooting, huh? Well then. I’m asking you to move in with me.”

The tingling in her neck spread to her toes.

Yes, yes, yes.

Undoubtedly yes. But at the same time, she didn’t want him to feel obligated to protect her. She wanted him to want her for her.

“What’s wrong? You looked happy for a minute and now you’re second-guessing.”

She wiggled forward in her seat. “I just don’t want you to do anything you don’t want to do.”

His gray eyes shone with amusement. “I promise you I wouldn’t ask you to do something unless I wanted it, too. I love you, Sav. I want to be with you every minute. I’ve never felt this way about anyone before.” He looked out at the scenery, and for a second, she thought he’d stop talking. “It’s easy... being with you.” He turned back, and his heart was in his eyes. He picked up her hand and brought it to his lips.

The action brought flames to her cheeks. She was sure many people on the patio could see the public display of affection, but god, she loved it.

“Live with me. If I can make you half as happy as you make me, I’ll be content for

the rest of my life.” Three seconds dragged past. “Say yes.”

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Tears burned her eyes and she covered his jaw with her palm. Her throat tightened. “Yes.”

He grinned.

“But you’ve already made me so happy,” she said with a shrug.

“Oh, babe. You have no idea what you’re in for.”

She threw back her head and laughed. “In that case, sign me up.”

He pulled her close and touched his lips to hers. “Done.” His tongue slipped through her teeth and she curled her toes. Her abdominal muscles bunched and her loins clenched.

“We’d better take dinner to go.”

His laugh lifted her heart.

With Toth, she’d had more to smile about in days than she had in years. And he was right—they were just getting started.

EPILOGUE

Toth smiled as he watched Sav bounce Aurora around his living room. Nash and Lexi had nicknamed her Rory, and it fit her perfectly. It’d been almost seven months since he and Savannah moved in together, and it was the best decision he’d ever made.

“I thought we were going to die in the back of that SUV,” said Gemma, Dallas’s girlfriend. She was sitting at the table with Dallas, Dare, Tess, Cole, and Sophia.

Dallas laughed then took a swig of his whiskey. “I’d pay good money to never return to that fucking jungle. That was some scary shit.”

“No, the scary part was you leaping over that damn river on a vine like a monkey.”

He shrugged. “We survived, didn’t we?”

Gemma’s pinched grin held all kinds of secrets. “You’re the only person I’d jump out of a plane for.”

“Pretty sure I had to drag you.”

Gemma threw her head back and laughed, slapping his chest.

Tess stared wide-eyed. “That sounds like a legit nightmare.”

Sophia nodded, and the jokes and laughter continued.

Toth couldn’t forget the other best decision he’d ever made: finding his brothers. He was still figuring out his place in the family, but the camaraderie that held them together had roped him in too.

Now, as much as he’d enjoyed the Thanksgiving food and fun, he was ready for everyone to go home so he could devour Sav’s delicious body. He found her with his gaze again, and they silently agreed to call it a night.

She waved with Rory’s little hand. “Say hi, Uncle Toth.”

Rory let out a scream of delight, and he crossed the room to scoop her up. She clapped his cheek, and Lexi laughed from the armchair, where she was polishing off a piece of chocolate cake. “She thinks that’s the funniest thing right now. Careful, her little pinches hurt.”

He tickled under Rory’s chin. “This cutie? No way.”

“I’m surprised she’s still going strong after our busy day.” Nash strode up and accepted Rory. She rubbed her eyes and yawned as he cradled her in his arms. “We’d better get her home before she’s overtired.”

“Yeah, I’ve got work in the morning.” Gemma stood.

“And I’ve gotta get Bella home,” Sophia said, nodding at the sleeping girl on the couch.

Cole made his way to the living room and picked up Bella. She barely stirred as he brought her to his chest. Dare left with Tess and Gemma and Dallas followed, behind Lexi and Nash.

“I’m going to take the leftovers to the car,” Sophia said to Cole, as she gathered the Tupperware containers Sav had laid out for them.

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“I’ll give you a hand,” Sav offered, picking up Bella’s bag of toys.

“Thanks for coming,” Toth said to Cole, when the room was empty besides them.

Cole nodded. “It was nice. I don’t usually do gatherings.” He glanced at Bella’s cherubic cheeks. “Kinda have to now.”

It was weird seeing the guy who’d been such an asshole step into dad mode. But from the moment he’d shown up at the door with Bella, Cole had been a doting stepdad and uncle.

“Listen,” Cole said. His gaze flicked to the door that Sav and Sophia had exited. “Dare told me you—you see her. Our mom.”

Toth’s throat tightened. He’d called their mother earlier to wish her a happy Thanksgiving, but he hadn’t told Cole that. “Yeah, that’s right.”

He cleared his throat. “Does—Does she know about us? I mean, that you found us?”

Toth scratched the back of his head. “Nah, I didn’t tell her. I was going to, but...” He shrugged.

Several seconds passed as Cole rocked Bella in his arms. “Well, if you do, I’d maybe—” He stopped, clearly struggling with the words.

“You wanna see her?” Toth didn’t hide his surprise.

