



Wizard's Spitfire

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Category: Romance, Western

Description: Wizard- I'm the club's hacker, the one behind the scenes. Their eye in the sky and on the ground while my other brothers are on the front line. In essence, I'm the club geek. If you need something hacked or information from the dark web, I'm your man.

Then everything changes. I met a single mother with three teenage daughters. I don't care that she's older than me. I'm drawn to her like I've never been before.

Charlie- I'm a single mom and a PI. I'm hired by the Voodoo Kings to do a job and my life changes forever. Not only do I find a hot, younger man who thrills me like no other has but I seem to have drawn attention of some seriously dangerous criminals.

Can Wizard save me and my girls from the Bratva?

Total Pages (Source): 71

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:06 pm

Prologue

Six weeks earlier

Wizard

I SIGH AND LEAN BACKIn my chair, checking my cell phone for a response from Bug. Bug, a fellow hacker, is part of our mother club in Baton Rouge.

Charlie Caruso

(504) 522-2639

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I smile. Nice, strong Italian name. Not as strong as Morelli, but I like it. I send a quick reply.

Thanks, brother

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Charlie

TODAY IS A TOTAL FUCKINGshit show. First, I get called to the principal's office while I'm dropping the girls off at school. My low-life ex didn't pay the tuition yet again. Now, I owe the school sixty-thousand dollars by the end of the school year. Six

weeks. Then I get a flat tire on my way to my first appointment of the day.

I'm meeting some guy named Wizard for a potential job. A job that could theoretically pay a chunk of said tuition. I'm fortunate the school is not making me pay late fees. The tuition was due last August. My slug of an ex pays a few hundred or a few thousand, then nothing for a few months. That's what the school told me today. He hasn't paid child support for the last five years. Why isn't he in jail? Good question. My guess, because he's a sleazeball lawyer with sleazier friends.

Which brings me to now. I slam the trunk of the car down and fight the urge to scream or cry. Possibly both. My spare is missing. I have a sneaking suspicion one of my daughters borrowed it and forgot to tell me. Which really means my piece of shit ex took it for the girls' car and didn't bother to tell me.

UGGGGGGGGGGGGGG!

"Deep breaths," I mutter to myself.

The rumble of a motorcycle draws my attention. Out of instinct, I shift my weight so I can reach my piece if I need it. I watch as a lone biker pulls behind my car. I'd maneuvered into an empty parking lot when the tire went flat.

My breath catches when he takes off his helmet. And not because I'm scared. He's a fucking adonis. I'd put him at six-foot-two, two-twenty. His black t-shirt clings to a muscular chest and shows off well-formed biceps. Well-worn denim clings to his lean hips. My lips curve slightly when I see the shit kickers. He takes off the helmet and I get a good look at him. His thick black hair is shaved on the sides, revealing tats. More ink peeks out from under the collar of his shirt and down both arms.

I wonder if he has full sleeves. His hazel eyes look greener against his olive complexion. He smiles, showing even white teeth and dimples. I feel my stomach

dip.

Oh no, Miss Thang, for-get it! You are NOT going to flirt with him. Fuck, I thought, Miss Thang died along with my libido.

“Can I help you, ma’am?”

“Only if you have a spare tire on that sled?”

His smile widens. “I’m afraid not. Can I wait with you for a tow?”

I glance at my watch. “I’m going to be late for an appointment. If I call a tow truck, it’ll be at least an hour.”

“Let me call our garage. They’ll send out a tow truck and take the car to the garage. We’ll get your tire repaired and get you a spare.”

I eye him suspiciously. “Why are you helping?”

“My ma raised me right. I’d never have Sunday gravy again if I left someone stranded on the side of the road.”

“How much is it going to cost?”

“I’ll have them give you the friends and family discount.”

“You don’t know me.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:06 pm

“I will,” he says with a smile and a wink.

I bite back a retort. I need that ride and a hefty retainer.

“I’m on my way to Daisy Dukes for a breakfast meeting.”

“What a coincidence. So am I.”

“I don’t have a second helmet with me. Mine will be a little big, but let’s get you strapped in.”

“Let me grab my satchel and put the spare key out.”

Wizard

I’M TOOLING DOWN THE highway on my way to Daisy Dukes to meet with Charlie Caruso. I have a thumb drive with everything I found so far on Lola Biaz. It’s plenty to get him started. I spot a vehicle in one of the empty parking lots. Not far off the road. A woman is outside. The way her head is hung. She must be having issues.

I pull in behind her, immediately stunned by her beauty when I get closer. Her long dark hair is pulled back into a braid. She’s a tiny thing. Around five feet.

Piercing blue eyes meet mine when I get closer. After she agrees to let me give her a ride, I watch her walk to her car while I text Crab. He’s working in the garage today. Damn, she has a nice ass.

She fishes a satchel out of the car. Then I watch her put a small magnet key holder under the right front wheel well. I add that info to a second text and shoot it off to Crab. When she is ready, I strap my helmet on her head and mount my sled. Offering her my hand after I'm seated. She throws a leg over and settles with ease. I wonder if she's done this before.

An invisible hand clutches at my chest. I don't like the idea of her riding on the back of someone else's bike. The thought gnaws at me the whole way to the restaurant. I park out front, helping her off before putting down the kickstand and getting off after her. I hurry after her, opening the door.

"Hey before your meeting, can I get your name and phone number? For the garage?"

"Oh, that would help, wouldn't it?" She says with a smile.

She offers me her hand. "Charlie Caruso."

I almost swallow my tongue.

"Private investigator, Charlie Caruso?"

She smiles. "One, and the same."

I point to the patch on my chest where my club name is stitched. Her face lights up with recognition.

"You don't look like a Wizard."

I smile. "I'm the club's tech guy. Our sister club dubbed their tech guy Bug."

"Wizard is better. You were expecting a guy?"

I nod my head. “My dad wanted a boy. Mom named me Charlotte. Dad called me Charlie and it stuck.”

“Let’s find a table and get some food.”

She nods her head. I point out an empty table and follow behind her. Once we’re seated, a server comes by and drops off water and menus.

“I’ll be right back with coffee,” he says.

The server comes back with coffee and takes our orders. I get the ultimate meat lover's omelet, hash browns, and a full stack of pancakes. Charlie orders a veggie egg white omelet, whole wheat toast, and fresh fruit.

“Everything I have on Lola is on here. Do you think you can figure out what happened to her in the last year?

“I can find out. A delve like that will take a few weeks to a few months. That’s a lot of billable hours.”

“I can have your ten grand retainer transferred as soon as we’re finished, if you’d like.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:06 pm

“About that. I hate to ask, but could we make it fifteen? My lousy ex still hasn’t paid the girls’ tuition for the school year.”

School is almost over. What a loser. Not paying your kids’ tuition.

“Sure, we can do that.”

We spend the next thirty minutes eating and going over the case. She virtually signs the documents I’d previously sent her a copy of to review. And I’ll send her a signed copy of the contract as well. When we’re done, I pay the bill, and we head to my bike. I’ll send her the deposit after we pick up her car.

The ride to the garage is over much too soon for my liking. I love the way she feels wrapped around me. A guy like me could get used to this.

Charlie

BREAKFAST GOES SURPRISINGLY well. Wizard didn’t flinch when I asked for an extra five grand. I’ll turn in the fifteen thousand to the school immediately. The girls love their school and I’ll figure out a way to send them myself from now on. I normally pay half anyway, but the ex insisted he’d take care of it this year. And every time I offered to pay my half, he’d explode in anger. I spent the money on braces for the girls. They begged for those invisible braces. For once I had the money to do it. So, I did. Of course that came back to bite me in the ass, but the girls are happy. In my opinion it was worth it.

Now instead of coming up with half, I’m coming up with most of it. It’s seventy-five

grand a year to keep the girls in their charter school. They just turned sixteen. Identical triplets. Lucia, Valentina, and Francesca, the loves of my life.

My only problem besides my asshole of an ex is my attraction to this biker. But that's not what I need. I need to focus on raising the girls. Getting them to college. Three more years of high school and maybe I'll consider going out on a date. I'm a little sad when the ride is over. I haven't been on a bike since I was a teenager.

The boyfriend before the ex. He was wild, free, and fun. Damon belonged to a MC, too. A scary one. He wasn't scary but the other guys were. I was afraid to be alone with any of them.

We pull into a well-kept parking lot. It looks freshly paved. The garage is an enormous square building with a sign that says King's Garage. In smaller letters it says, 'And Towing.'

A guy that looks like he stepped from the pages of GQ Magazine comes out to greet us. If GQ had a biker issue.

"Wizard. Who'd you bring to see us?" Hollywood asks.

"Hollywood, this is Charlie Caruso, our new PI. Charlie, this is Hollywood."

I offer my hand. He takes it, giving me a firm handshake.

"Nice to meet you," he says.

"Nice to meet you as well," I say with a smile. "What do I owe you for the tire?"

"We couldn't fix the tire. Whoever plugged it last time did a horrible job."

I look at him, shocked. “It hasn’t been plugged before. I just got a new set of tires two months ago.”

Hollywood shakes his head. “Your tires have too much wear to be that new. Could someone have swapped them?”

Motherfucker. It must be JR.

“I have an idea of who would have done that. When am I going to need to replace these?”

“They’re all new and so is your spare. Gambit, our president, said to give you new ones on us as a part of your fee.”

A wave of relief washes over me. Things have been tight lately. Tighter than I’d ever let the girls know. I pay for everything and JR swoops in and gives them things like cars and designer clothes.

“Thank you. And thank you, Wizard, for the assist. I’m going to get started. I’ll be in touch as soon as I have an update.”

I get my keys. Say my goodbyes. And head home to start researching.

Chapter 1

Charlie

I come through the front door of my modest home and kick off my shoes, taking a deep inhale of the aromas coming through the kitchen. I just got off a twelve-hour shift at the diner. I’m working undercover to find more information about Lola Biaz.

“Is that you, Charlotte,” I hear my mother call from the kitchen.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:06 pm

“It’s me Ma. Where are the girls? I didn’t see their car.”

“They’re over at Ronda’s working on a school project. They’re due home any minute now.”

“I’ll wash up and come help.”

I hurry to the hall bath and wash up before heading to the kitchen. Ma is flitting around. Every burner on the stove has a pot and the oven is on. I don’t know what I’d do without her.

“Something sure smells good,” Pops says, walking into the kitchen. He snags a bread stick and pokes it in the gravy. Ma slaps his hand.

“Pops, you can wait for dinner. You’re as bad as the kids, if not worse,” she says, shooing him away.

Pops’ thick, once black hair is now mostly silver. Romeo aka Pops Perillo is in his seventies and as spry as a man in his fifties. He’s my dad’s dad. My grandfather and the girls’ great-grandfather.

My grandmother died when I was six and Dad was killed in a plane crash when I was sixteen. After the divorce, Ma, Pops and I found a moderate three-bedroom home. Ma and I shared a room up until last year when I turned the garage into an ensuite. One large bedroom for the triplets with their own bathroom. Not that the adults have time to use any of the bathrooms in the morning. The house came with one and a half baths.

Now instead of hogging two bathrooms in the morning, they hog three. The adults have to be out of the bathroom by six-fifteen when chaos descends. The triplets' alarm goes off at six o'five. They take ten minutes to get out of bed and commandeer a bathroom. Once they go in, forget it for the next forty-five minutes.

"How can I help, Ma?"

"You can make the salad and the dressing. I've got everything else started. Oh, and keep Pops out of my gravy."

"I better go get my gun," I say with a playful smirk.

Pops laughs out loud, stealing another stick and dipping it in the gravy while Ma is giving me the evil eye.

"You know how I feel about guns in the house."

"That's why they're locked in a safe that needs a fingerprint and a retinal scan, Ma. I did that for you instead of using a normal gun safe. Besides, if you want me to keep Pops away from your gravy, I need backup."

Pops chuckles as he stuffs a third gravy laden stick in his mouth. These are the traditional crispy, thin breadsticks, not the thick one they serve at that Italian chain and with pizza. I mean, those are delicious, just not traditional.

The girls arriving home interrupts the conversation.

"We're in the kitchen," I call out.

"Wash up," Ma adds.

I head to the fridge to pull out salad ingredients. Romaine, radicchio, arugula, black olives, cherry tomatoes, red onion, roasted red peppers, and a block of Parmigiano Reggiano. By the time I have everything gathered, the girls file into the kitchen. It's the largest single room in the house and the reason we bought it.

They give each adult a hug and a kiss, starting with Pops, then Ma. I'm always last. Elders first in this family.

"How was school?"

"It's school," Valentina replies.

"Nice answer, smarty butt," Francesca adds.

While Lucia saves her grandmother the trouble and smacks her sister in the back of the head.

"Tone," Ma says.

Out of the three girls, Valentina blames me for the divorce. I blame my lying, cheating, scuzzball ex, but I've never said those words around the girls. And I'd never say it to them.

"Valentina, set the table. Francesca, you can help me by taking your grandfather out of the kitchen and keeping him entertained. Lucia, please make the dressing for the salad." Ma fires off orders.

The girls never talk back to her or Pops and rarely to me, except Valentina. I'm hoping one day soon she'll open up to me and tell me why she blames me. I've asked several times why. She refuses to answer.

I get to work chopping the salad while Lucia grabs olive oil, vinegar and herbs for the dressing.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:06 pm

“We had a good day, Ma.” Lucia says, setting her ingredients next to mine.

“How was your chemistry test?”

“I think Franni and I did well, but Val got salty when I asked her about it later.”

“How bad is she struggling?”

Lucia shrugs. “Like a seven, maybe.”

“It’s time to send in Nonna.”

“Ma, you wouldn’t?”

“I have to. I’ve tried several times. I know she blames me for the divorce, but I don’t know why.”

“You should tell her the truth.”

I put down the knife before I cut myself, lowering my voice.

“What do you mean?” I ask gently.

“I, uh. Ma, I didn’t want to say anything, but I caught Dad once. When Val came down with strep, Franni and I went out to get her something to make her feel better. We caught Dad with some bimbo. They were all over each other. I’m sorry we didn’t tell you.”

She throws her arms around me. I pull her into a hug and let her cry. Ma comes over, but I shake my head. She nods in understanding and starts carrying food into the dining room.

I run my fingers through my daughter's thick, dark hair. I'd say they're mini replicas of me, but they're already two inches taller than I am.

"I should have left him the first time I caught him cheating. Then you wouldn't have seen that."

My phone rings. I pull it out of my pocket and look at the screen. It's Wizard.

"Is it okay if I take this, honey? It's business."

"Of course, Ma. I'll finish the dressing."

"Thank you, sweet girl."

I slide the phone, taking the call. "Hello."

"Charlie, it's Wizard. I know we have a meeting on Monday, but I want to invite you and your family to a BBQ on Saturday. The club is hosting it for our employees and their families."

"We'd love to come. There's six of us. I'll need a time and address."

"I'll send them to you in a text."

By the time the brief call ends, Ma is staring at me."

"I'll tell everyone at the same time."

She nods her head and hands me the completed bowl of salad. We gather around the table. Ma outdid herself as usual. Unless the girls have an event, we have family dinner. Tonight, in addition to the salad, she made melanzane alla parmigiana. It's roasted eggplant, marinara, fresh mozzarella, and basil. Grilled asparagus tossed in olive oil, fresh garlic, and lemon. My mouth waters when I see the spaghetti all'ubracio, better known as drunken spaghetti. It's chianti-infused spaghetti with shrimp, scallops, clams, lobster, and calamari. It's like a mini seafood feast with every bite and my favorite.

Pops says grace before Ma starts passing food around.

"Your mother has an announcement to make."

I smile. She's dying to know about my phone conversation.

"We're invited to employee day at the Voodoo Kings' clubhouse."

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:06 pm

“What’s a Voodoo King?” Lucia asks.

“It’s some kind of gang,” Valentina says snidely.

“It’s not a gang,” Pops says gently. “They’re a motorcycle club. A group of men who live by a code. Only those wearing a patch that says one percent are criminals. I’ve heard of Chief; he started the Kings in Baton Rouge. Gambit, his son, is the current President of this chapter here in New Orleans.

“I know they do at least two charity runs a year, donate to a women and children’s shelter and recently opened a clinic that charges based on what you make.

“My friend Joe fell and broke his hip. His insurance sucks. The hospital had him sitting in pain in the waiting room ER for hours. This big biker comes in about the same time someone bumps into Joe and causes him to cry out.

The biker comes over immediately; turns out he’s a doctor and, get this, he’s one of those Kings. They call him Doc. He called someone from the clinic to come get Joe in an ambulance. The guy’d come to check on a patient. He left and came back not ten minutes later. Gave Joe a shot for the pain. Followed us on his bike when the ambulance arrived. Took care of Joe immediately. Even sent a healthcare worker to take care of him while he recuperated.”

“How much was that bill?” Lucia asks.

“Nothing. Every penny Joe gets he uses to survive. Someone from the clinic went over his finances with him. Even considered his dog’s expenses into it. Most places

won't do that. Joe said they used some grant he qualified for, and they paid his bill."

"I hope Doc is there. I'd like to meet him," Ma says.

Chapter 2

Wizard

I'M SMILING FROM EAR to ear. She said yes. She's bringing her family to the employee bar-b-que. I know from the research I did, after hiring her, that she lives with her daughters, mother, and paternal grandfather. Better known as Pops. Good thing Chief isn't here. It might get confusing. His kids and grandkids call Chief "Pops." A knock on my door draws my attention.

"Enter."

Gambit enters the room.

"Got an update for me?"

"The PI and her family are coming to the party. We officially meet Monday for information. I know she's hit a lot of dead ends. Frankly, so have I."

"This has to be more than one woman OD'ing."

I nod my head. "I agree. If it was a simple case of her using drugs, there'd be an easy line to follow. So far, Charlie's found no evidence of drug use until roughly six weeks before the twins' birthday. Why would a mother who stayed clean for nearly eight months start using hardcore?"

"Questions I hope we have answers to soon for Wrath and Millie."

“And the twins. One day, they’ll want answers.”

Gambit nods. “You know she’ll be swarmed the minute everyone finds out Charlie is a woman, right?”

I growl. “The women are fine to get to know her. Anyone else lays a mitt on her and I’ll break it.”

Gambit smiles and shakes his head. “You’ve got it bad.”

I flip him off. He walks out the room laughing.

Fuck! I’m in trouble and my mama and Nona will be over the moon. They’ve been after me to get a girlfriend since Mia left me standing at the altar six years ago.

I was only twenty-two at the time, but we’d been together since seventh grade, fall formal. She ran off with some rich twat. He knocked her up and left her for a Saints cheerleader. Last I heard, she moved back East to live with her family.

I never looked her up. Don’t intend to either.

Honestly, I haven’t felt drawn to anyone since Mia. Not until Charlie. Only I’m not a little boy anymore and it’s different. The pull I feel towards Charlie is nothing short of magnetic. We meet once a week. I go to her as often as possible.

It’s only for an hour or two but it’s enough. Enough for me to be half in love with her already.

I can’t wait to meet her girls. She’s talked about them a few times but not overly. I don’t blame her. She doesn’t know me from Adam. I’m sure she’s leary of bikers. Many people are. They don’t understand the culture and expect us to live like Sons of

Anarchy.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:06 pm

An alert on my computer brings me out of my thoughts. I quickly pull up the information.

“Mother fucker.”

I pick up my phone, find Gambit’s number, and hit send.”

“Did you miss me already?”

“Turd Senior just pinged my radar.”

“Fuck.”

“Exactly.”

“I’m calling church. See you in thirty.”

Seconds later a group text appears.

EMERGENCY SESSION

CHURCH IN 30

MANDATORY

??Gambit

I spend the next twenty-seven and half minutes gathering information before grabbing my laptop and heading downstairs. I'm the last one in the door. I close it behind me and take a seat at the table.

Gambit wraps the skull against the table. "Church is in order mother fuckers. Wizard got a hit on Turd senior. Turd, Tyler Edwin Barnes III, was a piece of trash we took out when he kidnapped Stormy. Wizard floors yours."

"Tyler Edwin Barnes II or Teddy is the Gov of Indiana. He's up for reelection this year. He expects his son who has been gallivanting around the world the last few years to come home.

"We'll need to stage a spectacular death with no hopes of recovering any remains."

"So, we just need an active volcano?" Everest says, with a smirk.

"Something like that," I reply with a smile.

"Where is the guy?" Hollywood asks.

"Gator food." Gambit replies. "He kidnapped my ol' lady. Been dead awhile now. Wizard and Bug from our mother chapter have been faking his life. Have him traveling all over, spending daddy's ill-gotten money."

"What's the plan?" Demon asks.

Chapter 3

Charlie

"Are we almost there yet?" Pops asks for the twelfth time.

We're on our way to the Kings' compound and I had to fight to drive. Now Pops is driving me insane because of it. Some days, he's worse than the triplets.

Our van is nearly twenty years old, but it fits all of us and Pops' friends keep it in good shape. I don't know where he takes it, but it comes back fixed every time and for a fraction of the cost I'd pay in a shop.

"Mom, is it dangerous to be around a bunch of bikers?" Lucia asks.

I let out a small sigh. I thought Pops already covered this the other night.

"Yeah, they're a bunch of murderers and outlaws. Why are you working for them? Much less bringing us." Valentina huffs.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:06 pm

“They are not criminals or murderers. Stop watching TV and expecting everyone to be like what you see.”

“I didn’t get it from TV. Dad told me...”

“Your father has no idea what he’s talking about. Not to mention this job paid your tuition,” I blurt out.

“What?” Ma said. “I thought JR paid that at the beginning of the year.”

I shake my head. I shouldn’t have said anything in front of the girls. They don’t know the asshole doesn’t pay his child support much less that he skipped out on their tuition.

“He had money problems,” Valentina says.

“Then why did he buy that expensive new sports car?” Lucia adds.

“He works hard. He deserves that car. If he didn’t have to pay you so much child support, he could have paid for our schooling,” Valentina adds with venom.

“Young lady, that is quite enough!” Ma says. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Yes, I do! She left him and ruined everything,” Valentina insists.

“Why your mother left your father is grown-up business, which you are not. Plus,

he's lying to you."

"Ma," I warned.

"Your Ma's right, Charlotte. The girls are old enough to know their father doesn't pay any child support hasn't for years," Pops adds.

"That's not true. You're lying!" Valentina yells.

"Yell at your grandfather again and you're grounded for a month. No social media, no phone, no after school activities. You can disagree in a respectful tone. Call him a liar again and I'm going to bust your ass like I did when you were little."

"That's abuse," Valentina says.

Her face is screwed up in anger.

"No, that's discipline," I reply, calmly.

"Well. It's not true. Dad pays you and you blow the money."

"If you want, I'll show you the paperwork from the courts," I say with resignation.

I didn't want the girls to know but JR is filling their head with lies. I don't have a choice at this point. I won't continue to let him undermine me with my daughters. Daughters he barely has time to see. And apparently his excuse is to blame me that he has to work long hours so he can't see his girls. Which is utter bullshit. He spends half his time golfing with his buddies.

"Those can be forged," Valentina snarls.

“That is enough young lady. I have said nothing because I wanted to keep this between your father and me. He’s filling your head full of nothing but lies. It’s time you stop blaming me for everything. Your father made choices that affected our marriage.”

“What choices are those?” Valentina asks, snidely.

“He cheated on Mom. Several times,” Francesca adds, quietly.

We reach the compound, and I have to turn into the front gate before I can respond. A man dressed in jeans, boots, a tee, and a cut comes out of the booth. He smiles as he approaches the car with a clipboard in his hand.

“Name please?”

“Charlie Caruso.”

I watch him scan the list.

“I’ve got you right here. Just pull through the gates and go straight. You’ll see the clubhouse. You can go in or walk around back.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:06 pm

“Thank you.”

I pull forward through the massive iron gates. The gate looks like it's reinforced to withstand a bomb blast. High, thick brick walls surround the compound. I pull through, spotting the clubhouse. It looks like an old boutique hotel that's been remodeled.

The parking lot is already half full of vehicles, including a few dozen bikes. I find a spot and park the van. The door slides open seconds later and Valentina rushes out.

Fuck my life. The last thing I need is for her to throw a tantrum in front of my employers. I've already dealt with two major bombs this week. Two of my girls know their father is a lying, cheating, bastard. We're going to need a family meeting.

Chapter 4

Wizard

My phone pings with a text. I pull it up.

She's here

Tully

Tully is one of our best prospects. He's due to be patched in soon. Gambit took the vote at Church. It passed unanimously. It's past his year mark, but he took some time off for finals in school.

I hurry outside in time to see the van park and one of the triplets comes rushing out. She takes off at a run, not paying attention to where she is going, and nearly runs into me. I catch her before she crashes into me.

“Hey, short stuff, why the hurry?”

Her face scrunches up. I can tell I’m in for a tongue lashing. Then she looks up and her eyes go wide. The words die on her lips as she stares at me. She blushes and turns her eyes down to the ground.

I look over her head to see Charlie making her way toward us with an entourage behind her.

“Valentina Teresa Angelica Caruso,” Regina Perillo calls out, passing Charlie on her way toward the triplet. She’s Charlie’s mom, and her pictures don’t do her justice.

The girl in question’s eyes widen, and she turns around. When the group reaches us, Regina shoots out her hand and grabs Valentina by the ear. I see the o’shit look on her face.

“I’m sorry, Nona.”

“As well you should be,” she replies, releasing the girl’s ear.

Charlie smiles up at me.

“Hello Wizard. This is my mother Regina, my grandfather Romeo, aka Pops, and the girls, Val, Franny, and Luci. Family this is Wizard.”

I offer her my hand to her mother and grandfather. “Pleased to meet you. Let me show you around. Why don’t we start out back. That’s where all the kids are now.”

“Give us a moment or two?” Charlie asks.

“Sure. I’ll wait for you over there.”

“Thank you.”

I walk a hundred yards away to give them privacy. Charlie turns on a dime, her face serious. I can tell she’s pissed. Valentina rolls her eyes at Charlie. The second time she does it, Pops smacks her on the ass, once. The girl looks surprised, then drops her head.

After a few more minutes of tense conversation, they head in my direction.

“We’re ready,” Charlie says.

Charlie

SHE’S GOING TO BE GROUNDED for life if she keeps up with this attitude. I wait until Wizard is far enough away that he won’t hear us.

“Valentina, two weeks. No social media, no phone, no TV. You don’t leave the house without Ma or I.”

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:06 pm

“Hey, what about me?” Pops asks with a pretend pout.

“You always let us off the hook,” Lucia says.

Pops has the grace to look chagrined.

“Two weeks! I’ll miss the summer dance. I have a date!”

“Not anymore.”

“It’s Dad’s weekend. He’ll let me go.”

“You’re not going to your dad’s for two weeks, either. I’ll call him and let him know. Now give your phone to Ma.”

Valentina lets out a screech but hands her phone to Ma. One problem solved. At least for now.

“Francesca, why did you say your father cheated?”

“Come on, Mom, we’re not babies. I know Dad cheated more than once. He introduced us to his girlfriends a few times.”

“What?”

“Sorry, Ma,” Lucia says, casting her eyes downward. “After I caught him, he figured why bother hiding them?”

“We can unpack all this later. We don’t have time now,” Ma says.

I nod in agreement.

“Let’s go.”

We make our way to Wizard.

“We’re ready.”

Wizard nods. “Right this way, ladies, and Pops.”

He leads us around the side of the building. I can hear laughter and music from here. When we round the corner, I see dozens of people. Men, women and children. Wizard leads us to a couple. Both are tall. The man’s long dark hair is in a single braid down his back. The woman’s sapphire blue hair hangs loose down her back. They’re laughing. He’s holding an infant, I’d say around a year old, and her belly is slightly rounded with another pregnancy.

“Charlie, I’d like you to meet Gambit, our President and his ol’ lady, Stormy. Also known as Queenie, our club’s queen. The little guy in Gambit’s arms is Xavier.”

He points out other children. “Their oldest, Bastian, is our newest prospect. Goes by Crab. That’s Genni, Remy, Acadia and Antoine.”

After Wizard introduces us to Gambit and Stormy, he introduces us to other people, mostly couples with children. Hollywood is next with his two kids, Ella and Brayden. They are six and seven. He doesn’t have an ol’ lady. Alena, with her son Xander who will be a year old in a few months, is a friend of the club who lives on the compound. Teagan, whose brother Tully is a prospect. She’s sixteen and her brother is only nineteen. Nitro and Lucia have EJ, Benji and another on the way. Boomer and Olivia

have infant twins, Romeo and Rocco.

Pops gets a huge kick out of that. A baby with his name. We have to pry the infant from his arms before Wizard introduces us to Dmitri, Lily, and Dakota with their baby Ace. Outlaw and Delta and their little girl, Delilah. They're expecting twins in the fall. Papa and Nay are due around the same time.

Smoke and Sabian have triplets. Avery, Riley and James. Two boys and a girl.

"I have so many questions," Sabian says.

"Ma and I will be happy to answer all of them. She was indispensable with the girls. Still is," I say, pulling Ma in for a one-armed hug.

"Smoke's grandmother is moving here to help."

Smoke nods. "My bio brothers are packing her stuff as we speak. She'll be here next week."

"I look forward to meeting her," I say.

Smoke smiles and Wizard leads us to Millie and Wrath. They have a set of twins that are a few months old. Madison and Mason. They're due again in December. I almost ask Wizard how the math works out, but decide it is none of my business.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:06 pm

After the couples, he introduces us to the rest of his brothers, fellow King members. Blue, Decker, who's Wrath's twin, and Saber, their third brother and Kentucky triplet. Wizard explains Saber was born on the same day in the same hospital as Decker and Wrath, but his parents abandoned him. Decker and Wrath's parents fell in love with Saber and took him home from the hospital with his new twin brothers. As the boys grew older, the twins didn't want their new brother to feel left out, they dubbed themselves the Kentucky triplets. A state they chose at random, according to Saber.

We also met Doc, Brick and his wife Red, Angel, Demon, Cobra, Everest, and Saint. The girls asked a few questions before they took off with Teagan, who's the same age.

I look around, surprised to see a large playground and pool, along with an enormous stage, and a BBQ pit behind the clubhouse. There are a couple dozen more children playing in the pool and playground. Wizard explains they are family of employees.

Over the next hour I meet all the prospects. Havoc, Mayhem, Tully, Flea, another set of triplets Hustle, Hurl, Honda, and Crab. Who I'd met earlier. Wizard also introduces me to several other employees. Ma and Pops sat down a long time ago and are at a table with an enormous umbrella for shade, people watching.

Chapter 5

Wizard

“Would you like a drink?”

“No thanks. I’m driving.”

“We have several non-alcoholic choices. Coke, iced tea, a few flavors of lemonade, and water. Maybe a few more. I lost count. The ladies sure know how to put on a spread.”

“The wives and girlfriends do all the cooking?”

“We men pitch in when they let us. Smoke made the chili, and the prospects are manning the girls. The dolls pitch in too.”

“Should we have brought a dish to share, and who are the dolls?”

“You’re guests. You absolutely did not have to bring a dish. The dolls are what other clubs call bunnies or sweet butts.”

I watch as she processes the information.

“Bunnies are women that sleep with any biker?”

“Only patched members of the club or visiting club. And always by choice. No member may demand sex from an unwilling participant. We’re big on consent.”

“That’s good. Will they be showing up in skimpy clothes?”

I look around and spot Deedee. I put an arm around Charlie’s shoulder and point her in Deedee’s direction.

“That’s Deedee. She’s one of our dolls.”

She’s dressed in jean shorts and a black tank that says ‘Voodoo Doll’ on it. The

shorts are short but cover her ass cheeks. “None of our women would dress skimpy in front of the kids. When the kids go to bed and it's adult only, then they can show as much skin as they care to.”

“Appropriate. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Were you worried?”

“Three young, impressionable women. One of which was already tripping over her tongue the moment she laid eyes on you.”

I feel warmth spread across my cheeks.

“I’m sure she’d feel the same if it were any of my brothers. None of their mugs are too ugly.”

“That’s right,” Demon says, walking up to us with a big smile on his face.

“Charlie, can I get you a drink or something to eat? Seems this ugly fucker is slacking,” Demon says, slapping my shoulder.

I growl at him.

“Did you just growl at him?” Charlie asks with a smile.

“Fuckers need to get gone. I’ll take care of you.”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:06 pm

“I’ve been taking care of myself for some years now. I’m going to see if Ma or Pops need anything. Excuse me.”

As soon as she walks away, I slug Demon in the arm.

“Asshole.”

“What? I just came to talk to the hot girl. Why didn’t you tell us Charlie is a girl? Not to mention she’s hot as fuck.”

“And she’s off limits.”

“Who says?”

“I do, fucker. She’s not the one-night stand type. Plus, she has three daughters to think about.”

I hurry after her, finding her at a table with her mother, grandfather and Hollywood. The latter just set a cold mug of beer and plate of ribs in front of Charlie’s grandfather. I sit across from Charlie by her mom.

“Can I get you anything, Mrs. Perillo?” I ask Regina.

Charlie shoots me a look when I use her mom’s last name. I give her a wink and a smile before she can say anything. Regina speaks up.

“Why don’t you escort me and Charlie through the line, young man?”

“I’d be honored.”

I stand and offer Mrs. Perillo my arm. She takes it. I do the same for Charlie, who surprises me by taking it.

“We’ll be right back, Hollywood,” I say.

“Take your time. Pops and I are having a great talk.”

I nod to him and escort the ladies to the food tables. We have several laden down with a variety of prepared food. Stormy has it all in covered dishes. Some heated. Others on ice to keep it chilled. Thanks to her, we also have a professional-grade kitchen.

“This all looks and smells delicious. Did you cater it?” Regina asks.

“Ma, Wizard told me the club made all the food. Mostly the ladies. Smoke made the chili.”

“I’ll have some of that,” Regina says with a smile.

I grab a tray, and an empty bowl filling it with rich smelling chili. Smoke’s chili is the best. Man could win awards.

“What do you like in your chili, Mrs. Perillo?”

“Call me Gina or Ma. No more of that Mrs. Perillo stuff. I like onions, cheddar cheese, sour cream and corn chips or crackers on the side.”

I give her a mock bow. “Your wish is my command, Gina.”

I grab a second tray for Charlie. I carry the trays down the line as the women grab a variety of things to eat. Gina tries a variety of foods while Charlie sticks to veggies and some roasted chicken.

“Nothing fried or fatty?” I ask her quietly.

She smiles at me. “Ma loves to cook. We have a big Italian meal most nights. I save most of my calories and carb intake for dinner. It’s that or do two extra hours of cardio and I don’t have time for that.”

Charlie’s girls surprise me by showing up in the food line before we can talk more.

“We’re starved,” Teagan says as she joins us in line.

Chapter 6

Charlie

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:06 pm

The day flew by all too fast. I had a surprisingly good time. So did Ma, Pops, and the girls. Valentina is mooning hard over Wizard, while Lucia can't take her eyes off Crab. There's only a two-year difference between them. Francesca, my fun flirt, teased Tully until his face was red as a beet half the day.

"Are you ready to roll, Ma?"

She smiles at me. "I am. I'll round up the girls if you round up Pops."

"So, you're taking the easy job?"

She smirks at me. "You betcha."

I do a quick scan of the perimeter. When I don't immediately spot Pops, I head inside. Wizard gave me a quick tour of the bottom floor when I needed to use the facilities earlier. I hurry through the kitchen to the hall, then into their bar, Lagniappe.

I hear a few whistles and calls. Likesexy mamaorMILF. It makes me blush, but I don't hate it. Pops finds me before I can find him.

"You're causing quite a stir, Charlie girl."

"It's not my fault they all need glasses."

"Hey, don't talk bad about my girl," Wizard says.

Surprising me by putting his arm around my shoulders.

“Your girl?”

“If I don’t claim you, all these neanderthals will start a chest thumping competition. It sounds hot, but it’s not. Not outside of romance novels.”

“What do you know about romance novels?”

“Stormy writes romance novels. Stormy St. James.”

“Does she write the Valhalla Marauders series?”

“She does indeed.”

“Charlotte, I have the girls corralled. Hustle, Hurl, and Honda are escorting them to the van. They wanted time to talk triplet stuff. Whatever that means,” I hear Ma’s voice behind me.

Wizard’s next words floor me.

“Gina, would it be a terrible imposition if I kept Charlie a few more hours? I promise to bring her home safely.”

“Only if you promise not to drink and drive,” Gina replies.

“Cross my heart,” Wizard says.

“Pops, are you ready? I’ll need your help with the girls.”

“I’m ready, Gina.”

Wizard turns to me. “It’s about to get wild. How about we go somewhere for dinner?”

I know this great Italian place.”

“I’m not dressed for anything fancy.”

“You’re dressed just fine. I’ll grab an extra helmet from the garage and meet you out front.”

“I need jeans and closed-toed shoes.”

“I’ve got some jeans that will fit, and I think we’re close in shoe size. You can see if mine or Tawny’s fit. I’m Athena, by the way,” a stunning Creole beauty says.

“Pleased to meet you, Athena. I’m Charlie.”

Wizard

I'M OUTSIDE THE CLUBHOUSE. Parked in front of the walk. Athena sent me a text to let me know Charlie's on her way out. I head toward the front door. I'm halfway there when the big doors open, revealing Charlie.

I stop in my tracks. Taking in her curves leaves me breathless and half-hard. She's wearing black leather pants that hug everycurve of her legs, ass, thighs, and calves. To her shapely ankles, where she's sporting boots that look like hooker heels and Harley boots had a baby. They are sexy as fuck and a low whistle leaves my lips before I can think to stop it.

She stops. I tense waiting for her to read me the riot act. Instead, she blushes.

"Thank you. You're too kind."

"Bellissima, I'm merely stating the truth. You're Venus in the flesh."

Her cheeks redden further. For not the first time, I want to find her ex and give him a sound beating. Then thank him for being a stupid mother fucker giving me a chance with Charlie.

"Where are we going?"

"Trust me?"

She nods her head.

“I have a spare helmet waiting for you.”

I offer her my hand. She looks surprised but takes it. I lace my fingers with hers and lead us back to the back bike.

“I borrowed Gambit’s sled. It’s built for two and is more comfortable.”

“What if you scratch it?”

“He’ll kill me.”

She laughs. I’m not joking, but she doesn’t need to know that. Lucky for me, Uncle Wizard is loved by all his children. And I run his wife’s website. He can’t kill me. He can kick my ass, though. And that fucker won’t pull his punches.

I take the helmet off the back of the bike and place it on her head. She has it fastened before I have a chance to.

“Do you ride?”

“I do. I had a little sportster but sold her a couple years ago to cover costs for the girls.”

“He sounds like a real cazzo.”

“He is definitely a dickhead.”

“Let’s forget about him for a little while. Enjoy the ride.”

She relaxes.

“Great idea.”

I get on the sled, then offer her my hand. She mounts expertly, fitting herself against me. Her arms wrap around me.

“Ready?”

She nods. I quickly don my helmet, start the ignition, lift the kickstand, and take off. Crab is at the gate. He opens it, giving me a wink and a salute as we pass him. I can hear her laugh. A sound like I'd love to hear more of.

Chapter 7

Charlie

The drive wasn't nearly long enough. Maybe I'll ask him to go for a longer ride after dinner. I'd missed feeling my knees in the breeze. We come to a stop. I focus on my surroundings and realize we're in front of Vincent's.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:06 pm

I take his hand and get off the sled. I take off my helmet and stow it in the luggage. Wizard gives me a look of admiration before stowing his helmet next to mine and locking the trunk.

“The girls will be so jealous.”

“Oh yeah, do they like it here?”

“They love it. I take them every year for their birthday.”

Wizard places his hand on the small of my back and guides me to the door. A uniformed employee opens the door and ushers us toward the hostess stand. A handsome woman dressed to the nines with silver hair greets us.

“Good evening. Do you have a reservation?”

“Morelli.”

The woman glances at the blotter in front of her. She grabs two menus and a wine list.

“Right this way, Mr. Morelli.”

We pass through the main dining room to a smaller private room.

“I’ll send your server in and let Mr. Di Bacco know you’re here.”

“Thank you,” Wizard says to the hostess, while pulling out the chair for me.

I take a seat and open the menu. I know it by heart, but they always have weekly specials. Plus, this place isn’t exactly cheap. I normally order the least expensive thing on the menu so the girls can have what they want. Ma and Pops either stay home or insist on paying for their dinner.

When Dad died, he left enough money for us to live on for a few years. Ma’s never had a job outside the home and, in my opinion, she doesn’t need one. She’s never been interested in one. She takes care of the house and helps with the girls. Pops insists on helping with the bills. I let him pay half the lights and internet/cable.

Our server comes in with ice water and a bottle of red wine.

“Compliments of Mr. Di Bacco.”

“Only a half glass for me. I’m driving,” Wizard says.

I nod at the server as he fills my glass. I smell the wine before taking a taste.

“This is good.”

“Why don’t we order enough food for you to take home to your family?” he asks after the server leaves.

“You don’t need to do that.”

“I’d like to. If you’ll let me.”

“Will it fit on the sled?”

“That’s what prospects are for. I’ll shoot off a text message to Tully. He’ll come and get it and deliver it to your house.”

“Thank you. They’ll be thrilled. Over the moon.”

The server comes back to take our order. We decide on the tasting menu: artichoke hearts with prosciutto, parmesan and olive oil, parmesan crusted shrimp, corn and crab chowder, cannelloni, a walnut, gorgonzola salad, seafood medallions and blackened redfish. We also ordered Osso Bucco to split and half the menu to take home for the family.

Paying for it will put a massive dent in my reserve cash, but I couldn’t tell him no when he suggested it. The girls deserve a treat. Fresh garlic bread and more ice water arrive at the table.

“Valentina seemed upset when you arrived at the compound earlier. Anything I can do to help?” Wizard asks.

I shake my head. “Only if you have a time machine. I’ll write myself a note that says, ‘ditch the asshole as soon as you find out you’re pregnant.’ Valentina blames me for the divorce. As we arrived at the compound, Francesca dropped a bomb. She knows her dad cheated on me.”

“I imagine those words were like a punch in the gut.”

Wizard

SHE NODS. IF I HADN'T already decided to look into her scumbag ex, the look on her face clinched it.

“Knowing that any of my daughters know makes it worse. I have a feeling when I know the full story, I’m going to want to throttle him. Not that I don’t want to most days.”

“Was your ex responsible for your tires?”

“Yes. He bought the girls a decent used car. Asshat promised them a new one. Likely spent it on his latest chippie.”

I nearly spit out the drink of iced tea I’d just taken.

“Chippie?”

“It’s an oldie but a goodie, Pops would say.”

“I like him. I think Hollywood’s already adopted him.”

She nods again. “He has. His kids are already calling him Pops. Ma already promised to teach them how to make gravy like a real Italian. Invited them to Sunday dinner. You should come too. Unless being stared at by my sixteen-year-old daughter is too weird.”

“I’d love to come. What time should I be there and what can I bring?”

“We’ll eat at six, but Ma will have a million snacks made, so come after one. We’ll be home from church by then. Bring your appetite. She’ll cook for days.”

“My Nona is the same way. Anytime any of us visit her, she cooks for days and sends us home with a box of leftovers.”

“Do you have siblings?”

I shake my head. “No, I’m an only child, but both my parents come from large families. I have dozens of cousins.”

“That must have been fun growing up.”

“It was. Holidays were always controlled chaos. But it was a lot of fun.”

“Papa has two brothers. They live in New Jersey but visit at least once a year to see Pops. He’s their dad. Ma is an only child like me. Her parents, my grandparents, live in Palermo.”

Our first course arrives. We continue to talk in between bites as the food arrives. I notice Charlie stops after her second glass of wine. I ask the server to cork the bottle. I’ll send it with Tully.

“How long has Pops lived with you?”

“Since Nonnina died. I was six. He can take care of himself, but the heart just went out of him when she died. He’s still not the carefree Pops I remember as a girl. They were so in love. It was like watching a romance movie happen in real time. He’d bring her a gift every day. A flower, perhaps a feather or beautiful stone. Maybe pints

of berries he'd get scratched up picking."

"Did they live in Louisiana?"

"No, they had a farm in New Jersey. Most people just think of the city and forget some of Jersey is farm country. My uncles still run the farm."

"Do you and the girls get there often?"

"Not really. Even before the divorce, money was tight. I thought we were strapped for cash so JR could pay off his school loans. Turns out it all went into an offshore account. I guess he knew his cheating would catch up one day."

She suddenly straightens. Her brow furrows. Charlie reaches out and places her hand on my arm.

"I'm sorry. I know this isn't an actual date or anything, but you don't want to hear about my ex."

"First, I want you to know you can talk about your ex anytime. You need someone to vent to outside your house. I'm happy to be that. Second, who says this isn't an actual date?"

Chapter 8

Charlie

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:06 pm

His last words floor me. He wants to date me? No. No way!

“I’m nearly a decade older than you are. And I have three teenage girls, my mom, and grandfather to take care of.”

“You don’t have to do it alone. And you’re only eight years older than I am.”

“Are you offering?” I ask, astonished.

“I am.”

I puff up. Is he nuts? I start to speak. He floors me by placing his finger gently against my lips.

“Posso finire, Spitfire, per favore?”

I nod my head. Since he asked so nicely and in our mother tongue.

“We’ve gotten to know each other a little over these past few months. Enough to know I want to date you. I understand that comes with Gina, Pops, Val, Frannie, and Luci. While I’m not sure how to address the crush thing, I’m sure with your guidance we will handle it the best way possible.

“Yes, I’m younger than you, but I did two tours in the sandbox with the Marines. The things you see make you grow up real quick. Our club is one hundred percent legit. As is every business we own. If, for whatever reason, we don’t work out romantically, it won’t affect your job with the club. Gambit likes your work. Plus,

I'm hoping at the very least we'll be friends. You don't need to do this all alone."

His words had me melting in my seat. I'm nearly a puddle on the floor. While he was talking, he'd put his hand on top of mine and curled his fingers around mine.

"I've been on one date since the divorce. It ended in disaster. Maybe I'm not cut out for relationships."

"Maybe you've only dated boys and never a man. I'm only asking for a chance. We can take this at your pace."