Cole lifted a shoulder. “Bella asks about my parents. I don’t have the heart to tell her the real story.” He rocked his jaw. “Not even sure I’d be able to look at her, to be honest.” His nostrils flared, and then some of the tension left his face. “But maybe I could try.”

Toth fought the urge to grab his brother’s shoulder. Cole looked ready to bolt, and if he weren’t holding Bella, he’d probably do just that.

“I think she’d like that.”

Interest appeared on Cole’s face but quickly vanished. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” He smiled. “I think you’ll be surprised by how much you might like her. You kinda remind me of her.”

His eyebrows drew together and amusement lit his eyes. “In what way?”

“She’s a hard-ass.”

Cole chortled. “Guess I had to get it from somewhere, and it sure as hell didn’t come from that coward of a man.”

Rather than fuel any anger inside his brother, he just shrugged at the mention of their deadbeat dad. “Honestly, I think she’ll be really happy. I’ll call you next week and if you still want me to reach out, I will.”

“Cole.” Sophia’s hoarse whisper-call from the front door got his attention.

“Gotta go.” He gave one sharp nod and carried Bella outside.

Savannah entered a minute later. “That was a nice visit.”

He caught her hips in his palms and inhaled her sweet jasmine scent. “Mmm. Kinda glad they’re gone though.”

She chuckled and ran her hand from his shoulder to his belt buckle. “Why’s that? Eager to get to bed so we can leave early for the cabin tomorrow?”

He dipped his head to nibble beneath her ear. “’Cause I’m going to get you naked and lick you until you scream.”

They spent most weekends at the cabin. Since their time hiding out there months ago, he’d had the place thoroughly cleaned and had increased security. There was nothing better than enjoying their nights in the hot tub, under the stars, draped over each other.

Her body turned to liquid in his arms. “Sounds like a plan.”

He laughed and lifted her so her legs wrapped around his waist. “I could do this with you every day, you know that?”

It was true. Sharing his life with Savannah had turned out to be everything he needed. Having coffee with her on his back porch every morning and curling up with her to watch movies at night completed him. Not to mention afternoon and morning sex—two things he’d never gotten to indulge in with the one-night stands that had barely taken the edge off.

Savannah filled him in every way. He’d never need or want for another connection as long as he lived.

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She curled her fingers into the strands of his beard. “Well, that’s a good thing, because wedodo this every day.”

He roared as he carried her up the stairs.

Toth took aseat at the ten-person table in the conference room of Backcountry Protection Services’ new office. The leather seat creaked beneath his weight. He loosened his tie. It had been only eight months since he took the job for Danny Carrington, but the business now earned enough that he and Rami could pay themselves decent salaries. Knowing how much money they’d spent on the lavish office space still made his blood pressure spike, though.

“I sure hope you’ve got something good,” Toth said, as he waited for Rami to fire up the projection screen.

“Have I ever steered you wrong?” Rami clicked off the light and drew down the shade on the window overlooking the cityscape.

“Not gonna answer that.”

Rami snorted then pressed a button on the remote in his hand and leaned against the table. “First up, we’ve got August Hick. Was part of black ops for six years. Thirty-four years old and from Houston, Texas.”

Toth froze. “I thought we were discussing a job.”

“Nope. We’re discussing expansion.” Rami’s gaze collided with Toth’s.

He pushed down his annoyance. Rami had brought up expansion after the dust had settled with Danny and they’d decided to wait. “We agreed to wait a year before hiring. Which means this topic is several months early.”

“Yeah, that was before. Now we can afford it. Hear me out,” Rami said, holding up his hand. “I’ve got four guys I think would be great—”

Toth’s jaw clicked open. “You want to hire four people? Dude. We’re just able to cover our own expenses.”

“Yeah, but how many jobs have we had to turn down due to lack of manpower?”

Toth swiped his tongue between his lip and top teeth.

“More than you want to admit,” Rami said. A beat passed. “Look, neither of us has had a vacation or time off since we opened two years ago. I’m fine with that, but we can’t grow and reduce our own time if we’re doing all the legwork. We need to think bigger.”

“And you think we can afford to staff four more guys?”

“Yeah, I do.”

Toth pinched the bridge of his nose. Having grown up in poverty, he’d never been one to squander money. But maybe his childhood programming was getting in the way of his success. “All right. Tell me about the others.”

“Next up are Taschen McAvery, Brick Slater, and Ghost.” Rami pressed a button and four profiles filled the screen.

Toth read each man's credentials. "Ghost got a last name?" he asked.

"He wouldn't supply it. I suspect that's not his real name either."

Toth twisted his face. "Sounds a little too secretive, don't ya think? Where'd you find him?"

"August vouched for him, and that's all the confirmation I need."

"You trust these guys?" Toth asked, with hesitation.

"I trust August, and he helped put the team together."

Toth tapped his fingertips on the wooden table and glanced at the clock. He'd promised to take Sav to lunch, and if he spent too much time arguing with Rami, he'd be late. "Fine. Set up in-person meetings and we'll go from there."

Rami smiled a rare smile, oozing confidence. "You'll thank me."

Toth smirked. "You'd better hope so." But a little thrill of excitement raced through him.

In more ways than one, this was just the beginning.

Keep reading for an excerpt from Rami...