"I wouldn't want to introduce you to the girls as my boyfriend unless we were serious. I hope you understand."

He nods his head. "Completely. Working together gives us the perfect excuse for us to spend time together. Your family is welcome to the clubhouse any time. You could come for the day or spend the weekend at the compound. We have one five-bedroom, four-bathroom guest house. Some of our ally clubs like to stay under the same roof. There's even a bodega on site to stock the fridge and pantry. I can send the prospects to tote, fetch, buy, etc."

"You make them do a lot of things."

"We need to push them. To prove their loyalty. Once you're a fully patched member, you get a vote and a percentage of the profits from each business."

"Do you all get an equal share?"

"No. Brass gets a bigger percentage because we have the most responsibilities. Plus, whoever manages the business gets a bonus. The club regularly gives bonuses."

“How many businesses does the club own?”

“We currently have sixteen. Voodoo Armadillo, a pub. It’s connected to one of our more recent ventures, Pele’s Palace. The Baron’s Best, a brand of medical marijuana. We make a variety of products. The brand is currently only sold at Swamp Witch Herb, our dispensary. We also have a grow farm. It seriously needs a name. Blue Bayou Customs does mostly sleds. Elvis takes three or four classic cars in a year. He has a six-year waiting list and clients begging him to expand. He’s also the lead singer of the club’s band, which they keep changing the name of. I have no idea what it is this month.”

“Who’s in it besides Blue?”

“Smoke, Outlaw, and Papa.”

He laughs, then playfully narrows his eyes. “How much of what I just told you did you already know?”

“I know the black and white of the businesses. Enough to know I’m working for the good guys and not the bad ones. I didn’t know anything about the band. I loved all the information you added.”

“What’s another of our businesses?” He asks with a smile.

“Professor Pumps in Baton Rouge and Grunt Work fitness here.”

His smile widens. His green eyes sparkle. He rubs his thumb across the back of my hand. “Very good.”

The server places our dessert in the middle of the table.

“How about a ride after dinner?” Wizard asks.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:06 pm

“I smile. I’d love that. If you’ll excuse me, I need the bathroom before dessert.”

“I’ll wait until you get back. Take your time.”

Chapter 9

Wizard

I watch her walk away, admiring her fine ass. Those pants hug her every curve. The private dining room I reserved comes with private bathrooms. The moment I hear the click, I flag our server and hand him the card. And tell him to give himself a twenty-five percent tip.

“Mr. Hurl picked up the food. He said to tell you Tully’s sister had a girly emergency. He gave me a generous tip.”

“Good, you can have both tips. Please hurry before she gets done.”

“Yes, sir.”

True to his word, the server came back less than a minute later, final receipt in hand. I signed his copy and put mine away. He hurries away, closing the door behind him as Charlie emerges from the bathroom.

She rushes to the table, phone in hand. “Can we get that to go? The girls are fighting. Ma says she needs me.”

“We can. Let’s go.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

A few minutes later, we’re walking hand in hand to the sled. I unlock the luggage and hand her a helmet.

“Let me give you my address.”

“I have all your info.”

“Oh, right,” she says with a laugh.

We make it to her house in record time. I didn’t speed that much. I’d never endanger the precious cargo on the back of my bike.

The more time I spend around her, the more time I want to spend around her. I turn off the engine before we get there and coast in, pulling into the shadows.

“A moment before you go in?” I ask as she dismounts.

She takes off her helmet and waits for me. I take mine off, laying it on the seat before stepping into her space. I gently cup her face in one hand, placing the other in the small of her back. I look from her lips to her eyes, asking permission. She gives a slight nod of her head. My lips descend on hers. The kiss is soft at first as I revel in the feel of her lips on mine. I’ve wanted to kiss her from the first moment I met her. She moans and opens to me. I run my tongue along the open seam before slipping it inside and tasting her. It’s my turn to moan.

Charlie molds herself to me. I draw her closer, slipping my arm around her waist and lift her. She wraps her legs around my waist as the kiss continues. Consuming us. The front porch light turns on. Charlie scrambles down. I offer her my hand and walk her to the door.

“I’d like another date. And please call me Damian when we’re alone.”

“I’ll do that, Damian. Time for me to go into the lion’s den.”

“Call me if you want or need to talk.”

Charlie

THE DOOR OPENS AND a blank-faced Pops looks out. This doesn't bode well. Pops steps out.

“I’ll be in shortly. Please wait for me to start, neonata.”

“Of course, Pops. I’ll grab the whip and chair and keep them in their corners until your arrival.”

Pops pulls me in for a quick hug and kisses the top of my head. I straighten my shoulders and head inside, stopping in the kitchen to grab a grape Nehi. After opening it and tossing the cap in the recycle bin, I take a deep breath and head into the family room.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:06 pm

Ma is sitting on the couch in between Lucia and Francesca. Veronica is in a side chair, arms crossed, a pout marring her beautiful face. As soon as they saw me, they all start speaking at once.

I let them go on for a couple of minutes. I need to give Pops a few minutes. A loud whistle pierces the air. The girls immediately stop talking. Pops comes in, putting an arm around my shoulders and guiding me to the love seat.

Wizard

POPS SURPRISES ME BY walking me to my sled.

“I need your phone,” Pops says.

I take it out of my back pocket and hand it to him. He fiddles with it for a minute and hands it back.

“Now we have each other's numbers. Take care of my neonata. Her ex doesn't deserve to breathe the same air. He's got Valentina tied up in knots.”

Pops walks away cursing Roger Caruso, aka JR. Two minutes later, my phone rings. It's Pops. It takes a few seconds to realize he's called so I can listen in to the meeting.

Chapter 10

Charlie

“Now, we’re going to do this in an orderly fashion. Regina, do you have the ladle?” Pops says.

Ma nods and hands him the ladle. It’s been in our family for generations. Whoever has the ladle gets to talk. No ladle, no talking. Pop surprises me, handing the ladle to Francesca.

“Franni, start by telling us what you know regarding the bomb you dropped in the van?”

“It’s all lies!” Valentina screams.

“That’s a week,” Pops says.

Valentina opens her mouth. I raise my hand; Francesca hands me the ladle.

“That’s on top of your current punishment.”

I hand the ladle back to my daughter.

“I’m sorry, Mamma.”

“It’s not your fault, baby. Just tell us what you know.”

For the next thirty minutes, I bite my tongue as my daughter tells me about the string of women in my ex’s life. A string that touched their lives far more than I realized. Francesca even walked in on her father once.

I sit there, numb. My girls knew their father cheated. Even Valentina, who accused me of breaking up the marriage. By the time she finishes, I need time to process it all. Francesca hands me the ladle.

I move across the room and take her into my arms.

“I’m so sorry, sweet girl, you had to carry that burden.”

I see tears trail down her cheeks. It breaks my heart.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, Mamma,” she sobs into my chest.

“Shh, sweet girl. This isn’t on you. Your father is an adult. He made those choices, not you. I’m only sorry I didn’t know you were keeping this all in.”

“I didn’t want to hurt you anymore.”

Lucia suddenly clings to my back. I can hear the crack in her voice.

“None of us did.” Lucia sobs against my back.

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:06 pm

I turn so I could bring her into the hug. When I do, I glance at Valentina. She has her arms crossed, a standoffish look on her face, but I can see tears glistening in her eyes. I motion for her to join us in the hug. She nearly bowls me over when she does.

Lucia shifts so her sister is in between the two of us. Ma joins us and, at some point, Pops wraps his long arms around all of us while we sob. My heart breaks a little more with every tear my girls shed. And my hatred for my ex's actions multiplies innumeraably.

From now on, I'll no longer be passive with his shit. I tried to be laid back and easygoing for the girls. Now that I know what that asshole put my kids through, I want him to pay. I don't know how long we cry, but when we finish, each adult leads one of the girls to wash their face and tuck them in bed in their big garage bedroom.

The adults meet back in the kitchen for a few Irish coffees before bed.

Wizard

I DEBATED IF I SHOULD listen in or end the call and head home. I don't want to invade Charlie's privacy, but Pops' call invited me in.

I'm drawn to Charlie. More so than any other woman. That means becoming a dad, if we get serious.

I tell myself listening gave me information I might need to keep my family safe. Make no mistake, whether or not Charlie and I work out, she and hers are already family. The Kings take care of their own. As do the Morellis. I smile briefly as a

thought crosses my mind. Charlotte Evangeline Anastasia Morelli. That has a ring to it.

My thoughts are pulled in a darker direction as I listen to Francesca speak. She goes on for several minutes about her dad's transgressions. The fucking bastard even introduced the girls to a few of his girlfriends over the years. While he was still married.

I shoot off a quick text to Bug.

Need you to do a thorough analysis into one Roger Carmine Caruso II

Aka JR.

??

I watch the dots while I listen to the conversation wrap up. Once they start crying, I disconnect the call. I figure what comes next, I need to earn the right to be in on. Not eavesdrop in on. The reply comes quickly.

How deep?

??

I respond immediately.

All the way down, the rabbit hole.

??

His response comes rapidly.

On it.

??

I tuck my phone in my pocket, pop the kickstand, and roll my sled down the drive. I wait until there's traffic before starting the bike and taking off. Hogs are notoriously loud. Not that they can hear me over the sobs.

Fuck! I want to be in there with them right now, drying their tears. I mean, it's one thing to cheat on your wife, but the position that man continually put his daughters in is unconscionable. I want to rip his fucking throat out. Instead, I speed home, and head straight for our gym at the clubhouse.

Chapter 11

Wizard

An hour later a tap on the shoulder has me stepping away from the speed bag. I look over to see Smoke.

"You okay brother?"

"Not really."

I gave him a brief rundown of what happened, and the conversation Pops let me overhear.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:06 pm

“Fucker. How soon can we feed him to the gators?”

I shake my head. “Sadly, I’m not sure we can disappear this fucker entirely. It would devastate the triplets. Especially Valentina. She seems to want to cling to this idea that he’s the perfect man. While her mom can do no right. He’s got her completely snowed.

“Let’s not even get into the financial shit. Including taking her new tires off her car and putting them on the used car he got the girls. He promised them a new one. No way he didn’t have the funds to get tires for that car.”

“Hollywood said something about her being surprised she needed new tires. Have you done a thorough analysis on this asshat yet?”

“Bug’s on it. I texted him earlier. He’s got connections I don’t have. He’ll get the most dirt on this fucker. If we can’t off him, we can get his ass locked up for the next ninety years.”

I hit the showers after talking to Smoke for a little while. The monitors blink to life when I enter the room, instantly filling the darkness with a soft glow. I toss my duffle in the corner, get undressed and crawl into bed.

“Lexi, sleep mode.”

I hear the lock click on the apartment's front door as the monitors power down.

?

I just tied up the last box of cannolis when there's a knock at the door. I open it to find Hollywood, Ella, and Brayden.

"Ready?" Hollywood asks.

"I am. Just need to grab a few boxes."

I walk back into the kitchen and grab the three large pastry boxes from the counter.

Ella's eyes light up. "What's in there, Mr. Wizard?"

I smile and boop her nose as I join them in the hall. "Cannoli."

"Which bakery did you get those from?" Hollywood asks.

"My kitchen."

"You bake?"

"I do."

We shoot the shit while we get the kids loaded into a cage. The easy conversation continues as I drive us to Charlie's.

Charlie

INSPIRED BY LAST NIGHT'S dinner, I get up early and head to the store for a few extra things after scribbling Ma a quick note and pinning it to the fridge. We're a family of mixed Italian heritage Sicilian, Tuscan and Roman. JR's family was from the Abruzzo region.

Today we'll have food representing each region. Damn, I didn't think to ask Wizard where his family is from. After I pull into the parking lot, I send off a quick text to Wizard, asking him about his heritage. If he answers quickly, I can put together a dish in honor of his family.

Family is important to me, to us. Pops, Ma, and I fight to keep our traditions alive. We've been saving to take the girls on a trip to Italy. While I've never hit the vacation fund, the money going in has trickled to a halt. I just made the last payment to the school and, in a few weeks, I need to start making payments for the fall. I made a deal with the administration after a lengthy conversation. They agreed to take nine monthly payments. I plan on starting early in case of an emergency during the year and I miss a payment. The school also agreed not to tell JR in the off chance he contributes to their tuition. Anything he pays gets put on their books for school lunch, extracurricular activities, uniforms and any other school-related expenses.

I almost drove over to his house last night. The only thing that kept me from storming into his house and kicking his ass was Pops. He talked me off the ledge. I don't need the legal hassle that goes along with assault. If JR reported me. Chances are, he's not alone and his choice in women runs in the whiny bitch direction. I'm so opposite from that I have no idea what attracted him to me in the first place.

I claim being young, stupid, and virginal on my poor choice. I choose to look at my three blessings instead of my poor choice of a husband. Well, ex-husband.

Chapter 12

Charlie

I'm in the produce section when my phone dings. I pull up the text. It's from Wizard.

Calabria, Sardinia.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:06 pm

Can I bring anything?

??

Just your smiley face.

Oh, and patience.

The girls had a rough night.

Now I want a cool signature emoji

CC

That's an easy one

??

??

I blush to my roots. I can't believe he thinks I'm hot. I mean, I'm the mother of teenage triplets. I have stretch marks. My boobs will never be the same. And I wouldn't change a thing.

Thank you

??

??

See you later

??

Thanks to a school project their seventh-grade year, I know a few recipes from each region. The Academy teaches foreign languages starting in first grade. The students will learn common words in Spanish and French.

Starting in the fifth grade, each student could pick an additional language. The girls chose Italian. We speak it frequently at home. I also speak fluent Spanish, and French. It pays to understand what you're overhearing when you eavesdrop.

I'm making licurdia, a Calabrian onion soup, and culurgiones with gravy from Sardinia. I make my way to the red onions, selecting several before I head off for starchy potatoes. From there, I pick up more garlic. You can never have enough, right? I have three dozen bulbs in the oven, slow roasting. The timer I used will shut the oven off in an hour. Ma should be up before then to start the gravy. We'll use plain gravy for multiple recipes today.

As I'm filling one of my reusable produce bags with elephant garlic, a shadow falls over my shoulder. I turn to see a tall man in a suit. I put him at an inch over six feet. The suit, an Italian designer one, is worth more than my minivan.

"Can I help you?" I ask, taking a step back.

"No need to worry. I mean you no harm."

"Who says I'm worried? I don't like people in my personal space without invitation."

He smiles at me, but it doesn't reach his eyes. Those are cold and calculating.

“Are you Charlie Caruso?”

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I draw myself up to my full height and harden my eyes.

“Who are you?”

His posture changes. He puffs out his chest.

“I'm Tyler Edwin Barnes, the second. Governor of Indiana.”

He holds out his hand. I ignore it. He looks offended and clears his throat.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:06 pm

“Yes, well. I’m looking for Detective Charlie Caruso. I need my son found.”

“The case I’m currently working is full-time.”

“I’ll triple your normal pay. I’m worried about my son. He’s acting odd and not responding to my texts.”

“Thank you for the offer, but I don’t believe in leaving a job until it’s complete.”

He reaches into his inner jacket pocket and pulls out a card, handing it to me.

“If you change your mind.”

“Why me?”

“You have the best reputation in the area. And your husband gave you glowing reviews.”

We sail right past the red flags and go straight to defcon-4. I politely take the card.

“That’s nice,” I say through gritted teeth. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to finish shopping for Sunday dinner.”

I head straight for the meat counter. I’ll finish produce later when Mr. Creepy Dude is long gone. An hour later, I’m gratefully pulling into the driveway. The door opens and Francesca and Lucia hurry out to help me unload.

“Nonna has the gravy started,” Lucia sings.

“Can I make dessert?” Francesca asks.

“Yes, you may. Do you know what you're making?”

We talk as we unload the groceries.

“Torta setteveli or torta de nonna.”

“Or we could do one of each since we have company,” I suggest.

By this time, we’ve made it to the kitchen. Valentina is stirring the gravy while Pops is making the meatballs. Ma has her hands in a batch of dough.

“Pasta or bread Ma?”

“Ravioli. You’re doing the filling.”

“Who's coming for dinner?” Lucia asks.

“Hollywood and his two kids,” Pops says.

“And Wizard,” I add.

“Wizard’s coming? Valentina asks

“He is.”

“He looks Italian,” Ma says. “Is he?”

“He is Calabrian/Sardinian.”

“Can we make licurdia for him?” Valentina asks.

“We can, I have the ingredients in the bag.”

Chapter 13

Wizard

I could smell the food as we approached the door carrying the boxes of cannoli.

“Something smells good,” Hollywood says.

“I’m starving,” Brayden declares.

The door opens to a smiling Pops.

“It’s a good thing we made extra, then,” he says to Brayden.

“Right this way, folks,” Pops says, motioning them in.

We follow him inside the house. I can tell the family takes pride in their home. It’s spotless. The furniture is quality, but not new. Pops leads us through the living room. It’s warm and inviting. And into the dining room. The large table is set and laden with food.

Regina Perillo hustles out of the kitchen, a dish in her hands.

“Sit please. The girls are behind me. Pops, can you get the bread? It’s warming in the oven.”

“On it. Sit anywhere, kids. I’ll be right back,” Pops says.

Hollywood, the kids and I take a seat. I have Regina on one side and Brayden on my

other. His eyes are like saucers as he takes in the food on the table. They become impossibly wide when the Caruso women come out, each carrying a dish of food. Valentina carries a huge soup tureen, which she sets close to me before blushing and taking a seat at the other end of the table.

Charlie sits across from me with Lucia beside her. Though the girls are identical, they each have their own style and carry themselves a little different. Thank you, Mother Mary, I can tell them apart. As I get closer to the family, it will be easier if I know which girl I'm talking to.

Pops sits at the other end of the table after setting down a large basket of bread at each end of the table.

"I'd like to say Grace," Pops says. "Please join hands and bow your heads."

We all join hands and bow our heads. I feel a brief pang, missing my family. I need to go back home to Chicago.

"Bless us Lord and this bountiful feast prepared with love by so many hands. Amen."

"We have two types of soup if anyone wants some. Licurdia, and red wine stew," Regina says.

"Daddy, what's licurda?" Brayden asks.

The adorable six-year-old is the spitting image of his dad.

"I'm not sure, son, but I bet Miss Regina would."

"Nonna, posso spiegarti il piatto, per favore?" Valentina implores.

“Sì, Valentina, puoi farlo.”

“Grazie, Nonna mia. Licurdia is a sweet onion and potato soup from the Calabria region of Italy,” Valentina says with a smile. “I made it.”

“Are you Italian like Wizard?” Ella asks.

“We are,” Pops says. “Italian Americans are proud of their heritage. Including the region we come from. There's even a big fight over if it's sauce or gravy. The ladies and I, mostly the ladies, made dishes from the different regions of our families, including a couple for Wizard.”

“Would it be easier if we tell you about the dishes, or do you just want to dig in?”

“Yes!” Brayden and Ella say at the same time.

We all laugh and start passing dishes. As each dish comes around our way, Regina tells them the name of the dish and what's in it. My mouth is watering when I take the first bite of Sunday gravy. A myriad of flavors burst across my tongue. A little moan of pleasure escapes me.

I hear Charlie chuckle. “Been too long since you've been home?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:06 pm

“Yes. I was just thinking I need to head home to Chicago and visit my family.”

“Or invite your family down here to meet the Kings,” Hollywood suggests.

“This red sauce is good,” Brayden exclaims.

Gravy is smeared on one cheek and around his mouth.

“We call it gravy, Brayden,” Charlie says softly.

“I thought gravy was what you put on biscuits and taters,” he replies.

“That’s gravy too. How about you call it red gravy?”

His eyes light up. “Yes!”

“We’ll have plenty of food left to send home whatever you want,” Pops tells the boy.

Regina said their Sunday gravy is a family event, with each of them helping with portions of the finished product. The gravy contains juicy meatballs, Italian sausage, and pork. For pasta, they made spaghetti and mushroom ravioli to go with the gravy. In addition to that, there’s an antipasto platter with meats, cheeses, roasted artichokes, and eggplants, and black olives. Osso Bucco, Tacconelle with chickpeas and shrimp, beef broccoli, Sicilian roasted chicken, sauteed greens, and panzanella salad.

And much to my surprise, culurgiones. These amazing, boiled dumplings are filled then tossed in a simple tomato and basil gravy. Nonna made them every Sunday and

always made me an extra batch. This time, my moan is louder. Francesca giggles.

“I helped Mamma make those. Do you like them?”

“They’re amazing. Close to my Nonna’s recipe.”

“Good thing we made extra,” Lucia chimes in.

For the next little while we talk and eat. The triplets make sure Hollywood’s kids are included. After dinner, the triplets take Ella and Brayden to their room to watch a movie. Hollywood and I help clean up and true to her word, they box and bag leftovers.

When we are done cleaning the adults go into the living room with a glass of wine. I wind up sitting on the sectional in between Pops and Charlie.

“Ma, I forgot to tell you about this interesting encounter I had at the store today. This man approached me, wanted to hire me to find his son. Said he was the governor of Indiana. Gave me his card.”

My blood goes cold. I clear my throat.

“Can I see the card?”

“Let me grab it. It’s in my purse.”

Charlie hurries out of the room, coming back moments later with a card in hand. She hands it to me. It’s on expensive linen card stock.

Tyler Edwin Barnes II

Governor of Indiana

317-461-9747

Fuck! I sent off a quick text to Gambit.

Turd II approached Charlie

at the grocery store this morning

??

Chapter 14

Charlie

Three weeks later

It was my third double in a row at the diner. I would have quit two weeks ago if I didn't feel like I was close to getting info on Biaz. Lola worked here up until a few weeks before the twins were born.

From the information I gathered so far, she was clean. So how does she get hooked on drugs a few weeks before her due date? Those few weeks is all it took for the twins to develop Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome, or NAS.

The corner booth flags me over. Four guys in suits. They look out of place in the dingy diner. Only they're frequent flyers who come in two to three times a week. They always sit in the same corner booth.

I hurry and set the plates for table two down before hustling to the corner booth. I pull out my pad and pen and brace myself. While the men have never introduced themselves, I knew each of them.

Marcus "Pistol" Brooks sits in the far-right corner. Black hair falls to his collar. Hazel eyes devour me. He always makes it a point to leer. I ignore him. Seated next to him is Caleb "Cal" Robillard. Across from Cal is Victor "Vico" DeLuca. Next to Vico is Raynard "Ray Ray" Jacobs, the man who flagged me over.

"What can I get for you today?" I ask, addressing Ray Ray.

“You can give me your number,” Marcus says.

“Shut up, Marcus,” Cal says. “We’re ready to order.”

I paste on my best fake smile. “Ready when you are.”

After putting their orders in, I refill their coffee and leave a full carafe on the table before scurrying off to cash out another table.

Shirley, the head waitress, flags me over.

“You have a phone call, sugar.”

I hurry to the phone, wondering who would call me here.

“Mamma.” Lucia’s scared voice comes over the line.

“Lucia, cosa c’è che non va, piccolina?”

“We’re lost. The car broke down and no one else is answering.”

“Can you see a street sign?”

“We’re too scared to get out of the car.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll find you. I’m on my way. Stay together, lock the door.”

I hang up the phone and turn to Shirley.

“I’ve got to go. My girls are in trouble.”

“I’ll tell Sal when he gets back.”

“Thank you.” I take off my apron and hand it to her.

“I’ll cash out for you and hold your tips.”

“Thanks, Shirley. You’re the best.”

I run to the locker, speeding through the lock’s combination, and grab my purse. On my way to the car, I rummage through my purse to grab the keys. Some jack hole left a flier on my windshield. I grab it and toss onto the passengers’ seat.

I dial Wizard’s number while putting my seatbelt on. He answers as I turn the car on.

“The girls are lost, and the car is broken down. Can you use the tracking app and tell me where they are?”

“On it.”

“I’m heading toward their father’s place. They are supposed to be at his house.”

“It’ll take me a few minutes. Stay on the line with me.”

Wizard keeps up the small talk while he searches for the girls.

“Found them, sending the address to your GPS. I’ll meet you there.”

“Thank you, Damien.”

“Thank me after we get the girls home safe. I’ll have a prospect there with a tow truck.”

The next thirty minutes feel like the longest of my life as I follow the directions Wizard sent to my phone. I go as fast as I dare. The last thing I need is to get pulled over. With shaking fingers, I dial JR’s number. He picks up on the fifth ring. I can hear music and party noises in the background.

“I’m busy.”

“Yeah, busy fucking off instead of spending time with your daughters. This is the last straw, JR. The very last fucking straw. You’ll be lucky if you see them again before they’re eighteen.”

“Please, we both know you don’t have the money to take me to court.”

“Watch me, Twatknot. I’ll fucking bury you. If anything happens to the girls before I get to them, I’ll feed you to the bayou gators while you’re still breathing.”

I disconnected the call and focused on the navigator's voice. Twatknot calls back a half dozen times. I let it go to voicemail.

Chapter 15

Wizard

As soon as I sent Charlie’s phone the girls’ location, I sent a group text requesting back up from any brother in the area. I ran out of my apartment to the stairs. I took the stairs, leaping down them several at a time. My phone pinging the entire time.

By the time I make it to my bike, so has half a dozen of my brothers. Angel, Demon, Cobra, Saint, Blue, and Everest. We mount and head toward the gate. Flea opens it. So, we roar through without slowing or stopping.

Once we’re on the road, I thumb open an app I created and sync the lights. I’ve been gathering information on Charlie’s ex, JR, and his connection to Teddy the turd. The turd hasn’t contacted Charlie since the initial meeting in the grocery story. I still didn’t like it and I don’t trust the man.

I have enough to move against him. I just need time to talk to Charlie first. I hope she doesn’t hate me, but I can’t see that scumbag skate another day.

We race across town, as fast as traffic will allow. The girls are down in a rough neighborhood and I, for one, would like to know what they were doing there. They’re supposed to be at their dad’s this weekend.

My heart drops to my toes when I see a group of thugs surrounding the car. A few of

them have bats. They're posturing. None of the dumbasses turn around when they hear us. One big fucker takes a bat to the girls' headlights. I speed up and pull away from the pack. As I drive past the car, I kick out and takeout the big fucker's knee. I hear the snap before his scream. He falls to the ground, clutching his knee.

The remaining thugs turn their attention to us. My brothers and I park our sleds and hurry toward them.

"You don't know the mistake you just made, dog," one of them says.

"You're the stupid mother fuckers who don't know the mistake you made. If there's one hair out of place on those girls' heads, you'll be gator bait."

"I'd like to see you try," another says, pulling a gun from his waistband.

A split second later, the gun is on the ground and the guy is howling in pain, a knife sticking out of the back of his hand. By the time any of the thugs think to move, we've all pulled our pieces and they're looking down the barrels of guns. The roar of engines gets closer as more of my brothers close in on our direction.

The punks scatter like cockroaches when you flip the light on. I let them go. My priority is checking on the girls. I run for the car. The doors open and suddenly I have three sobbing girls in my arms. They're all talking at once and I can't understand a word they're saying.

Crab and Tully pull up at the same time. Crab in the wrecker and Tully in an SUV.

Charlie

THE CLOSER I GET TO the girls' location, the farther my heart sinks into my toes. What are my girls doing here? And where the hell is there no-good father? I'm going

to kill him when I get my hands on him. I briefly picture a cartoon version of myself choking a cartoon version of my ex. I don't condone violence, but when it comes to him, I sometimes fantasize about it.

Page 28

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:06 pm

Messing with me is one thing, but he continually drags the girls into things and lets them down. Ever since the girls told me he introduced them to his girlfriends, I've wanted to punch him in the throat.

I mean, who does that? Who puts their kids in that kind of position? I hear the roar of sleds close by as I near my destination. When I turn onto the block, I spot half dozen bikes, an SUV, and a wrecker. The girls are huddled around Wizard. And he's surrounded by more big, badass, heavily tattooed bikers.

I put the car in park, leave it running, and rush to my daughters. Luciana spots me first and squeals my name. Soon they're all in my arms with Wizard's arms wrapped around all of us. I hear more sleds close in on us. When he doesn't tense, I relax into his hold and put my arms around my daughters.

"Why don't we get you in the SUV and back to the clubhouse? It's closer than your place," Wizard suggests. "I'll drive and get prospects to drive your car and my sled."

I nod my head and let him lead us to the shiny black SUV parked next to the wrecker.

Chapter 16

Charlie

Wizard threads his fingers through mine. His thumb rubbing calming circles on the back of my hand while he drives us to the compound. The girls are surprisingly silent. We agreed to wait until we were at the compound to talk about it.

Which is good. I need time to calm down. Not only from my murderous rage, but also the utter and complete fear I felt when I realized what neighborhood the girls broke down in. The ride doesn't take long. Whoever is manning the gate opens it for us and Wizard pulls the SUV to the front of the building. He opens the left passenger door before coming around and opening both doors to let everyone out. After he closes the door behind me, he takes my hand. I assume one of the prospects will take care of the vehicle.

He leads us through the main foyer and down a hall to a large room with a massive wooden meeting table. The table has the club's colors engraved in the center. Large leather office chairs surrounded the table.

"Take a seat, ladies."

He waits until we all sit down. "Can I get you anything to drink?"

"Do you have Nehi?" Valentina asks.

"I'm sure we do. Stormy keeps a wide variety of coke and other beverages. Luci, Franni, Charlie, what can I get you?"

"Nehi for us," Lucia replies.

"Macallan neat if you have it," Charlie says.

Less than five minutes later, the girls have grape Nehi, and I have a double Macallan. Gambit, and the other Kings, have filed in one by one.

"Mamma, why is everyone here?" Francesca asks.

"Because we all care about you and what happens to you," Gambit says. "I think you

gave Wizard his first gray hairs tonight.”

Wizard nods in agreement. The girls crack a small smile. I’ll take it. The look of fear on their faces was nearly my undoing earlier. It’s weird to have a family meeting surrounded by mostly acquaintances.

“Which of you wants to tell me why you’re not at your father’s house?”

“Do we have to do this here?” Valentina whines. “In front of everyone.”

I look around the room.

“Did these men stop what they were doing and ride to your rescue?” I ask softly.

“Yes.” Valentina huffs.

“Then I believe they have a right to know why they had to drop everything they were doing and come save you when you’re supposed to be safe at home with your father.”

“He went to some political fundraiser,” Lucia says.

“He gave us an address for a party. It was supposed to be an under twenty-one party,” Francesca adds.

“We couldn’t find the address he gave us,” Lucia says.

“We circled the block a few times looking for the address when the lights started flashing on the car. Then it just went dead,” Francesca says.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:06 pm

“After we called you, a bunch of thugs surrounded the car,” Lucia says, her voice shaking.

I reach out and take her hand in mine.

“What happened after that?”

“A few had bats. They threatened to break the windows and come in after us if we didn't come out. One of them broke out the headlights right before Wizard and the Kings showed up,” Francesca adds.

“Did they just leave when the King's showed up?” I ask.

“Shortly afterwards,” Wizard says. “Can I see the address your dad gave you?”

“Sure. He sent it in a text, but it's not Dad's fault the car broke down,” Valentina says handing Wizard her phone.

“Is anything Dad's fault according to you?” Lucia huffs.

“Girls, let's not get into an argument about your father. That being said, you won't be going to his house for the foreseeable future. Gambit, is there a place the girls can stay while we have a conversation?”

Hurl runs into the room with a piece of paper in his hand. He runs straight to Gambit.

“Prez, I found this on Charlie's floorboard. I think you're going to want to see it.”

Chapter 17

Wizard

Red and Brick take the girls to their apartment to eat and watch a movie while we talk. Gambit held onto the paper until after the girls were gone. As soon as they're gone, he turns to Charlie and hands her the paper.

"Any idea where this came from?"

"I found it on my windshield. Haven't had time to read it."

I stand behind Charlie, looking over her shoulder as she reads the paper.

Stop looking into Lola Biaz

Or they're next.

Below the writing is a picture of the triplets. Someone had taken a black marker and put x's over their eyes. I watch the paper start to shake. I step up and pull Charlie into my arms. Her breath rate increases until I'm concerned, she's having a panic attack.

I gently turn her, lifting her chin until our eyes meet.

"Breathe slowly. You're not in this alone, Spitfire."

"I called church," Gambit says. "We have a few more members on the way, Charlie. We'll figure this out."

She keeps shaking. I pick her up and put her on my lap and rub small circles on her back.

“My brothers and I won’t let anything happen to you, the girls, Regina, or Pops.”

She nods her head. A tattooed hand thrusts a glass in front of her face. I look up to see Doc.

“Drink this. Doctor’s orders.”

“Thanks, brother.”

He smiles, and winks before taking a seat next to us. Charlie takes a sip before throwing it back in one long gulp.

“Someone else needs to drive us home,” she says, placing the glass on the table.

Page 30

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:06 pm

Doc takes a flask from his pocket and hands it to Charlie.

“Thanks.”

“Welcome,” Doc replies.

The last few members take their seats and Tully closes the door. Gambit takes the skull and slams it on the table.

“Church fuckers.”

All eyes focus on him. It’s cute, he said fuckers instead of motherfuckers. I know he did it because Charlie’s in the room with us.

“Wizard, I need you to patch Bug in. He’s waiting for us.”

“Lean back, baby.”

Charlie leans against me. I leave one arm wrapped around her. With the other, I open the hidden keyboard in front of my chair. It hides in the table. It activates as soon as the tray is fully extended. A few clicks later, Bug is on screen. He’s the IT guy for our mother club in Baton Rouge.

He’s “retired” from working for the government. They occasionally call on him for his unique skills.

“Thanks for helping, brother,” Gambit begins. “Can you give us two minutes to

update everyone before you fill us in on what you've found?"

"Sure thing."

"For those that don't know. Earlier tonight, Charlie's girls' car broke down in Storyville."

"What were they doing there?" Papa asks.

"They're father gave them an address nearby for a party. Only the girls didn't find the address."

"What the actual fuck?" Smoke says.

"It's worse than you think," Bug adds.

All eyes turn to him.

"The address is owned by a shell corporation. Which is owned by Yuri Morozov. Yuri is New Orleans Pakhan. A ruthless son of a bitch with his fingers in everything. He's suspected of human trafficking. The Feds have an ongoing investigation into him and the rest of the New Orleans Bratva.

"The address is in the Feds file as a possible abduction site."

I feel Charlie sag against me. Her face is pale. I wrap both arms around her and draw her to my chest.

"We've got you, Spitfire."

"I'm going to cut off his balls and make him eat them before I dump him in the

nearest swamp,” Charlie says.

She wiggles out of my hold and hops off my lap, storming toward the door. I’m out of my seat after her. I catch her before she gets to the door.

“Hold on, baby. I’ll go with you. Let’s finish the meeting first. Bug may have more information.”

She reluctantly agrees and comes back to the table with me.

Chapter 18

Charlie

I’m in the lobby pacing, while Wizard finishes up the club’s meeting. After Wizard talked me into staying, Bug finished giving us information. One of the things he revealed blew me away. Roger Carmine Caruso Junior, JR, is in the Fed’s file as a known associate of Petrov’s.

What the hell is my ex doing getting in bed with the Russian mob? Has he finally lost the few scruples he had left? If that’s the case, did that lowlife son of a bitch sell our daughters? The more I think about it, the angrier I become.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:06 pm

Ma's ringtone interrupts my pacing.

"I wanted to let you know Pops and I have the girls. We're settled into the guest house. When will you be home?"

"I don't know, Ma. As soon as Wizard finishes his meeting, we're going to JR's house. I'm going to give that asshat a piece of my mind and a kick in the nuts. Or maybe a punch to the throat. I haven't decided yet."

"Charlotte, you'll do no such thing."

"I appreciate your stance against violence, but this is warranted."

"I'm not worried about the violence. I'm worried about him pressing charges."

"I have bail money."

"She also has a kick ass attorney," Wizard says, sliding up behind me.

"There's stuff you don't know, Ma. When you do, I'll have to tie your ass up so you don't shoot him."

"What did he do?" Regina asks

"Not now, and not over the phone. I'll tell you after the girls go to junior orientation. They'll be driven there and picked up. JR is to have no contact with them. Olivia, our new attorney, has an emergency court hearing in the morning. I've got to go. I'll talk

to you later.

“We ready?”

“Sled’s out front. A few of the brothers are riding along.”

“I’m good with that.”

?

Wizard and the others park the sleds down the block. We walked in the back entrance of the building after Bug took down the cameras. He was working remotely while Wizard, who usually takes care of that, was with me. Smoke, Doc, Blue, and Devil follow behind us. JR’s condo is on the top floor.

I head straight for his door as soon as the elevator door opens. I pound on his door.

“Open the damn door, JR. I know you’re home.”

I pound on the door again.

“So, help me God, I’ll break down this door if you don’t open it, right now, Roger!”

A skank with sex hair wearing one of Roger’s shirts opens the door.

“He doesn’t want to talk to you. Go away!” she snarls, then tries to close the door.

I stick my foot in the door to prevent her from closing it. Catching her off-guard with my maneuver, I shoulder my way in, followed by the others. I head straight for his bedroom. Skank makes the mistake of grabbing my arm. I grab her hand, twisting her pinky. She lets go. I grab her arm and push it up behind her back.

“Lay a hand on me again, skank, and I’ll break your arm.”

“You don’t even know me. Don’t call me a skank.”

“If you’re screwing my ex, you’re a skank. I’m the only woman to date he’s had sex with. That’s not a skank. It’s his type.”

I push her arm farther up. Hard enough to make it hurt but not break it. She screeches ungodly loud. JR comes running out of his bedroom, just like I knew he would. I release her and storm over to him. With zero preamble I deck him in the jaw he staggers back, his eyes narrowing.

“What the hell, Charlie? Have you lost your mind? Coming in here and attacking me and my date.”

“What the hell am I thinking? What the hell were you thinking? Sending the girls to Storyville to some warehouse. A warehouse where young women have gone in and never been seen again.”

I kick him square in the balls. “Were you going to sell my babies, you rat bastard?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:06 pm

The woman's still screeching at this point. I turn to her.

"Get the fuck out or you're next."

Her eyes widen and she takes me in. Then all the guys. All of whom JR has yet to acknowledge. She swallows and runs into the bedroom, coming out less than a minute later haphazardly dressed. JR is still on the floor, writhing in pain. That felt good. I should have done it years ago. Doc heads into the kitchen. I hear him rummaging around. He comes back with a big bag of frozen peas, which he tosses next to JR.

"You'll need those."

His gruff voice penetrates the fog surrounding JR, who for the first time, looks around and sees the giant, tattooed men in his condo. He sits up, grabbing the peas, he holds them to his junk. "What the hell is going on? I'm going to call the police and have you all arrested."

"You'll have to get to a phone first," I snarl. "Why did you send the girls to Storyville?"

He shakes his head looking confused.

"I didn't send the girls anywhere. They were supposed to stay in while I went to a fundraiser."

"You were supposed to spend the entire weekend with them. No business, no bimbos."

I mean God, JR, what were you thinking introducing your skanks to our daughters when we were still married?"

I pulled Lucia's phone out of my pocket, unlock it and pull up the text JR sent. I toss the phone at him. He misses it and it hits his nuts.

"What's this?" he demands.

"A text from you telling the girls where the rave is."

"I did not send this text."

"Where's your phone?"

"On my nightstand."

Chapter 19

Wizard

I watch Charlie head down the hall and go into the door the asshole came out of earlier. A few moments later, she comes out with a phone and pushes it at JR.

"Unlock it."

"Why should I?"

"Because I'll kick you in the nuts so hard you'll sing soprano if you don't," she says.

"What makes you think I won't press charges?" He growls.

“What makes you think I won’t throw your ass to the gators? You put our daughters at risk. Now open the damn phone and prove you didn’t send the text.”

“Fine.”

He unlocks the phone and hands it to her. I look over her shoulder as she goes through the texts.

“I don’t see it. Could he have erased it?”

“Let me see the phone, Spitfire.”

She hands it to me.

“Hey that’s mine,” JR protests.

I ignore him and start tapping. A few minutes later, I hand her the phone back.

Page 33

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:06 pm

“It doesn’t look like he erased it. I’ll need his phone and the girls’ phones to track where the text was sent.”

“You’re not taking my phone. Get out of my house.”

“I don’t need your phone. I already cloned it,” I say with a grin.

I place my hand in the small of Charlie’s back.

“Are you ready, Spitfire, or do you want to hit him again?”

She smiles up at me.

“I’m ready. One more thing, JR, you won’t be seeing the girls again for a good, long while.”

“You can’t keep me from my daughters.”

“You can’t see them from behind bars,” she replies smugly and heads toward the door.

?

Charlie’s still wound up by the time we get back to the compound. I lead her upstairs to my room instead of taking her to the guesthouse her family is staying in. The prospects got them settled while we were in church.

“Can I get you a drink?”

She shakes her head and starts pacing my room.

“What if you hadn’t shown up in time or showed up first? I mean, I carry, but I’d have been clearly outnumbered.”

I draw her into my arms.

“None of the what ifs matter because it turned out fine. Bug and I will go over the phones with a fine-tooth comb and figure out where the messages came from.

“JR may not have sent the text, but he is in bed with the Russian mafia, not to mention his association with Barnes. He’s not a good man.”

She turns, burying her head in my chest. I can see tears trailing down her cheeks. I wipe them gently with my thumbs and drop a sweet kiss on her lips. She tries to talk but it comes out in sobs.

I gather her in my arms and carry her to the couch.

Charlie

MY MIND’S RACING A million miles an hour as I sob in Wizards’ arms. I feel like I’m losing my freaking mind. I can’t believe my girls were almost attacked and possibly kidnapped by a human trafficking ring. How the hell am I going to keep them safe? From the Russian mafia, and from human traffickers.

JR may not have sent the text, but he’s not innocent in all

this. If he didn’t target the girls, one of his buddies did. Not to mention whoever left

that note on my car.

My brain begins to spin. My breath comes faster. My chest tightens and it feels hard to breathe. I'm gasping for air when Wizard spins me around so I'm straddling his lap. He takes my hand and puts it on his chest and puts one large hand on mine.

"Breathe with me, Charlotte, baby. Breathe in. Hold. Let it out slowly."

He repeats the words over until my breathing slows to normal. This man, who I've only been dating a few weeks, has shown more care and concern for me and the girls, than JR did during our entire marriage. He was different when we were dating and during our first year of marriage.

It all changed the day he found out I was pregnant. After that, he became increasingly aggressive and started stepping out on me. Damien is nearly JR's polar opposite. He's considerate, kind, caring, and generous.

With that realization, I knew what I wanted to do next.

Chapter 20

Charlie

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:06 pm

I lean closer, bringing my lips down on his. My hands fasten in his hair, and I kiss him. I let the dam that held back my desires for the last several years break and pour my longing and desire into it.

He moans and returns the kiss. His hands undo my long hair. Once he has it down, he runs his fingers through it while the kiss continues. My nipples are so hard they ache. My underwear is soaked with arousal. I break the kiss.

“I need this. I need you.”

“Are you sure? You’ve been through a lot. I don’t want to take advantage of you.”

I shake my head. “I might be the one taking advantage of you. How fast can you get us naked?”

He laughs and stands up, taking me with him. He walks us over to the bed. After he sits me on the bed, he toes off his boots and shrugs out of his cut. He lays the cut on the back of the chair before pulling off his shirt by reaching behind his head. The move slowly revealed his abs. His jeans ride low on his hips. My mouth waters at the sight of his Adonis belt and washboard abs.

His smile widens, showing off a dimple.

“Do you like what you see, Spitfire?”

“Yes, very much.”

I pull my shirt over my head, tossing it before unfastening my bra and throwing it in the same general direction. I watch his eyes widen and his nostrils flair.

“Like what you see?”

“Yes,” he says before licking his lips.

His hands go to his belt. My eyes are glued to them as he first unfastens the buckle, then undoes the button and zipper of his jeans. He hooks his thumbs in the waistband of his jeans and takes them down, along with black boxers. I gasp as his hard cock springs free.

He’s long, thick, and huge. My breath catches in my throat as he kicks off his jeans and comes to stand before me. He smiles. A wicked grin that lights up his eyes. He steps in front of me, palming his cock. I moan as he strokes it a few times. The drop of precum beckons me.

I scoot forward, taking him in my hand. My tongue flicks out and scoops the drop of precum off the tip of his cock. He moans, his hands fisting my hair.

“Damn, Spitfire.”

“I want to suck your cock, but I’ll do that later. Right now, I want you to fuck me. Hard and fast. Make me forget about tonight, just for a little while.”

Wizard

FUCK, SHE’S BLOWINGmy mind and if I’m not careful, I’m going to blow my load too soon. The things this woman does to me. It’s taking every ounce of willpower to not cum from just being this close to her.

I help her take her skirt and panties off. We devour each other, our hands roaming over each other's body. I break the kiss trailing my lips down her neck. I lick the hollow of her throat before nipping the skin gently.

She smells intoxicating. It makes me wonder what other parts of her smell like. I kiss my way down her body stopping to admire her breasts. They fit perfectly into my hands. I palm one while I lick and suck on the other. The sounds coming from her have more precum leaking from the tip of my cock. I twist one hardened peak with my fingers while sucking her other nipple into my mouth at the same time.

She arches her back and leans into me. Her fingers run through my hair before her nails scratch down my back. I moan. I love that feeling. I switch nipples, taking the other one into my mouth while playing with the first. I take time to kiss under her breasts after I suck on her nipples, licking along the underside.

Charlie shakes and moans.

“God yes, that feels so good,” she says.

I chuckle and move down her body kissing down the middle of her body to her navel. I lick and suck on her navel. It drives her insane. Her breath comes in pants as I continue my downward path kissing from her navel to the top of her pubic bone before flicking my tongue across the little bundle of nerves. She gasps and digs her nails harder into my back.

I move down farther and lick from the bottom of her pussy lips to her clit before sucking it into my mouth. I lick suck and nibble on her pussy like a man starved of food before I add one finger then a second. Her hips come up off the bed. I curl my fingers and hit that little spongy spot. Charlie shoots off like a rocket, her walls choking my fingers.

“Oh fuck, Wizard,” she cries out.

The orgasm took us both by surprise. I smile and lick the cream off my fingers before lapping up all her juices.

“I need you inside me, now,” she demands.

“Scoot back, baby.”

Page 35

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:06 pm

She scoots back and I crawl up her body, putting one leg over my shoulder before lining the head of my cock at her entrance. I push in slow. She's tight. So, fucking tight. It takes me a few minutes to work my way inside. I start with long, slow strokes.

Charlie hooks her other leg over my ass pulling me closer.

"Faster please. Fuck me, faster."

"Your wish is my command," I say, speeding up.

I fuck her faster feeling a low tingling in my back, I know I don't have long before I cum. I press my thumb down on her clit and rub at the same time I cant my hips, so I hit her spot. A few more strokes and she cums. I'm not far behind. She pulls me down into a big kiss and I collapse next to her pulling her with me while I'm still inside her.

Chapter 21

Wizard

Ifidget with my tie for the millionth time as we wait for the family court judge. My other hand is entwined with Charlie's. Olivia Albrecht-Scott sat on Charlie's other side. Sitting next to Olivia, the firm's other founding partners, Sabina Rabinovich and Maxi Kelly.

Though their firm was fairly new, they were already in the top five law firms in the city. Olivia came from the number three law firm and her father is a senior partner in

the best law firm in not only the city, but the tri-state area. Her other father is the state's attorney general. Currently, neither JR nor his attorney are present. The only thing holding us up is the judge got caught in traffic.

The doors fly open and the bailiff scurries through.

“All rise for the honorable Jordan Davis.”

I'd put the judge around six feet, athletic build, mid-fifties with salt and pepper hair. His piercing blue eyes survey the room before he tells everyone to sit.

He calls our case first. Olivia presents the case. Opposing counsel shows up and asks for a continuance. It's denied, and full custody with no visitation is temporarily granted. The court will reconvene in thirty days.

It takes another hour for us to get all the court documents for the school and Charlie.

The school year starts the following week. I plan on surprising the girls with a back-to-school shopping trip. I should run it by Charlie, but I'm going with 'ask for forgiveness instead of permission'.

We take one of the club's SUVs. A big black bullet-proof beauty with tinted windows. I drive us to the girls' school.

“Do you want me to come in or stay in the cage?”

“Are vehicles really that bad?”

I laugh. “In some ways, yes. It's a cage where my sled is freedom. But cages have their uses.”

“Like hauling groceries and grumpy hormone fueled teens. And please come in with me.”

I nod and hurry out of my side of the cage to open her door. She threads her fingers through mine as we walk into the school. The halls are mostly quiet, with only the sophomore class doing orientation today. Each grade has their own orientation day. I have no idea why. Charlie said it’s tradition and she has no idea why.

She gave me a crash course on the school and rules last night and this morning asked if I will be an emergency contact for the girls. I said yes, of course. Charlie’s not the only one I’ve grown to care for.

I’ve spent far more time with Charlie, but last night, when those girls were in danger, a fierce sense of protectiveness settled into my heart. I knew then I’d lay down my life to protect theirs.

Charlie stops outside the office.

“I never officially thanked you for saving my daughters last night.”

Her voice catches and I squeeze her hand.

“I don’t know what would’ve happened if you and your brothers hadn’t shown up. I can’t bear to think what could’ve happened.”

I draw her into my arms and kiss the top of her head.

“Don’t go down that road, Spitfire. My brothers and I will do everything in our power to protect you and the girls. You’re safe behind our walls. I have eyes everywhere. There’s not an inch of the place not under surveillance. I even have the water covered.

“Most of my brothers are military-trained. Some elite forces. Plus, Bug has sent me a few experimental military grade protection devices. Our backup generators have backup generators, and we have our own bodega. Not to mention the clubhouse has enough to feed an army for a month.”

“Are you planning on war?”

I shake my head. “No, just letting you know we’re prepared.”

I feel her relax. “That makes me feel better. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now, let’s go turn in those papers and get our girls.”

She laughs and leads us into the office. A silver-haired woman in a dress complete with pearls and heels greets us. She looks me over a few times. I can’t quite discern what her eyes hold. It isn’t fear or contempt.

“Mrs. Caruso, how nice to see you.”

“Grace. How was your summer?”

“My summer was amazing. Who’s your friend?”

“Grace, this is Damien Morelli. I’d like to add him to the list of approved adults and as emergency contact. Damien, this Mrs. Grace Appleton.”

I extend my hand to the older woman. “Mrs. Appleton, it's a pleasure to meet you.”

She extends her hand with a smile.

“Call me Grace, and it’s a pleasure to meet you. Mr. Morelli.”

“Please call me Damien. May I say that dress brings out the color of your eyes.”

Grace blushes. “Oh, you’re a rascal.”

I smile and wink.

“If you have a few minutes, we brought some paperwork regarding the girls,” I say.

“We can meet in Mr. Stanley’s office. He’s out on the soccer field with the sophomores.”

“Valentina will love that,” Charlie says with a laugh.

Grace laughs and points to a CTV monitor. “She doesn’t look so happy trotting across the field in her heels.”

I stifle a laugh at the look on half the girls' faces as they traipse across the field in heels. A man dressed in athletic gear striding across the field is oblivious to the angst behind him.

We follow Grace into the principal’s office. It takes all of ten minutes for her to document the changes and file the paperwork. After that, we’re free to take the girls with us.

Chapter 22

Charlie

We meet the girls at the soccer field. They are not only surprised I picked them up early, but they are doubly surprised to see Wizard with me.

It's barely ten A.M. by the time we load into the SUV.

"Who wants breakfast?" Wizard asks.

A chorus of "I do's" goes up. The girls chat about who wore what as Wizard navigates the busy streets of New Orleans. We park near the Ruby Slipper. Yum, one of my favorite places. Then I remember I mentioned it to him once when we met for work.

"Pig candy," Valentina exclaims.

"And loaded tots," Francesca adds.

"It's creamsicle beignet season," Lucia exclaims.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:06 pm

“I guess I know your orders,” I say, laughing.

Wizard gets out and opens the rear driver door before coming around and opening the other two, letting us all out. He slips his hand in mine and opens the door when we get to it. His hand in the small of my back as the host gets our number, gathers menus and escorts us to a large booth. Wizard and I sit on one side, his impressive shoulders taking up space in the roomy booth. The girls sit on the opposite side of us.

When the server comes, we quickly place our order. The girls knew what they wanted before we sat down. Wizard orders an omelet while I indulge in white chocolate bread pudding pancakes.

An hour later, we’re all stuffed and high on carbs. We load back into the SUV. I realize after a few turns we’re not headed toward the compound.

“Where are we headed?” I ask.

“It’s a surprise.”

Ten minutes later, I hear the girls squeal collectively.

“Is that the Crescent City Galleria?” Lucia asks.

“I hear it’s the GOAT,” Valentina adds.

Wizard smiles and pulls into the parking lot, heading straight for one of the parking garages.

“Wizard, why are we here?”

“I’m taking the girls back to school shopping.”

“I can’t let you do that.”

“I want to. Besides, I have tickets to the Quickening and the new virtual dressing room.”

“Please, Mom.”

“Please let us go.”

“I’ll die if I don’t get to see the virtual dressing room.”

The statements all came at once and I had no idea who said what. Wizard takes my hand, rubbing his thumb across the back of it. He leans in close so only I can hear what he has to say.

“I promise the shopping trip won’t put a ding in my wallet.”

“We can talk more after the girls are safely ensconced in the Quickening.”

The Quickening is a Tatum Quick experience. The world’s top female performer. Tatum has millions of followers around the world who worship her. The experience has three-D interactive videos, games, music booths, a snack area, clothes, merchandise and more.

We escort the girls to the mall’s top floor. The Quickening takes up half the floor while a movie theater takes up the other half. In between the experience and the movie theater is a small sitting area with a concession stand.

Wizard leads us to a table, pulling out a chair for me before taking a seat across from me.

“Charlie, you don’t have to do this alone anymore.”

“They’re not your responsibility.”

“Maybe I want them to be.”

“What do you mean?”

“I like you, Charlie. I more than like you. This is not me rushing you. This is me stepping up and acknowledging that you come as a package deal and I’m ready, willing, and able to take care of you.”

I opened my mouth to say something and shut it three times. I had to chase their father down to get him to pay for anything and here Wizard is offering to take them back to school shopping.

“You know clothes, shoes and back to school stuff isn’t cheap.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:07 pm

“I did a cost analysis of today's possible expenditure. I have it more than covered. As a member of the Kings’ leadership, I get a bigger percentage of the profits. Plus, all the businesses pay me to do their IT work. I have a healthy bank balance. Living at the compound, my expenses are low. I put most into savings, investing a percentage of my earnings each month. Dakota, our treasurer, is a financial whiz. He’s tripled my portfolio the last two years.

“Look, Spitfire. I’m willing to take as long as you want, but I want to be a long-term part of your life. All of your lives.”

I felt the tears slide down my cheeks. I didn’t wipe them away or try to stop them. Motherfucker! This man is making me fall in love with him. HARD. If he decides this isn’t for him, he’s going to break me. I’ll shatter into a million pieces.

Losing JR was nothing. I’d already dealt with the pain and death of the relationship long before we filed for divorce. I stopped giving him the power to hurt me years ago. After he’d gotten over the novelty of fatherhood, he stopped paying for most of the girls' stuff unless he wanted to impress them.

He made sure I didn't have any extra money so he could swoop in and be the hero.

“I’ve done this with just Ma and Pops for so long. I’m not sure I know how to let anyone help me. I’ll try, but I can’t promise I’ll do it well.”

“We’ll get through it together.”

“Alright. Let’s get some of the basics out of the way while they’re in the experience.”

“I’ll have Havoc and Tully keep an eye out on them.”

“They’re here?”

Wizard smiles. “They are. They have been since we left the compound.”

Chapter 23

Wizard

We drag the girls out of the experience at lunchtime and take them to Ichiddo Ramen on Lucia’s request. After they’re refueled, we hit the virtual reality changing room. They have clothes from every store pre-loaded into the system.

They have the girls change into green sports bras and shorts before being scanned. After that, they get VR goggles and a tablet so they can choose their outfits. The orders go to the stores. When the girls finish, Charlie checks each girls’ order giving final approval before I enter my credit card into the system. The orders are processed, and we can either pick them up from the stores or have them all delivered to the concierge. We choose to have the items delivered to the concierge so the girls can hit a few more stores.

The back of the SUV is filled by the time we leave the galleria.

“How about we pick up pizza to take home?”

“I’ll text Ma and Pops and see what they want.”

We wind up getting a couple pies, pasta, wings, cheese bread, salad and dessert. We find Regina and Pops setting the table. Regina takes one look at us and shakes her head.

“Did you buy out the mall?”

“Wizard did,” Lucia says with a smile.

“I’m starved. Let’s eat,” Pops says.

?

After dinner, the girls hole up in their new room. The guest house had five bedrooms and four bathrooms. Since they were a bedroom short of everyone having their own, the girls decided to share one.

The adults are in the living room enjoying coffee or an after-dinner drink.

“When’s your next shift at the diner?”

“I’m on late shift tomorrow and the night after.”

“At least two of us will be at the diner from now on. There's enough of us. We can switch it up.”

She nods. “Can we head to the office? I have some information I think you’ll want.”

I follow her into the office of the guest house. She rummages through the desk and pulls out a file sliding it to me. There are pictures of four men in the folder, along with a file on each one of them.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:07 pm

I look at the first file. Marcus “Pistol” Brooks, age forty. Six feet tall. Black hair, hazel eyes. A small-time hood trying to work his way up the food chain.

The second file is one I recognize. Caleb “Cal” Robillard, former detective for NOPD who got bounced for taking bribes. Now he uses his skills for illicit activities. He’s thirty-nine, five foot eleven with light brown hair and brown eyes.

Victor “Vico” DeLuca is the third file. He’s a smuggler that specializes in running goods through the bayou. I wonder if the goods he’s been smuggling are drugs or people. He’s the oldest of the four at forty-five. Five foot ten with dark hair and green eyes.

The fourth and final file is on Raynard “Ray Ray” Jacobs. He’s thirty-nine with dark blonde hair and blue eyes. Standing at six-one. Another small-time thug trying to make a name for themselves.

“I’ll get to work and see what else I can find on these four. Do you think one of them left the note for you on your car?”

“It’s possible. If they did it. It was before they sat down to eat. I left them at the table last night. I’d just taken their order when the girls’ called the diner. I still don’t know why they couldn’t reach Ma or Pops. They both had their phones on.”

“I’ll check and see if the carrier had an outage around the same time the girls tried calling them.”

“They tried to text too, but it never went through.”

We spend the next hour going over all the information Charlie's gathered on Lola's case, so far. I have new information to share with Gambit and the rest of the Kings. It's starting to look like Lola was targeted for the twins. Some people are just sick fucking bastards who need to be put out of their misery. Human traffickers, in my opinion, are scum. We're all better off without.

Chapter 24

Charlie

Sweat dripped from my brow as I worked to stay up with the spin class instructor. He's extra brutal this morning, or maybe it's been too long since I've been to spin class. Things have been beyond crazy lately.

A week had passed since the incident with the girls. Today is their first full day back to school. Tully drove them to school while three brothers escorted them. One in front and two in back. Wizard hacked the cameras, so he has eyes on them.

We've been out a few more times and tonight I agreed to go to a club party with him. All adults.

The kids are in their new mini clubhouse. Jackson and Sons construction just finished the mini replica of their clubhouse. Still, the structure is around ten thousand square feet, with entertainment for all ages. A movie "theater", complete with a concession area.

Red and Brick are supervising the clubhouse. The club built the couple a townhouse in the new structure. They moved from Baton Rouge to New Orleans to help Gambit and Stormy with the orphan children they adopted.

The couple in their early fifties are childless but love children. They also loved

sending them home at the end of the evening or morning.

Wizard told me the club hired a few workers for the younger kids and chaperones for the older ones. Lucia has volunteered to help with the younger kids every day since we moved into the guesthouse.

The class finishes, jarring me back to the present. I grab the towel, wiping the sweat off my brow before gulping down water. My phone begins to play The Who's Pinball Wizard.

"Hello, Damien."

"Charlie, I'm on my way to school. I got an alert on JR. He's on his way to the school if he's not already there. I'm five minutes out, four if I catch all the lights."

"I'm on my way."

Fuck me! I'm fifteen minutes away from the school. I shoot off a quick text to my attorneys and run to the lockers. I go through the spin lock's combo in record time. Grabbing my street clothes and stuffing them in the bag. I don't have time to change. The school can deal with a sweaty, pissed off mom should my ex contact the girls.

They had new phones, with new numbers. JR's numbers are blocked. Any unknown numbers are routed to a program Wizard setup. The calls go randomly to one of the following phones: mine, Wizard's, Gambit's, Smoke's. Or Ma's. If any of us get a random call, it sends a notice to Wizard's computer.

He made a program that starts a trace on the caller's location and information immediately.

I keep my mind on all the security measures Wizard put in place to protect the girls.

He and Bug are working on connecting JR to Barnes. And Barnes to Brooks, Robillard, DeLuca, Jacobs, and Petrov.

I push the speed limits and the yellow lights, throwing caution to the wind. I park in front of the school and run inside to the office. Grace waits for me outside the office. A serious look on her face.

“JR is in the office. He says he has papers to take the girls out of school. He came in and demanded to see you. Before we could call you, Mr. Morelli and his friends showed up. They’re in the conference room with Mr. Stanley.”

“Thank you, Grace.”

She reaches out and takes my hand, patting the back of it in a reassuring nature.

Page 40

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:07 pm

“Don’t worry. Those girls won’t ever know he showed up.”

I nod and head to the conference room, grateful for Grace Appleton’s protective nature. I hear raised voices.

“I told you I’m not saying anything else or showing you the papers until Charlie arrives.”

Pushing open the door, I take in the scene before me. Principal Stanley sits on one side of the table. JR sits next to him, away from Wizard and Smoke, the club’s enforcer. Wizard looks to the door. He’s up off his feet the moment he sees me. His muscular arms wrap around me, and he drops a kiss on top of my head.

JR remains surprisingly quiet for all of thirty seconds. Then stands up and clears his throat. He draws an envelope out of his inner jacket pocket before thrusting it toward me.

“These papers give me the right to take the girls.”

I grab the papers, but he doesn’t let go. Furious, our eyes meet and I’m shocked beyond reason when he mouths, Help me.

Chapter 25

Charlie

What the hell is going on? He’s saying one thing out loud and mouthing, help me? I

take the papers when he finally lets go of them. I speed read through the information, my heart beating faster with each word. By the time I get to the last page, I'm seconds away from full-blown panic mode when the bottom of the page catches my eyes. The judge's signature doesn't match the printed name. Plus, the document isn't notarized.

A solid wall of muscle steps up behind me. I can feel Wizard leaning over my shoulder. Yeah, I know it's him. He leans in until I feel his lips on the shell of my ear.

"Let's play along."

"You'll take my girls over my dead body," I say.

"I'll call the police if you fight me on this," JR replies

Wizard steps around me and puts himself in between me and JR. In a split-second, he cocks his fist and clocks JR on the jaw. My ex crumples like a sack of potatoes. Smoke picks him up off the floor and slings him fireman style over his shoulder.

"I'll take out the trash, Principal Stanley."

For his part, Jorden Stanley doesn't bat an eyelash. He nods, and I follow Smoke out of the conference room.

"I'm parked right out front."

Smoke nods and heads in that direction. Everyone in the office stands and begins to applaud as we walk by. Maybe I'll get through this day without getting arrested.

Wizard

SMOKE TOSSED JR INTO the back of the SUV.

“I can drive,” Charlie says.

“We’ll follow you.”

She wraps her arms around my neck. I bend to give her a brief but passionate kiss. I watch as she gets into the cage before hurrying to my sled. Smoke follows, as does Havoc and Mayhem. Hustle, Hurl, and Honda are on their way to give extra eyes on the school grounds.

I keep my eyes on road as we drive back to the compound. JR was scared when he handed those papers to Charlie. I let my anger bleed away enough to see it when he mouthed, help me.

Tension flows from me the moment the gates close behind us. I direct Charlie to drive to the clubhouse. She parks in front. Smoke and I park behind her. Havoc and Mayhem grab a woozy JR out of the back, helping him to his feet and inside the clubhouse.

“Take him to Gambit’s office, boys.”

The alarm on my phone starts beeping.

“Fuck. Change of plans. Get him to the pool NOW!”

Havoc picks up JR, slings him over his shoulder and dashes through the clubhouse and out the back with the rest of us close on his heels.

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:07 pm

Havoc tosses JR Into the deep end of the pool. He comes up sputtering.

“Strip, take off everything. If you have contacts, leave those in the pool too.”

“I need a prospect to get this guy towels, sweats, and a tee.”

While JR strips, one of the prospects rushes off to get what I ask for. I notice patches of color on his skin as the man strips. As well as multiple bruises.

“What happened?” Charlie asks.

“He has a wire or some other similar device. My alarm system picked it up. Drowning it was the quickest way I could think of to destroy the device.”

“Does he look like someone beat the hell out of him, or is that just me?” She asks.

I return my attention back to JR. As he moves toward the shallow end, he exposes a clearer view of the bruises. He’s taken a serious beating and whoever did it took great pains to make sure clothing would cover their handiwork. I almost feel sorry for the guy. Almost, but he was a shitty father, and I can’t abide by that.

By the time he’s out of the pool, dried and in spare clothes, most of my brothers have gathered around us. I spot Doc and give him a nod.

“Can you check him out then bring him to church?”

“You got it.”

Doc looks at JR. "Follow me."

He didn't wait for JR to respond. He turns on heel and heads back toward the clubhouse. We have a small clinic set up inside.

We're prepared for an emergency, including surgery if needed. Not only do we have Doc, but we also have Nay, who recently started her residency as a Nurse Practitioner.

Chapter 26

Charlie

Twenty minutes later, I'm sitting in church surrounded by more than a dozen tattooed bikers waiting for Doc and JR. I go over his injuries mentally cataloging each one. What the hell had JR gotten himself into and does it further endanger our daughters?

"Want something to drink?" Wizard asks.

"I'll take a Coke."

"I'll be right back."

I check my phone for messages while we're waiting. I told Ma there was an incident and I'd let her know as soon as I know something more. Wizard returns, sitting a cold bottle of orange Nehi in front of me.

I smile at him. "Did you start carrying these for the Caruso girls?"

He nods. "Stormy had a few, but yes, I keep them in stock and cold now for my girls."

“Your girls? They’re not your girls, they’re mine!” An irate looking JR shouts as he enters the room.

Wizard stalks toward my ex until he’s up in his personal space.

“Watch your tone. You’re here as a guest and that could end at any second. If you think those bruises are bad, I can inflict enough damage to make you beg for death but keep you alive for days. Hell, I’m tempted to torture you for all the shit you’ve already put your family through. Now sit down and shut up until it’s your turn to talk.”

JR takes one look around the room and takes the seat Doc indicates. As soon as Gambit takes a seat, the rest of the Kings follow suit. When the last brother is seated, Gambit grasps a hand sized skull and bangs it on the table.

“Church is in order, fuckers.”

Everyone quiets down. All eyes turn to him. Gambit turns to JR.

“You’ve got the floor. Better make it good and don’t leave any details out. Start with how you know Tyler Barnes.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:07 pm

JR's shoulders sag. He looks defeated. After taking a deep breath, he begins.

"I met Barnes in college. It was a freshman year he was an involved alumnus. We've kept in touch over the years. He's not the problem."

"Who or what is the problem?" Gambit asks.

"I got into some gambling debt and took out a loan from the wrong people. They want the girls," he blurts out.

I stand up so fast my chair tips over, crashing against the floor. Strong arms wrap around me a split-second before I get to JR.

"We need him breathing to tell us everything, Spitfire. You can kick his ass later."

I relax in his hold. He's right. We need to know everything. Over the next hour JR tells us exactly how much trouble he's in. The biggest concern is the fact that the Russian mob wants my girls.

?

It's five o'clock somewhere, right? At least, that's what I told myself as I drink a glass of bourbon. Ma and Pops are on their way. Wizard and I are sitting in Lagniappe having a drink while we wait for them.

JR is in one of the guest apartments somewhere in the compound. He's supposed to stay there and not let anyone know where he is. For all intents and purposes, we want

the Bratva to think he's gone or dead.

They had him wired for audio and video. One of the prospects retrieved JR's clothes and the devices from the pool. Wizard sent the devices to Bug.

"Charlotte Evangeline Anastasia Caruso, are you drinking before noon?" Ma says.

"Yup, and you will too when you hear what JR did."

"What did he do this time?" Pops asks, taking a seat at our table.

"I can't tell you everything, but there is something you need to know. JR got into some gambling debt and chose the wrong people to borrow money from. Now the Bratva want the girls."

Ma's face pales. She opens her mouth and closes it several times before grabbing my glass and throwing back the rest of its contents in one gulp.

"Where is that son of a bitch? I'm going to kill him," Pops says, standing up.

Chapter 27

Wizard

I'm sitting in a corner booth at the River Road Rest Stop, keeping an eye on my woman. It took a few hours for us to get Pops to cool down. Nitro took Pops with him to La Poule Rouge, our burlesque club. Regina had two more bourbons before retreating to the house to cook and clean. Charlie assured me it would calm her nerves.

The bell above the door rings as more people come in. I fight to stay relaxed as

Marcus, Caleb, Victor, and Reynard saunter in taking a booth in the back. I shoot Gambit a quick text to give him a heads up and nudge Cobra, who's sitting across from me with his nose in his phone.

He looks up and I move my head in their direction. He glances in the direction I indicated before looking back at me and nodding. Our server comes back, refills our coffee and takes our order.

I activate the Bluetooth earpiece and open the app to the bug I installed under the table our suspects are sitting at. Seconds later, I tune into their conversation. While they pass the time talking bullshit, I begin to recognize them by voice.

"Where's our sexy as fuck waitress?" Brooks says.

"You need to leave her the fuck alone," Robillard says.

"You ain't my boss, Cal," Brooks sneers.

"You're grave, idiot. Petrov has the hots for her."

That Russian bastard won't get anywhere near my Spitfire. I'll gut the motherfucker myself and feed him to the gators. I feel a boot nudge mine and look up at Cobra. He points to my face. I school my features and continue to listen to their conversation.

When our food arrives, they're ordering theirs. I take a few bites and mostly move my food around for the next twenty minutes while I listen to their conversation. A few minutes after their food arrives, they start talking about shipments. The next one is less than ten days from now. Fuck. I pull up Gambit's number and shoot off a quick text.

Church 911

Page 43

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:07 pm

Swapping out

ETA 30

??

While I wait for his reply. I call in the calvary. I pull money out of my wallet and stand up. Without a word Cobra follows suit. The door jingles. Three of five back up members stroll in.

My phone pings as we walk out the door.

CHURCH NOW

??

Devil's phone pings a second later and we hurry to his cage. We're all driving them tonight. Devil's is a royal blue and white 2012 Ford Mustang Boss 302 Laguna Seca.

As we're leaving the diner Havoc, Hurl, and Honda had come in to replace us. They would wait with Charlie until she finished her shift a couple hours from now. Mayhem, and Hustle were somewhere in the parking lot.

"How fast can you drive this thing?" I ask.

Cobra smiles.

“Buckle up, let’s find out.”

Cobra peels out of the parking lot like a shot and races down the street. I activate my scanner app and connect my phone into the car’s Bluetooth.

“This will let us know if there are police nearby.”

“I fucking love your big ass brain, bro.”

I laugh. “Thanks, brother.”

He floors it when we come to an open expanse of road.

“I love being a King, man. Doing what I love, making bank, booze, women. It’s the fucking life, man.”

Cobra is only two years younger than me, but he’s more of a wild child, whereas I’ve always been a geek. My old room back home still has action figures on the shelves. A few are probably worth a mint.

I’m saving them until I have kids, then I’ll sell a few and start college funds. The rest they can play with should they like that kind of thing. Of course, I have every Star Trek and Star Wars movie, TV special, and book. I still grab new action figures I think will have value. I buy two, one to keep and one for my future children.

I wonder if I can convert the triplets to the dark side. I open my notes app and make a quick reminder to do a search correlation for their age group. I’ll also do a general age group search to find more things in common with the girls. Valentina is having a hard time with me dating their mom. The other girls are thrilled. As are Regina and Pops.

Chapter 28

Wizard

Gambit bangs the skull on the table. “Church motherfuckers!”

Phones are off or on silent and face down.

“About ninety minutes ago, Wizard and Cobra were at the River Road Rest Stop. Charlie is on shift tonight. She’s still gathering information on Lola’s case. I’ll let Wizard tell you more.”

I push a few buttons and pull up the first of the four diner losers. I introduce each one, starting with Caleb Reynard, giving them basic information. I wrap up with Marcus Brooks.

“While the four of them chatted, I found out a few things. Brooks has the hots for Charlie. The only thing holding him back is Petrov’s interest in her. We’ll circle back around to that. The most urgent information I gleaned tonight is that the Bratva is expecting a shipment tomorrow night around ten.

“I believe the shipment is people. Bug and I have been working on tying Petrov and Barnes together. They have a large network, and I think we should involve US Marshals. Let them take down Barnes and the local Bratva.

“Bug knows a US Marshal. His friend can send us a couple handpicked agents. We’ll get sworn in with authorization to use lethal force.

Page 44

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:07 pm

“JR turns state's evidence and goes into the witness protection program. Somewhere far away, like Alaska.”

“Has he agreed to turn state's evidence?” Dakota asks.

“He will. I’ve got enough to bury him, plus it’s his only way out from under the Bratva,” I reply.

“Thoughts?” Gambit asks.

We spend the next hour debating the pros and cons of working with the feds and the best way to protect Charlie and the girls long term. Gambit’s phone rings. The room falls silent.

He answers the phone. “Go...yeah... on our way. Don’t touch anything.”

He disconnects the call. “Let’s roll. Someone trashed Charlie’s car and left another message. Wizard, she's okay. The prospects are with her. Hurl found the car first. She wasn’t blindsided.”

Boots pound as we race outside and to our sleds. Minutes later, the roar of bikes vibrates the windows as we roar out of the compound.

Charlie

WIZARD PRACTICALLY ran out of here earlier. I wonder what he overheard. Three prospects sit at one of the back tables, shooting the breeze. They’re a few tables away

from the marks.

While I work, I know one of the Kings is placing trackers and other devices on the marks' cars. The four of them won't know what hit them with the King's are done with them. Plus, I hope the trackers will finally lead me to the last piece of Lola's puzzle.

I know these men are responsible, or at least one of them is. Now I just need proof. Proof I can give Wrath, so he can close the books on this part of the twins' life.

Never in a million years did I dream I'd put my girls at risk for a job, yet I have a feeling it may have more to do with JR and the Bratva than it does my snooping around Lola's life. Unless the two are somehow connected.

The thought of human trafficking makes me want to hurl. Finding out the trade is alive and well in your own backyard. That's frightening. I have three young women to think about. Young women that thanks to my skeezy ex are on a mafia's don's radar. The same ex who may also be responsible for me being on the same man's radar.

I don't know much about Yuri Petrov, but I intend to find out more. I'll start by asking Wizard for his file. I know he has one on him. I suspect he has one on every major hitter in the city. He's brilliant and good at his job. He's amazing with the girls. He's also eight years younger than me and his lifestyle scares the hell out of me.

"Waitress, we need more coffee," Brooks bellows.

I hurry across the diner to grab a fresh pot before refilling their cups.

"Is there anything else I can get you?"

“Besides your phone number?” Brooks says, with a sleazy smile. “I’ll take a piece of pie.”

I ignore his first comment. “Apple, peach, cherry, strawberry rhubarb, chocolate, pecan, butterscotch or coconut?”

“No blackberry?”

“Sold the last piece an hour ago.”

“Apple with ice cream.”

“Got it. Anyone else?”

I take their dessert orders. The diner is well known for its desserts. Cakes, pies, rolls, brownies, cookies, puddings, and more. Desserts and salads are the easiest thing at the diner. I can get them myself and don’t have to wait on someone else.

My shift is over in thirty minutes. All my tables have their food.

After delivering the corner booth’s desserts, I start clearing the booth behind them. Not a minute later, Robillard gets a call. He stands up and pulls out a wad of cash, tossing it on the table.

“Boss wants us now.”

I wait until the last one’s out the door before taking the money from the table. I count out the money for their bill first. They left enough to cover it. Whew. If I get stiffed it comes out of my paycheck. Supposedly, it’s so the wait staff doesn’t let their friends dine and dash. I call bullshit.

Four tables left to check out. Eight tables to clean and I'm out of here. I get to work on the three empty tables. We bus our own tables. The cheapskate owner doesn't believe in bussers.

Chapter 29

Charlie

The minutes until my shift is over tick by. I keep busy getting desserts, cashing out my tables, and cleaning them. A loud crash draws my attention to the other side of the diner. I see two women with their hands locked in each other's hair screaming and bumping into tables, causing general chaos.

Two of the prospects rush into help while another drops back closer to me. Seconds later two more prospects enter the diner, making their way to me.

Between the fight and the onlookers, it takes a good five minutes to get everyone separated and settled. The two prospects that helped with the fight slip outside while I go back to my tables.

Seconds later, the door bursts open and one of them runs back in.

“There's a car on fire. I need an extinguisher.”

I sprint to the hall and grab the massive industrial size extinguisher from the wall handing it off to Hustle, who follows me in the kitchen. He nearly bumps into Mayhem, who has a similar extinguisher. People part like the red sea as they run out the diner's doors.

I hear someone say they're calling 9-1-1. A sense of dread washes over me. I run to the back, toss my money and receipts at the manager before grabbing my purse from

the lockers and dashing back to meet my shadows. We head outside and make in time to see Mayhem and Hustle extinguishing my car. In orangespray paint to the left of the car on the ground, it reads, You were warned. All the windows and lights are busted out. I can see parts of letters here and there through the blackened paint.

The roar of engines is suddenly louder than the sound of sirens as I stare in shock at my car. I'm hoping one of those engines is Wizard.

Wizard

THE SIRENS AREN'T FARbehind us when we pull into the diner's parking lot. I already gave our friends at NOPD a heads up that we'd be there. I pull close to Charlie but out of the way of the impending cop cars. Seconds later, I'm off my bike, pulling my woman into my arms. I kiss the top of her head. She throws her arms around me, burying her head in my chest and sobbing. I rub her back.

"I'll find out who did this, Spitfire."

My brothers are standing around us in a semi-circle when the police pull into the parking lot. Most of the customers have spilled out of the diner by this point and are taking videos or gawking.

Detective Stone is the first to arrive, followed by several uniforms, including officers Vega and Simmons. Stone heads in our direction. He eyes the group when he arrives.

"Wizard, what have we got?" he asks.

"Some asshole set fire to my woman's car after they vandalized it. They left a message," I say, pointing to the words.

One by one, Charlie and the prospects tell them what they found, including the fight

in the diner, which pulled everyone's attention from the parking lot long enough for them to leave the message and torch the car without being noticed.

At some point, the owner of the diner arrives and ushers us into the private dining room. They close the diner while the cops interview everyone, and forensics does their thing. The uniformed officers interview the staff and diner's occupants while Stone interviews Charlie and the prospects.

When they're done, I approach Stone.

"Say, Stone, you got a minute?"

He nods his head, and we step to the far side of the room where there are no doors or windows.

"Tomorrow morning there's a US Marshal coming to the compound. We'd really like you to be there. Vega and Simmons too."

"Can you tell me what it's about?"

I shake my head. "Not really, but I can say you'll want in on this."

He nods his head. "We'll be there. I like pineapple Danish."

I laugh. "I'll make sure we get some."

I head to collect Charlie.

"You good to ride on the sled, or do you want to ride in one of the prospect's cages?"

"I want to ride with you."

Chapter 30

Charlie

I can't sleep. I give up after a couple hours of tossing and turning and start to bake. I heard that detective say he wanted pineapple Danish for the meeting in a few hours. I haven't made Danish in a while, but I know how.

I start with the dough, so it has time to rise and rest. Once that's finished, I get started on the fillings. In addition to the pineapple, I'm making cherry, cheese and apple. Besides the Danish I made vuoto, or empty pastries. They're light and flakey like a croissant. Only you cut these open and fill the middle. For the fillings, I make strawberry jam, raspberry jam, chocolate hazelnut, creme patisserie, and pistachio cream.

Not everyone has a sweet tooth, so I decide to make a variety of pasties. Scrambled eggs, meat, cheese, potato, a combination of all three, and some with jalapenos.

With nearly an hour to go, I pack up everything, put it in the borrowed SUV, and head to the clubhouse. Ma and Pops already know I'm leaving early for a meeting. I haven't told them what it's about yet. Until JR signs the papers, there's a chance he'll change his mind and not testify.

If he doesn't, I'll have to take the girls and run. I don't know where, but I'll find somewhere far enough away. Somewhere I don't have to worry about human traffickers being after my girls. I'm holding my shit together surprisingly well. In less than forty-eight hours, I've found out the Russian mafia wants my girls, the boss

wants me, and my car's been torched.

I'd wanted Wizard to spend the night but knew it would be a big deal for the girls if he did. I didn't have the energy to add a possible fight on top of an already full plate. Right now, I'd do just about anything to be in his arms.

My phone dings as I'm making my way to the clubhouse. I stop long enough to read the text. It's from Wizard. I reply immediately and tell him I'm almost to the clubhouse. Three minutes later, I pull up near the back kitchen entrance. By the time I'm parked, Wizard is opening the door for me.

He pulls me out. I throw my arms around him. He wraps his arms around me and lowers his head. Our lips meet in a passionate kiss. I devour his lips like he's my last meal and I haven't eaten in weeks.

Catcalls and applause break us apart. I look to find Saint and Doc grinning at us like idiots clapping.

"Is there food to go with the show?" Saint asks.

I laugh. "Actually, there is. It's in the back."

"I'll get it," Doc says.

"There's two tubs."

"I got the other," Saint says as they both head to the back of the SUV.

Doc and Saint carry in the two tubs of food. We bypass the kitchen and head to church. I'm surprised to see Stormy there, setting up coffee and other drinks. My fingers are threaded with Wizard's. I drop his hand and walk over to Stormy.

“Do you need any help?”

She shakes her head. “No, I got it. I already have some pastries and muffins on trays. The prospects are bringing them in a few minutes.”

“I made some pastries and pasties, too.”

“Oh homemade. I’ll have them hold off on the store bought then. Thank you. Are you nervous?”

“Terrified that JR will try to weasel out of it.”

Stormy pulls me in for a hug. “Aww, honey, don’t worry. The boys won’t let him weasel out of it. He either signs on the dotted line or he’s gator bait.”

I pull back and look at her. She’s serious. I feel a weight lift off my shoulders. JR will save his own ass, if nothing else.

“Thank you.”

“You’re family now, Charlie. We’ve got your back.”

Tears prick at the corners of my eyes. Ma and Pops have always been in my corner, but we’ve done it all on our own. At least I had them. Plenty of single moms out there have no one. I feel a warm presence behind me before muscular arms wrap around me from behind. Lips drop a kiss on my neck.

“You heard Queenie. You’re family now. You’re never going to get rid of us,” Wizard says.

“I don’t want to get rid of you. I just found you.”

He kisses the top of my head. “Technically, I found you.”

Page 47

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:07 pm

I laugh. “Technically, Bug did.”

“True. I’ll have to send him a thank you gift.”

Chapter 31

Wizard

The feds arrived fifteen minutes before meeting time. Havoc and Mayhem bring JR in and close the door behind them. Detective Stone and officers Simmons and Vega have arrived as well. Gambit takes a seat at the head of the table. He grabs the skull and pounds on the table.

“Meetings in order, fuckers.”

“I want to introduce you to our guests, senior federal marshal Nathan Blake and marshal Riley Hayes. We’ll be working with them to take down the local Bratva.”

Gambit introduces everyone going around the table, saving JR for last.

“Marshal Blake, the floors yours.”

“Is everyone here essential to this case?”

“My brothers and I are all military trained and will take part in the plan. JR is the man with the information on Petrov. Wizard sent you the file on JR’s crimes as well as his involvement with Petrov and Barnes. Stormy, my wife, is here to offer Charlie

support. Charlie is JR's ex and the mother of the underage children currently in danger," Gambit says.

"Oh no. No way, I'm talking about Teddy Barnes. No fucking way."

I put my hand on Charlie's arm.

"I got this," I say, quietly.

"Prez, I need our immunity papers signed now."

"Marshal Hayes, may we have the papers, please?" Gambit asks.

The marshal sits a briefcase on the table and pulls out a tablet. After pushing a few buttons, she stands up, taking the tablet to Gambit.

"I need everyone except Roger Carmine Caruso, Jr. to sign. After you sign, hit the done button and hand it to the next person. The pad will auto load a new signature page. Did you have your attorney look over the copy we sent you?" Marshal Hayes asks

"We did. There's a copy of the final draft in my inbox," Gambit says.

"Let me double check my inbox to make sure I have the latest copy before we begin."

With speed and efficiency, Hayes accesses her emails and compares documents. With a smile, she hands the device to Gambit.

"I did have the latest. Would you care to compare the two?"

"If you don't mind."

“Not at all. I would,” Hayes says with a smile.

Gambit smiles and takes the tablet. Uses the pen to sign electronically and passes it to Papa. It takes about five minutes to pass the device around. As soon as it's back in the marshal's hands. I explode out of my chair, make my way to JR, grab him up out of the chair and lift him up until he's standing on his toes like a ballerina.

“You will give them what they want. You put your daughters on the radar of human traffickers. Do you have any idea the life those poor girls would live? I'm telling you right now, mother fucker, talk or I'll feed you to the gators still alive and bleeding.”

Sweat breaks out on his brow. I've got a good six inches on the twat. I slap him hard once in the face. Then shake him for good measure before I let the fucker go.

“You can't do that. You heard him threaten me.”

Marshal Hayes smiles. “He has immunity in regard to your personal wellbeing. You may want to keep that in mind from now on.”

JR looks like someone punched him. He deflates and slowly lowers himself into the chair I drug him out of earlier. Over the next hour, JR answers the marshal's questions and admits to a litany of crimes in the process of turning over evidence against Barnes and the Brava.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:07 pm

When he finishes Marshal Hayes hands him the pad. Standing over his shoulder, she shows him all the places he needs to initial or sign.

“Alright, Mr. Caruso. I have agents waiting outside to take you into protective custody. They’ll make sure you get your new ID, get you to your new home, and get you settled,” Marshal Blake says.

“What, I have to go now?”

“Yes, now.”

“I want to say goodbye to my girls.”

Blake shakes his head. “I’m sorry, but they can’t know. Not until after we’ve taken everyone down and they’re in custody. Then your ex-wife can tell the girls you’re in the witness protection program. Until then, they’ll just have to think you disappeared.”

JR whines and drags his feet all the way out the door. I turn to Charlie and pull her into my lap. Fat tears roll down her cheeks. I rub circles on her back waiting for the police and Marshals to leave the room.

“Just breathe, baby. This is almost over. The biggest step is done.”

She looks up at me. “I know we have to take the bad guys down but now we have federal and local backup. Gambit mentioned we’re all military trained. What he didn’t mention is the club has successfully completed several black ops

missions. We've been up against the impossible before and everyone of us made it home.

Chapter 32

Charlie

Wizard holds me while tears run freely down my face. I'm processing his words, but my brain is sluggish from all the trauma of the last few weeks. I'm feeling more than a little overwhelmed at the moment.

"How are you feeling, Spitfire?"

"Overwhelmed. I'm not sad to see him go. But I'm sad for the girls. They adore that jerk. While they'll never see him again, at least they'll know he's safe and alive."

"Part of me wants to go after them. To beat the ever-loving shit out of him for the danger he's put the girls in," Wizard grumbles.

Then adds, "It's not just the girls. That psycho Petrov has his sights set on you. I think you should quit your job at the diner."

I shake my head. "I can't. I'm too close."

"I'll help you, and so will Bug."

"It's my job. I have a family to take care of."

"Let me take care of them. At least until we get this sorted out. I don't know what I'd do if something happened to you or the girls. As it is, I think we should send a few of the prospects under cover at the academy to guard the girls."

“Like all 21 Jump Street style?”

“Something like that. Crab, Tully, and even Flea could pull it off. They can register as seniors. I’ll get them fake IDs, and backgrounds.”

“What about parents? Parents at the academy are very involved.”

“I’ll have Doc write a note for the girls for the rest of the week. They have the flu or something. I’ll have the new kids’ parents and background squared away by Monday morning in time to get them enrolled.

“Might be easiest to have Red and Brick acting as their guardians. We can use the address of one of the newly completed houses in King’s Estates,” Nitro suggests.

“Good plan. I’ll see what’s finished and we need to ask before borrowing it,” Wizard replies.

“That’s the residential neighborhood next door the club owns, right?” I ask.

Wizard nods his head. “Yes. Only family of club members can build in the Estates. There were a couple nearly complete last I checked.”

“You can use Nana’s house,” Smoke says. “For that matter you can set her up as their guardian. She’s already qualified as a foster parent in Mississippi. I don’t think it would take Bug long to make that Louisiana.”

“Thank you, Smoke. That will save me a lot of time. You and Nana come up with the backstory and I’ll tell the prospects and take care of the paperwork,” Wizard says.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:07 pm

Smoke pats him on the back and walks away.

“Do you think the girls are up yet?” he asks me.

“They should be awake by now. And Ma’s likely told them they’re staying home. I need to go talk to them. To explain they’re in danger. How the hell do I do that without scaring them. And what do I tell them about JR?”

“Tell them he went on a business trip.”

“That’s the closest to the truth I can get, isn’t it?”

“I think so. I’ll be with you every step of the way, tesoro.”

As if I wasn’t already head over heels in love with him, he calls me treasure. My heart melts a little and some tension eases.

“Can we take the sled to the house?”

“We can. Would you like to go for a ride later?”

“I would, very much.”

“We’ll have to have escorts.”

“I understand. Maybe a few others want to go out too.”

“Leave it to me. I’ll plan everything.”

“Okay. Ready to go?”

“I am.”

I stand up. Wizard’s right behind me as we make our way through the clubhouse to the front where the sleds are parked. He gets the spare helmet out of the trunk and straps it on me before donning his and throwing one long jean clad leg over the seat. He balances, then offers me his hand. I step on the peg and throw my leg over before scooting in as close as I can, pressing my core up against his delicious jean clad ass.

The ride is much too short and soon we’re pulling up the drive to the guest house. We’ve no sooner come to a stop than the front door opens, and the girls come pouring out.

Chapter 33

Wizard

Valentina leads the charge out the door. She’s yelling. The other girls are yelling at her for yelling. Valentina’s face is red. I decide to immediately try and diffuse the situation.

“Girls, get your stuff. We’re going car shopping, then lunch. You have ten minutes.”

Valentina stops mid scream and mid step.

“Ten minutes! That’s not enough time.”

“It’s nine and a half now. You better hurry.”

She opens and closes her mouth before turning on heel and racing inside. Her sisters follow her. I help Charlie off the back before getting off.

“I’ll have a prospect bring the SUV. I panicked.”

“It’s a good plan, but I’ll need the insurance money to put a down payment on another car.”

“Let me take care of it now. You can give me what the insurance pays you. The family needs a car, and I have a stupid, fat bank account.”

Her face reminds me of Valentina’s a few minutes ago. She opens and closes her mouth a few times.

“This is hard.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:07 pm

I pull her into my arms and drop a kiss on the top of her head.

“We’ll get through it all together, including navigating finances.”

“Okay, but I can’t promise not to buck along the way.”

“Then I’ll hang on tight for the entire ride.”

Regina makes it out the door before we make it into the house.

“Is it done?”

“We’ll explain everything over lunch. We’re going to load into one of the club’s big SUVs and go car shopping. Then lunch. We’ll tell them as much as we can. Step one is done.”

Charlie

I CAN’T BELIEVE I LET my family talk me into getting a Lexus G series. I’m never going to be able to afford to pay Wizard back. The insurance money won’t even put a dent in the price tag. Although he negotiated one hell of a cash price.

We’re sitting in the private dining room at Doris’ in downtown. I still have the girls’ phones, or they’d be snapping pictures and posting on social media, regardless of the fact that they are essentially playing hooky today.

“Mom, we need our phones or at least one so we can take pics,” Lucia pouted.

“Yeah, we never go anywhere this nice,” Valentina adds.

“No phones. You’re still grounded.”

“What for? Dad sent us to the party,” Francesca says.

“You’re still old enough to know the rules, dad or no. You can have them back on Monday.”

The server comes with drinks, stopping the rest of the conversation. He takes our order. Wizard gets several appetizers. I choose the butcher’s cut with mushroom ragu and heirloom carrots. One of the appetizers my man orders is caviar. The girls wanted to try it.

We wait until all the appetizers arrive. I’m having a glass or ten of wine with my dinner. My amazing boyfriend agreed to forgo alcohol and be the designated driver.

“Has Dad responded to my text yet?” Francesca asks.

“I’m sorry, sweetie. He hasn’t. I know he’s away on business.”

“How do you know?”

“We talked earlier this morning. He’s going to be away for a while.”

“How long?” Valentina asks.

“Who knows?” I say, shrugging.

I hate lying to them, but telling them the truth is not safe. Not until we get Barnes and Petrov behind bars or dead. Honestly, I hope they resist arrest and wind up six feet

under.

“I can’t go into all the details right now, but your father has some unsavory friends. He inadvertently brought you girls and your mother to their attention.

“My brothers and I need some time to get protection in place, so you’re going to be ‘sick’ until Monday,” Wizard says.

“What do you mean?” Lucia asks.

“He means there are some terrible men after us. They’re the ones that sent the text, not your father. If Wizard and his brothers hadn’t shown up, you very well may have been kidnapped, or worse,” I say.

“Are you serious?” Valentina asks.

“We are. I’m stopping my investigation work until this is settled and none of us will go out of the compound without security.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:07 pm

“Are we prisoners?” Lucia gasps.

“Fermatevi miei cari. The compound has a pool, gym, movie theater, bodega, and sports area. It’s not like you’re locked in an eight by ten room with nothing but a light bulb and a chair,” Pops says.

Then he continues, “You girls are lucky to have your mama and the Kings looking out for you. Most people in this situation would be in dire straits.”

And so, the conversation continues for the next hour in between the servers' trips to our table. I’m exhausted by the time we get home and beg to put off our date until tomorrow. I know it’s a club party and I feel bad about missing it, but I don’t have the emotional bandwidth to deal with anyone outside of the immediate family.

Chapter 34

Two days later

Wizard

I HAVE EVERYTHING READY for date night. Well, date afternoon and night. I have a surprise for Charlie. I knock on the door and wait. A large bouquet of pink splash roses and stargazer lilies, along with other flowers and greenery.

Pops opens the door. He gives me a smile and a wink.

“Are those for me?”

I laugh. “They’re for your beautiful granddaughter. Shall I bring you some next time?”

Pops ushers me in laughing.

“She’ll be down in a minute. Lucia and Francesca are helping her get dressed. Come on in and have a seat.”

I follow him into the living room and take a seat on the sofa.

“How are you liking the compound, Pops?”

“It’s like a small city behind these walls. It’s like nothing I’ve ever seen.”

“Stormy’s always thinking of something else to add to the compound. We’ve purchased land a few times. Anytime something goes up around us, we buy it. Our latest project is a housing development for family members only. As of now, we are undecided if we’ll directly connect the two. Right now, the entrance is a block away.”

“I gotta say, your club is nothing like I expected.”

“Yeah, the media has everyone thinking we’re Sons of Anarchy.”

“Wizard, you’re here.”

I look up to see Francesca come in.

“I am. How are you?”

“Good, I’m dying without my phone. I’m on my fourth book. Reading is one of the few things we’re not grounded from.”

“I love to read. I have a collection of novels in my apartment.”

“Oh, can I look sometime?”

“Absolutely. Let’s set up a time for you to come over. Your sisters can come too, or you can come alone. Your choice.”

“Thanks, Wizard.”

“Any time, kiddo.”

She smiles at me and tucks her legs under her but and settles beside me. Lucia and Valentina join us after we chat for a few minutes. If the girls are down here, then Charlie should be down any second.

I hear footsteps on the stairs during a break in conversation and look up to see Charlie. My jaw drops open as I take her in. She's wearing a pair of black jeans that hug her every curve, making her legs seem impossibly long. Along with a black leather halter top that zips up the front and black leather boots that come to her knee.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:07 pm

I stand up, lay the flowers on the table, and stride across the room, taking her into my arms. I kiss her until we're both breathing heavy and one of the triplets is in the background making gagging noises and saying gross. The other two are giggling.

We finally pull apart.

“Damn, Spitfire, you look amazing. I mean, knock me over with a feather.”

Charlie's cheeks are pink.

“I'm glad you like it.”

“Like it? That's the understatement of the year, tesoro. Are you ready to go?”

She smiles up at me. “Are those my flowers?”

“Shit. Yeah, sorry. As soon as I saw you, all other thoughts fled from my brain.”

I heard a collective sigh behind me.

“That may be the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me. Let me go put them in a vase. My purse and jacket are by the door.”

I watch her exquisite ass as she retrieves the flowers and heads to the kitchen. She's back in less than a minute with the flowers in a glass vase. Charlie sets the flowers in the middle of the coffee table.

“They’re beautiful, Damian. Thank you.”

I smile. “Anything for my girl.”

Charlie takes my hand, and we make our way to the front door and to my sled. It doesn’t take long to mount up and head down the road. She doesn’t know where we’re going or what we’re doing.

I hope she likes the plans I made for us today. I know she loves to cook. Her whole family does. I’ve been lucky enough to spend a few Sunday afternoons with them making dinner. I booked a cooking slash wine tasting class and invited a few of our friends.

A couples’ date night and afterwards we’re going dancing. The class is in Baton Rouge, so Charlie has a chance to ride. I love that she loves riding with me. I overheard her talking to the ol’ ladies a few days ago. A few of them are talking about learning to ride and getting sleds of their own. I think it’s a great idea. Don’t get me wrong, there are few things better than having her wrapped around me when we’re on the open road. My dick’s been hard since I saw her in that outfit. She’s always beautiful, but tonight she’s a fucking Goddess.

Neither of us uses the built-in Bluetooth on the way, simply enjoying the scenery. I think we need a ride soon. I’ll talk to Decker about organizing a ride. Maybe ride through the swamplands and make a day of it.

The ride seems far too short. Only an hour and fifteen-minute ride by the time we pull into the parking lot. Our friends will arrive after us, so they don’t give away part of the surprise. We find a spot up front. I park the sled and help her off before getting off and stowing our helmets in the luggage.

Chapter 35

Charlie

The ride here was magnificent. We really need to ride more. Maybe when things with the sting are over, we can go on longer rides. We have five escorts tonight. Angel, Saint, Hustle, Hurl and Honda. The triplets served four terms in the Marines, two of those as Marine Raiders.

All too soon, we pull into a strip mall. Wizard parks up front and helps me off the sled. I take off my helmet and put it in the luggage. My boyfriend bought a new bike after we started dating because it wasn't comfortable for two.

God, I love this man. Da fuck? Did I just think that? I did. And I do. Now to pick the right time to tell him. After he stows his helmet, he tilts my chin up for a sweet, soft, kiss. When we turn around, I spot the name of the store we're parked in front of the Tasting Table.

"Is this where we're going?" I ask, pointing to the sign.

"It is. It's a cooking slash wine tasting class. It's a three-course meal. We're cooking with wine as well."

"I can't wait. This is thoughtful. Thank you. Maybe we can switch it up for Sunday dinner and make what we learn to cook tonight."

"Do you think Regina will go for that?"

"No, but we can outvote her. We do it a few times a year. It's nice to change things up. You should have seen her face when we voted for sushi."

We walk as we talk. Wizard opens the door and ushers me inside. We find our way to a large open area with six cooking stations set up in the middle. Off to one side is a

classroom type area, while the other side has bistro tables and chairs.

“Which station do you want, tesoro?”

“Left front?”

“Good choice.”

We walk hand in hand to the station and sit on the stool provided. I hear the bells over the front door and look toward the front of the room. Wizard’s club brother Blue comes in with a stunning redhead I’ve never met.

Wizard leans close to my ear. “All of my married brothers ’ ladies are expecting or breast feeding. I invited a few single brothers and told them to bring a date or a friend. Blue’s with CJ. She’s the premiere dancer at La Poule Rouge.”

“She’s stunning.”

“She is, but you’re breathtaking.”

I feel my cheeks flush. Shaking my head, I set him straight.

“I’m a single mom with stretch marks and saggy boobs. I have little doubt that CJ is utter porcelain perfection.”

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and in my eyes, you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

“I think my ovaries just exploded,” a new, yet familiar, voice says.

I look up to find Doc with Marshal Hayes.

“Hi, Doc. Hello, Marshal.”

“Shh, I’m just a friend hanging out. Call me Riley. I wanted to help monitor the situation, plus wine.”

I laugh.

“I’m all for the wine. I hope we can drink while we cook.”

“Same.” Riley says.

Then she points to the table across from us. “Let’s take this one.”

“Sure,” Doc says, following behind her.

“How did he get wrangled into being her date? They’re like oil and water,” I say to Wizard.

“She asked him when she overheard me talking to him about this afternoon.”

Before we could talk further, more of our friends entered. Decker and Madison. I met her at the employee BBQ. Saber comes next with two of the dolls, Tawny and Athena. Followed shortly by Hollywood and Alena. I remember her name because of her story. The young woman has been through more in twenty years than most people will go through in a lifetime.

A few minutes later, two people in chef’s whites enter the room. The first is a dynamo of a woman with spiky blonde hair. She introduces herself as chef Kimberly and her co-worker as chef Jimi.

We spend the next couple of hours cooking, drinking, and laughing. My face and

sides hurt from laughing so much. Saber, Tawny, and Athena have us all in stitches. Blue and CJ randomly break out in song a few times and, of course, we have to all sing along.

The menu was seared steak with a marsala and shallot pan sauce. A roasted beet salad with goat cheese and a cabernet vinaigrette. And pears poached in merlot. It was good and I want to serve it for Sunday dinner sometime.

Chapter 36

Wizard

Last night was epic. We had a blast at a local nightclub and danced until the wee hours of the morning. Regina gave me the side eye when I dropped Charlie off as dawn peeked through the night sky.

Tonight, we're having an epic party for Tully. It's past time to patch him in as a full-fledged member of the Kings. As an added bonus and surprise, I'm presenting Charlie with her cut tonight. We haven't talked about it before, so if I've misread the situation, she could totally shut me down in front of my brothers.

The Baton Rouge and Houston chapters are joining us for the patch celebration. They'll start rolling in any time now. I'm looking forward to seeing Chief, Trinity, and the others. Being only an hour away from the mother chapter, our clubs spend a lot of time together. It's like one big extended family.

An alert goes off and I dash to my command center. Pushing a few buttons, I see it's Robillard's vehicle. He just pulled into a warehouse I've been monitoring. One that's also tied to the Bratva. In less than forty-eight hours, there's a shipment going out. The feds, Bug and I are doing everything we can to find out where they're shipping the people and, if we can, who the buyers are. We're casting our net wide, hoping to

take out as many of the low life fuckers as we can. Human trafficking and sex trafficking turn my stomach. I'd like to raze all the fuckers from the face of the planet.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:07 pm

I'd love to feed every one of them to the gators alive and bleeding, but we'd need more gators for that. If it wasn't for the girls, I'd track JR down and end him. Stupid fucker endangered his daughters and ex-wife. My girls, and my woman. I'd end him for that if it wouldn't hurt the girls. Who knows how long he'll be in protective custody? If we're lucky, for life.

I double check my settings to make sure we're recording everything. I'll turn it all into the marshals. This isn't our usual MO, but it'll work. For now. I'd rather send them all to meet their maker. Let him sort them out. I shot a quick text to Gambit, giving him an update.

There's nothing I can do now but collect information. We're working with the marshals to make a plan on moving on the traffickers. This is the first time we've done a joint operation with anyone other than other MCs. While I'm not thrilled about it, it's our best chance of taking out a large chunk of the Bratva and keeping my girls and my woman safe.

For them, I'll work with the marshals. Not that it matters much in how we'll do things. Each one of us has immunity, unless we shoot one of the marshals in the face on purpose. Since neither of the marshal's is an ass that shouldn't be a problem. Unless you ask Doc. He and Marshal Hayes butt heads at every turn. It's been fun to watch and makes me grateful Charlie and I don't spar like that.

The alarm on my phone sounds. It's time for me to shower and change for the party. If I don't set alarms, I get wrapped up in work and forget the outside world even exists. Charlie and her family have made it easier for me to step away from work, but I still need the reminders.

Every time I step under the multiple shower heads in my bathroom, I want to give Stormy a big fat kiss on the lips. She put together the entire clubhouse. Well, most of it. It's refurbished from a boutique hotel, so the structure was set up, but we gutted it, and Stormy did everything else. She chose the materials, colors, and fixtures, etc.

Hot water hits me from several angles, easing the tension in my neck and shoulders. I turn on the rain head and let the water wash my worries down the drain.

Who, me, worried? Yeah, a fuck ton. I've never been head over heels in love before. The Kings keep their women safe, but this is the first time we've been up against the mafia. There are more than one million members of organized crime in the U.S. I don't know the exact number per state. While most are in New York and Chicago, New Orleans, being a port city, has our fair share.

After a long, hot shower, I trim my beard and mustache before blow drying my hair and putting it back in its topknot. Black jeans, a black tee, shit kickers and my vest. One last look in the mirror and I head downstairs to help. Charlie is meeting me here rather than me picking her up.

Chapter 37

Charlie

"Are you sure I look good in this?" I ask Riley for the fifth time.

After our epic party last night, I invited her to get ready with me for the party tonight. Everyone but the prospects knows the club is having a patch party tonight. It's my first all adult club rager.

I've already been warned the other two chapters are coming and they'll bring their dolls/bunnies with them. And that there will be hang arounds and women from town

coming in all to get a piece of biker ass.

That's fine by me as long as they leave my man alone. I won't shank a bitch, but I will kick their ass. Wizard is my man. I don't know why this shit is running through my brain. Yes, I do. We've only had sex once. It was amazing. Things have been so crazy we haven't had time to be together again. He's eight years younger than me and he has easy access to a lot of pussy. Why would he want mine?

"Get out of your head, Charlie," Riley says.

"How did you know?"

"I can tell, and for that, we're changing your outfit."

"What? No."

"Oh yeah. I stopped by the dolls' rooms earlier. I didn't bring anything with me suitable for tonight's party and I want to turn Doc on his ear. For the fuck of it."

"You like him."

"I like to goad him. It's kind of fun."

I laugh. "Fine, what am I wearing? We're going to be late if we don't decide."

"We'll both change and be fashionably late. I have an idea."

?

Thirty minutes later, we stroll into Lagniappe. I swear on a stack of Bibles everyone stops and stares. My hair is pulled back from my face yet cascaded onto my bare

shoulders and down my back in gentle waves. I'm wearing a black leather cropped halter that ends a few inches below my boobs. Sexy jean shorts hang low on my hips and show the barest hint of my ass. Black suede boots end a few inches below my thighs.

Silver waterfall earrings mingle with my hair and brush the top of my shoulders. I'm wearing smokey eye shadow and siren red lips. To complete the outfit, I have a red flannel shirt tied around my waist. Thank you Bunnie xo for Riley's outfit inspiration.

After she made me strip, she pulled up a photo of the celeb in a video with a few of her girlfriends. Two of them wore similar outfits to the ones we have on. I see Doc first. His jaw is literally hanging open. Devil elbows him in the ribs and slaps his jaw shut.

"Someone call 9-1-1; this house is on FIRE!" Wizard says, hurrying towards me. He sweeps me up into his arms, picking me up off the floor. His lips coming down in a punishing kiss. I open for him. His tongue instantly plunders my mouth. I moan and wrap my legs around him.

The cheers around us grow louder. Wizard continues to kiss me. Eventually we pull apart.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:07 pm

“You like the outfit?”

“I’ll show you how much I like the outfit a little later.”

“Riley put it together and demanded I wear it.”

“I owe her a big thank you.”

“You can never go wrong with wine and chocolate as a thank you,” Riley says, giving Wizard a saucy wink.

“She could do better,” a deep voice says.

I turn to look at the newcomer. He is maybe an inch taller than Wizard, with thick dark hair cut short and brilliant blue eyes. His beard and mustache are neatly trimmed, and his eyes sparkle with mischief.

“Is that so?” I ask.

He nods his head and smiles. “It is. You can give me a chance. I don’t see a ring or a cut.”

Wizard growls. Literally growls at the man.

“Ryker, watch it. I don’t care if you’re the Houston president. You’re messing with my woman.”

Ryker throws back his head and laughs, then slaps Wizard on the back.

“I’m only pulling your leg, brother. Seriously though, where do you guys find all these incredible women?”

Wizard puffs out his chest. “We’re good that way. Spitfire, this is Ryker. He’s the president of our Houston chapter. Ryker, this is Charlie, my girlfriend.”

“Nice to meet you,” I say.

“Believe me, the pleasure is all mine. If you get bored, you can always come to Houston,” he says with a grin and a wink.

Wizard pulls me closer to him. I hide my smile. I’m not so secretly thrilled he’s this possessive. He threads his fingers through mine, then tugs me away from Ryker.

“Forza tesoro, ho delle persone da presentarti.”

I go with him, waving at Ryker as my man leads me off to meet people. We stop in front of a group of men.

“Spitfire, these are a few of the guys from Baton Rouge. Chief, the president and cofounder of the Kings. Trinity, VP and co-founder. Bug, their IT guy. Hammer their Sergeant at Arms and Preacher.”

I shake each of their hands, surprised when half of them give me hugs. After a few minutes of chatting, Wizard drags me to get some food and something to drink. Tables laden with food line one entire wall of the massive bar. How cool is it to have a full-size bar inside of the clubhouse.

We load up our plates and find a spot to sit. Nitro, Lucia, Boomer and Olivia are

sitting at the same table. The conversation flows easily as we all chat. I have just finished my first plate of food when Gambit steps onto the large stage in the corner of the bar. He taps the microphone.

“Brothers, prospects, please join me on stage.”

Wizard drops a quick kiss on my lips and heads up to the stage with the others. One by one all the Kings take the stage, including the Baton Rouge and Houston Chapters. Over fifty jean-clad, cut-wearing, tattooed bikers are standing on that stage now. That’s a fuck ton of hotness and testosterone.

“Tully, stand, front and center.” Gambit says.

I watch the young man move from the crowd to stand in front of Gambit.

“Papa, take his cut.”

Tully pales when they pull the prospect cut from his shoulders.

“Tully, you’ve prospected for us for over a year. It’s pastime we fucking change that horrible ass name and that ratty prospect cut.”

I watch as Blue hands Papa a bag. Papa takes a cut out of the bag and slips it over the prospect’s shoulders. I watch as Tully looks down at the name on this new cut. His face lights up.

Page 56

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:07 pm

“Kings, meet our newest member, Ace.”

Cheers go up around the bar. Foot stomping, applause, hollers and calls. The noise is nearly deafening, but the smile on Ace’s face says it all.

Everyone begins to file off the stage. Wizard heads straight for me. When he reaches me, he pulls me into a kiss and kisses me until I’m weak in the knees before picking me up and sitting me on top of the table nearby.

Cheers break out again as she hops on top of the table with me. Gambit whistles and quiets everyone down. The crowd quiets down again.

“Spitfire, since the moment I laid eyes on you in that parking lot, I knew you were the one for me. Will you be my ol’ lady?”

Tears prick at the corners of my eyes. I can’t speak past the enormous lump in my throat, so I nod. He pulls me in for another kiss. Blue hands him a bag. He takes out the cut and hands it to me. I look at the back. It says, ‘Property of Wizard’. The front has ‘Spitfire’ on it. He slips it on me. I beam with pride.

Chapter 38

Wizard

We dance and drink for the next couple of hours. Charlie is having a blast with ol’ ladies and dolls alike. Even the guest bunnies are on the dance floor, and everyone is having a good time. I think we’ve stayed long enough for me to be a good brother and

show my support for Ace.

Charlie is on the dance floor with Riley and several of the ol' ladies. I head to the bar to turn in my empty glass. I could leave it anywhere, but ma taught me to clean up after myself. Crab is on bar duty. He gives me the guy nod.

“Need anything?”

“No, just turning in my empty.”

“You leaving this early?”

“I’m ready to call it an evening with my ol’ lady.”

“Lucky fucker. She’s hot.”

“That she is. And all mine.”

As one song ends, another begins. Charlie is still on the dance floor. I make my way through the crowds towards her. I’m nearly there when I feel a hand on my arm. It’s some random woman wearing next to nothing in impossibly high heels. Her fake tan is so dark it’s nearly orange. Bleach blonde hair, bright pink lipstick and huge fake as fuck tit. Her surgeon did a terrible job. Bless her heart. I’ve seen some incredible breast enhancements. I have nothing against them. Someone really botched the job.

“Where’re you going so fast, hot stuff?”

I take her hand and remove it from my arm.

“I’m going to get my woman so I can take her upstairs and fuck her until neither of us can talk. Also, consent is sexy as fuck, and I sure as hell didn’t give you permission

to touch me.”

She looks taken aback for a moment before shaking her head and moving on.

“That was H-O-T, hot,” Charlie gushes.

“I didn’t know you saw that.”

“I saw you heading my way and decided to meet you in the middle.”

“Ready to get out of here?” I ask, holding out my hand.

“More than,” she says, taking my hand as our fingers lace together.

I lead her into the hallway and to the nearest dark corner. She giggles before putting her hand over her mouth. I look her in the eyes, asking silent permission. As soon as she nods her head, I pick her up and spin her around before planting her back on the ground.

She gasps softly and looks up at me, her eyes never leave my face. I take both her small hands in one of mine wrapping her wrists in a tight hold before raising them above her head. A quiet moan escapes her lips, and she arches her back. I bend down slide a kiss across her luscious lips before kissing down her jaw line to the shell of her ear. I swirl my tongue around the edge of her ear. Then graze her earlobe and suck it into my mouth.

I growl picking her up. She wraps her legs around my waist. There’s a fourteen-inch height difference for the two of us. My dick doesn’t care If I get a crick in my neck, but I need an agile neck so I can feast on my favorite dessert later. I carry her to the private bathroom on this floor. I use my thumbprint to unlock the door before carrying her inside. It locks automatically as the door closes.

“Where are we?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:07 pm

Dim lights softly illuminate the room as I carry her to the vanity counter. I set her on the cold marble kissing her passionately. While my nimble fingers work to loosen the laces of her corset.

“In a private bathroom. Brothers and ol’ ladies only,” I say with a smirk lowering her corset enough to expose her nipples. They’re already standing at attention begging to be sucked. I lower my head twirling the hardened nipple with my tongue before moving to the next one.

I cup both her breasts in my hands pushing them together and taking both nipples into my mouth. I release them with a pop. She moans when the cold air hits her nipples.

“I want to fuck these amazing tits sometime.”

“Yes,” she says.

Fuck! I didn’t think my cock could get any harder. I’m wrong. So very wrong. It’s pressing painfully against my zipper ready to burst out of my pants. I ignore the rude fuck and continue to suck on my woman’s breasts. When I feel her getting closer, I release her breast and undo the button and zipper of her denim shorts. Shorts that have had me hard all damn night.

I slide my hand down the front of her shorts and panties, stopping to pinch her clit before plunging two fingers deep inside her slick heat. Charlie cries out bucking her hips against my hand to get more friction. I press the heel of my other hand into her swollen clit, grinding it in circles. Her body starts to quiver. I bend down and bite the hollow of her throat. She screams my name and rides my hand. Her walls strangle my

fingers convulsing against them.

Charlie pulls my head to her kissing me savagely. When she pulls away. We're both breathing ragged.

"That was fucking amazing," she says in between pants.

I smile as I button and zip her shorts.

"How about I take you upstairs and see how many orgasms you have before we pass out?"

"Lead the way."

Chapter 39

Charlie

I'm deliciously sore from last night's lovemaking. I had a text waiting from Ma. It was a list of items for dinner. Wizard is still passed out. I slip out of bed, take a quick shower, dress, and leave him a note before slipping out. I'd slip into the club's bodega, but I don't know if they carry specialty Italian ingredients and Ma and Pops are PICKY when it comes to ingredients.

My new SUV is still at the guest house, so I grab a set of keys from the club's garage and head to the store in a new Jeep Wrangler. Maybe I'll get ducked! It's before six on a Sunday morning in one of the biggest party cities in the world. The streets are nearly deserted as I make my way to the closest Italian market.

I realize a few blocks away I have a tail as I spot two motorcycles. Fuck! I forgot to take an escort with me. I mean, the guy at the gate waved me through. I dial 9-1-1 but

don't hit send. I don't have anything to report at the moment. I continue toward my destination, looking in the rearview as often as possible. It's a red light. I realize it's two of the Kings' prospects behind me. I sag with relief.

They park one on either side of me. After I get out, I wait for them.

"I'm sorry guys, I'm not used to needing an escort."

"No worries. We were on duty and saw you pulling out of the garage. You didn't drive like you were trying to lose us," Mayhem says.

"So, we figured you forgot," Havoc finishes.

"What's for dinner?" Mayhem asks.

"I'm not sure what Ma and Pops are making. For once, I'm not cooking. There'll be gravy. There's always gravy."

"White stuff gravy or sauce?" Havoc asks.

I mock gasp. "Sauce is a bad word when it comes to red tomatoey goodness. It's called gravy, not to be confused with the white stuff."

"Good to know. Can you teach us to make some Italian food?" Mayhem asks.

"I can. Come shopping with me. I'll show you where to get traditional Italian ingredients."

They follow me inside. I start in the produce aisle, showing them how to pick the freshest ingredients. Next is the butcher and seafood department. According to the reviews, their fish is fresh daily. I send the prospects down different aisles to get a

few ingredients while I wait my turn in line. I'm next.

"I see you're still slumming it with biker scum," a sneering voice behind me says.

I turn to see Tyler Barnes. The person in front of me finishes and the employee behind the counter calls next. I ignore Teddy and start my order.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:07 pm

“Don’t ignore me, bitch.”

After I finish telling the employee my order, I turn and look at Barnes.

“Does your constituency know you speak to women that way?”

Before he can reply, Mayhem returns.

“Is this the right coffee?”

I look at the bag and nod my head. “Yes, perfect. Thank you.”

“Is douche in a suit bothering you?”

“No, I’m mostly ignoring him.”

From the corner of my eye, I glance at Dipshit’s face. He’s turning red. I can tell he’s seconds from exploding. Havoc interrupts Barnes’ next vocal outburst, arriving with his arms full.

“I found a bunch of stuff I want to try.”

I laugh when he dumps it in the cart before digging out the items I sent him for and showing them to me.

“You found them all. Excellent. You can follow me to the guest house after I make a pit stop.”

The butcher hands me the order wrapped in brown paper. He gave me a smile.
“Anything else I can do for you, ma’am?”

When he asks, his eyes dart to Barnes and back to me.

“I’m good, thank you. Have a blessed Sunday.”

The three of us turn and walk away, ignoring a sputtering Barnes and a smiling butcher.

“Thank you, both. It was a lot of fun riling him up.”

“Any time. We’ll escort you home, then report to Gambit while you talk to Wizard,”
Havoc says.

“Thank you again. Please come to the guesthouse when you're done with Gambit.”

“We’ll be there. Let’s get you home,” Mayhem says.

Unlike most prospects, the twins have call signs from their days in the military. The club voted to let them keep the names while prospecting and should they become brothers. I could tell the triplets apart, but not always these two. Thankfully, they have name patches. Their names are yellow instead of white, like the fully patched brothers.

Mayhem walks in front of me while Havoc takes up the rear with the cart. They get me in the Jeep, load the groceries and get on their sleds. The streets are busier but not enough to slow my drive back to the compound. Flea lets me in. He pissed Smoke off at last night’s party, he had to man the gate immediately. At the time, he had a hottie waiting for him. All this according to the twins. He’s still on gate duty.

On the drive home, it hit me. How the hell did Barnes find me? It's not like he frequents Italian markets. He's having me followed or bugged. If I'm bugged, what is it? I make an immediate catalog of things that are with me every day.

By the time I'm in the elevator, I'm in full-blown panic mode. There's nothing I wear every time. I change out watches, shoes, clothes, etc., daily. Call it an occupational hazard.

Chapter 40

Wizard

I wake up to find Charlie's side of the bed cold. A note on her pillow. I pick up the note and read it.

Ma needs stuff.

I'll pick up breakfast.

Be back as soon as I can.

Love, Charlie.

I fold up the note and put it in my nightstand before grabbing her pillow and inhaling. It smells like her. That brings a smile to my face. I toss back the covers, get out of bed and pad to the bathroom.

After taking care of business, I turn on the shower and step under the water. I grab a bar of hair soap and lather my thick locks. Rinse, repeat. Since I have plenty of time, I take an extra-long shower. Next, I blow my hair dry and do my grooming.

Feeling like a million bucks, I wrap a towel around my waist and step out of the steamy bathroom. The front door opens and Charlie strides in. I can tell she's upset. As she's walking toward me, something catches her attention. I follow her line of sight. Fuck!

"Valentina Teresa Angelica Caruso, what in the name of all the saints do you think you're doing?" Charlie yells.

Valentina, who appears to be naked in my bed, sits up, letting the sheets fall. I avert my eyes and turn around to face the bathroom.

"What the hell are you doing in Wizard's bed? Get dressed right now."

"No, I'm not getting dressed. As for why I'm here. We had sex, can't you tell?"

"Oh, hell no, we did not! I'll be right back, Spitfire. I just got out of the shower and have some spare clothes in the bathroom. I'll be right back."

I hurry to the bathroom and clothes the door heading to the linen closet. I have spare clothes on the bottom shelf. My apartment is entirely open except for the bathroom. I always leave clothes in here in case one of the brothers drops by unexpectedly.

I pull on a pair of sweats and a black tank. I can hear them yelling but can't make out what they're saying. What the fuck was that girl thinking? I sigh and try to prepare mentally for the onslaught.

Charlie is pacing back and forth. A pissed off Valentina is sitting on my bed, dressed, thankfully.

"I told you we had sex. You left and he filled his bed five seconds later with a better, younger version," Valentina says to her mother.

I'd had enough.

"Tesoro, are you against corporal punishment?"

She looks at me. I can tell she has a million questions. She shakes her head. Valentina is too busy vacillating between screeching and trying to look smug. I walk to the bed tossing a shirt at her.

"Put this on."

She huffs but starts pulls the shirt on over her head. I quickly close my eyes and count to ten. I feel a hand on my arm and open to see the shirt ending right past her knees. I pick her up, making sure she keeps covered and put her over my lap with her ass up in the air. I look at Charlie one more time; she nods.

Much to Valentina's chagrin, I light up her ass with twenty smacks. She won't be sitting comfortably for a day or two.

“You let him hit me! I’m telling Daddy.”

“Good luck with that,” Charlie says. “He didn’t hit you, he spanked you. Something I’ve been remiss with the last few years. I gave you way too much leeway with the divorce, but no more. You’ll no longer respect me or act like an out-of-control teenager.

“What you did today, you have no idea how dangerous a game you tried to play. I’m calling a family tribunal to decide your punishment.”

“What? No! You can’t do that. I’m going to go live with Dad. You don’t understand me. You never listen and now you’re sleeping with some guy who’s closer to my age than yours.”

“I think you should redo that math on that one little girl,” Charlie says. “Mine and Wizard’s age difference is none of your business, but he is in fact closer to my age than yours.”

A knock on the door interrupts further conversation. I cross the room in a few quick strides and open the door to find Regina and Pops. Charlie’s shoulders relax a little when she sees her mom and grandfather.

“Ma, can you take Valentina home? I have an emergency I need to handle. The groceries are in the Jeep Wrangler parked out front.”

Regina and Pops look concerned. Regina gives Charlie a quick hug before turning her attention to Valentina.

“Let’s go. You’re on dish duty today and tonight. We’ll sort this all out with a family tribunal tonight.”

The girl surprisingly goes with no more fussing, cussing, or angst. Charlie's last words plow into me.

“Tesoro, what's the emergency? Are you alright? I'm sorry about what you walked in on.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:07 pm

I look to find tears flowing down my woman's face. She throws herself at me and I catch her pulling her into my arms.

"I think I'm bugged."

"What?"

"Barnes confronted me at the market. Or tried to. Mostly Havoc, Mayhem and I ignored him, but that's not the issue. Or at least the biggest issue. How did he find me? I'm not living at home. I was in one of the club's vehicles and I don't normally shop at that market. We weren't followed, I checked. I never wear the same clothes, shoes, jewelry, daily. I don't have anything I wear every single day, on purpose. I was so rattled I forgot to pick up breakfast."

By the time she finishes she's nearly hysterical. I pick her up and carry her toward the door.

"Come on, baby. Breakfast doesn't matter. I'll take you to the infirmary and get Doc and Bug. If you have an implant, the three of us will figure it out."

She nods, then lets her head fall on my shoulder as she continues to cry. She's breaking my fucking heart but I'm not going to tell her to stop crying.

Chapter 41

Charlie

My mind is still reeling. Not only from the revelation that I may have a tracker implanted somewhere in my body, but walking into Wizard's room to find my naked sixteen-year-old daughter through me for one hell of a loop. I knew she was crushing on him, but I didn't know she'd go this far. Valentina is completely out of hand. I should have lit her ass on fire several times myself these last few years.

I gave her too much leeway because she took the divorce so hard. Of course, the last few weeks have been a revelation of knowledge. I don't understand how she could blame me for the divorce when she knew her father was cheating on me. Did she expect me to be okay with their father, my then husband, sleeping with other women? That's not how marriage works. At least not one I want to be in. To each their own. My marriage should've been monogamous.

In the beginning I hesitated to have a relationship with Wizard because he's a biker. Bikers like women. They'll fuck just about anything. At least that was my experience until the Kings. The single guys are wild. Wild enough I saw several having sex in Lagniappe last night before we left. The men that are married or in a committed relationship are a different story. I've spoken at length with the ol' ladies over the last few weeks. I find them all delightful.

Wizard carries me down the hall to the elevators then through the corridors until we arrive at the infirmary. It looks like a cross between a doctor's exam room and an emergencyroom. He sits me on the exam table and pulls out his phone. Instead of texting he calls.

"Doc, we have a non-life-threatening emergency. I'm in the infirmary with Charlie. See you, brother."

After he hangs up, he calls someone else.

"Need you in the infirmary. Bring your gear."

After he hangs up, he picks me back up and sits us both back on the bed.

“Doc and Bug are on their way. If you have a tracking device, they’ll find it. Then we’ll go over everything, clothes, house, cars, and anything else I can think of until we find any and all devices.”

“Thank you. I’m sorry about Valentina.”

“Hey, baby, you don’t need to apologize for her. She’s old enough to make her own decisions and mistakes. I just hope she learns from this one.”

“I’m never going to hear the end of you spanking her.”

“I can take the heat. I couldn’t think of anything else to do to get through to her. I know I haven’t known her for long but grounding wasn’t putting a dent in her attitude.”

I let out a big sigh. “You’re right. I was overcompensating and let it go too long. She took the divorce hard. For weeks she cried in her room every night. Which I don’t completely understand. Did she expect me to stay with him knowing he was seeing others?”

“Maybe we should ask at the tribunal tonight. I also think we need to tell the girls more. Not everything.”

“What do you think we should tell them?”

Wizard

“I THINK WE SHOULD TELLthem he got in business with the wrong people and now he’s in witness protection. That some ofthose people are interested in you and

them.”

Charlie gasps.

“I don’t want to terrify them.”

“I understand and I know I’ve never been a parent before. This is all new to me. Here’s my thinking, as horrible as it is telling them they’re in danger. At least they’ll know to be on the lookout for anything unusual. I’ve also been thinking we should send something with each of them to school. A burner phone, and a couple of emergency devices that might give them seconds to get away, or us to get to them.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:07 pm

“You’re scaring me.”

“I don’t mean to, but if they put a tracker in you, these people are serious. We’ll need to scan everyone in the family if we find one on you.”

“Do you think so?”

“I do, tesoro. I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. None of this is. Including my child’s disastrous attempt to seduce you or break us up. Maybe both.”

“The important thing is. Nothing happened that we can’t walk back from. She didn’t come into the bathroom. Which means she didn’t see me naked. I averted my eyes quickly enough. I didn’t see her. The most she did was be inappropriate. Again, in a way, we can all walk back from.”

“Therapy?”

“Therapy.”

“Why do I need therapy? I just got here,” Bug asks.

Doc is standing beside him. I was so wrapped up in my conversation with Charlie, I hadn't heard them come in. That's not a good thing. I need to always be aware. Awareness will keep all my family safe.

“Bug, there are too many reasons for me to state.”

We all laugh.

“Charlie thinks she might have a bug and not the kind you treat with a prescription.”

Bug sets a large gym bag on a nearby table. While he rummaged through it, Doc went to a drawer and pulled out a few things.

“While Bug is looking, I’m going to get your vitals.”

“Go ahead, Doc.”

I stand up, putting Charlie back down on the exam bed and step to one side, taking her hand. Doc takes her vitals with efficient speed. He’s halfway done when Bug starts waving this small wand life device slowly over Charlie, starting with her feet.

Bug moves up to her legs while Doc finishes her vitals.

“Her blood pressure is slightly elevated, but that’s all. I can draw blood for labs if you want?”

“Let’s see what Bug finds first. Unless you want labs, Charlie,” I say.

She shakes her head. “I’m good unless we need to.”

Bug slowly makes his way up Charlie’s body using the wand device. It makes a slow, steady hum. When it reaches her jawline, the device lights up and emits several shrill beeps.

“Who has a dentist on speed dial?” Bug asks.

“Seriously?” I ask.

“We won’t know for sure until a dentist takes it out. Charlie, when's the last time you went to the dentist?”

“Three months ago. I had to have a tooth capped.”

“I’ll need the name of your dentist.”

Charlie gives him the name of the dentist, while Doc makes a few phone calls.

“We have an appointment. Let’s go,” Doc says.

Chapter 42

Page 62

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:07 pm

Charlie

What a fucked up day. Started by waking up blissfully sated, then it all went to shit. Wizard and I pass through the front gate and are headed to the guest house. Doc's dentist friend Ethan Reynolds opened his office for me. He found a tracking device implanted into tooth.

He put the tracker in a static jar. Marshal Hayes picked it up from the dentist's office while the dentist put a new cap on my tooth. We were in and out in under an hour. Afterward, we met with the marshals, detective, and officers again.

I went over the details of my meeting thoroughly. The marshals wanted me to stay at their safe location while they had a team scour my home, guest home, family, vehicle, and anything else they can think of.

They're working on getting into the girls' school and sweeping it before tomorrow morning. I'm tempted to keep the girls' home, but I can't. They need to go back, and everything needs to look normal. Even if they're not being tracked, I have little doubt they're being watched.

About a thousand times today I've thought of different ways to kill JR. I've always known he's not a saint, but endangering the girls is a whole new level of low. In my eyes, he's little better than the human traffickers. I hope he has to stay in the witness protection program for the rest of his life.

I wrap my arms tighter around Wizard. As we round the curve, I spot four bikes in the drive and wonder who's there. Ma will be thrilled. She loves company.

“I wonder who’s here?” I ask after we park.

“Havoc, Mayhem, Hollywood, and Preacher. I recognize their rides.”

“I should pay more attention.”

“Good detective skills.”

“Indeed,” I snort.

The front door, as expected, is unlocked. I hear sounds coming from the kitchen. Hand in hand, we walk into the kitchen. It’s wall to wall people.

“We need a bigger kitchen,” Pops says as we enter.

“I’ll include that in the house plans.”

“House plans?” Lucia asks.

Wizard nods. “Mmm hmm. Your mom agreed to be my ol’ lady last night. In the MC world, that’s the same as being married. I figure we should build a big house here at the compound.”

That was news to me. I look up at him. He smiles sheepishly.

“We can talk about that after dinner.”

Wizard

DINNER WAS AMAZING, as always. Our guests are full, happy, and have leftovers. They understand we have a family tribunal to get to. We’re all sitting in the

living room. The kitchen and dining room is spotless. Everything is put away where it belongs. The guys insisted on helping clean up. Something Valentina was grateful for since it was her job. The teen had been quiet since we arrived earlier.

“Everyone get settled,” Pops says. “We’re not using the ladle tonight. I’ll let you know if and when you get to speak. As patriarch of this family, I’ll lead the tribunal.

“We’re here tonight to first discuss Valentina’s actions. Then decide what her punishment should be before we move on to other pressing matters.

“Valentina, earlier today you put yourself in an untenable situation. You made Wizard uncomfortable and hurt your mother’s feelings. What was your intention?”

“To get him to see me. To break them up. I don’t know,” Valentina says, obviously frustrated. “He’s too young for Mom anyway.”

“That’s not your decision, young lady,” Regina says. “Your mother can date whom she chooses and I, for one, am pleased with her choice in Damien. After all the hell she’s been through, why don’t you want her to be happy?”

“Why should she be happy? It’s her fault dad left.”

“That’s not true,” Charlie says. “And it doesn’t matter. My marriage was just that, my marriage. It’s over. Your dad moved on and so have I. I found someone kind, caring, and willing to accept an entire family. He and his brothers took us in and kept us safe.

“As for punishment, I vote we take away all her privileges for the next week. In addition, she’ll write a two-thousand-word essay on why what she did was wrong. And whatever else the family thinks we should add. What you did was illegal and could have resulted in Wizard being arrested.”

Chapter 43

Charlie

The remaining family members decide they would mete out their ideas for punishment at the week's end. After they saw her reaction to the week and read her essay. Valentina freaked when we told her about the danger and her father being in witness protection.

She called us liars and held a meltdown. I sent her to bed. Wizard and I went over the earlier events right before the tribunal was convened. Lucy and Francesca want to throttle their sister.

Now the adults are sitting in the living room. I don't know about anyone else, but I feel shell-shocked. Pops stands up before helping Ma to her feet.

"We'll see you both in the morning," Pops says.

"I'll make breakfast," Ma agrees.

"Did I just get invited to stay the night?"

I smile and nod. "Yes, you did. Let's go to bed."

I stand and offer him my hand, leading us to my bedroom.

"Your room's nice," he says, after I lead him inside.

I slump into the overstuffed chair across the room from the bed. Wizard kneels in

front of me, taking my hands.

“What’s on your mind, Spitfire?”

“Everything. I’m still trying to wrap my mind around the danger we’re all in. And around us. I mean I wasn’t expecting anyone, and you’ve blown past all my defenses. Not that I’d change anything between us. I’m falling so hard for you, and it scares me to death. I trusted JR with my heart and look how that turned out.”

“I’m not JR,” Wizard says softly.

“I know. You are so much better than he ever could be.”

“Charlie, I’m in love with you. I think I’ve been in love with you since the moment I saw you. Not only that but I love your whole family.”

“Even after today?”

“Even after today. I love the way the family handles big punishments.”

“Pops did that with my dad and Dad did it with me. JR refused to do it but as soon as he was out of the picture, Ma, Pops and I reinstated it. Along with the family ladle. It’s been a lifesaver as the girls have grown up. I’m terrified that something is going to happen to them. The Bratva is scary.”

“It is, baby, but we’ve come up against warlords who are far worse than Petrov and his goons. My brothers and I will make sure nothing happens to them.”

“Will you hold me?”

“Let’s get undressed and get into bed. I can hold you all night long, Spitfire.”

Wizard

THE DOOR FLIES OPEN.

“Ma, we’re going” Lucia says.

Her words die when I sit up.

“Oopsie. My bad.”

She closes the door in a hurry. Charlie sits up.

“I don’t know whether to be mortified or laugh.”

“I vote for laughing. We have five minutes to make it downstairs for breakfast if we want to get the girls to school on time.”

Page 64

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:07 pm

“Eek,” Charlie shrieks as she throws back the covers and makes a dash for the bathroom. I laugh and chase after her. We make it downstairs as Regina dishes out plates of French toast and scrambled eggs with sausage links, and juice.

After everyone eats, we load into Charlie’s new ride. I drive. We have six riders with us this morning. Two in front, two behind and two farther back to watch for tails. I pull into the back of the parking lot and put the cage in park.

“Before you go in, I have something for each of you.”

I hand a phone to Francesca. “This is a special phone. Keep it hidden. It will work even if there’s a jammer on.”

I open the phone and show the girls a brief sequence of keys.

“That sequence sends an SOS to me, the police and federal agents we’re working with. See something you think is odd? Send me a text or call the phone. If it’s an emergency or something happens, that scares any of you, use the SOS sequence.”

I hand Valentina a metal-looking stick.

“Break any part of this and it will emit a sound ten times louder than a car alarm. It’s based on a first responder’s alarm. If you get in trouble, or something happens and you get lost, use it.”

Lucia gets a tiny flashlight. It’s a little over two-inches.

“It’s small but mighty. Use this if you want to blind someone. It’s bright enough you can flash it in someone's eyes in full daylight and still blind them for a few seconds.

“I hope I’m not scaring you. I want you to be safe and have a few surprises up your sleeve should something happen outside the compound.”

I give them a few minutes to ask questions and settle their nerves before pulling into the drop-off line.

Charlie

I’M A NERVOUS WRECK. I don’t know why. I’ve sent the girls off to school every school day since pre-school. I have this gut feeling that I can’t shake.

Wizard is holed up in his room trying to find a connection between my previous dentist and Petrov or Barnes. According to Bug’s latest information. Petrov and Barnes have worked together for two decades. When they started Petrov was a goon in the organization with no power but a lot of muscle.

Both Wizard and Bug are scouring the web and using their resources to put all the pieces together. I assume the marshals are using their resources as well. We all want Petrov and Barnes to go down. The plan is to not only take out those two, but as many men as work with them as possible. The more we take out in one fell swoop, the safer the girls and I are.

“You’re going to wear a hole in the floor.”

I turn to see a very pregnant Stormy standing behind me.

“Hi, sorry.”

“No need to apologize. Do you want to come into my office for coffee or tea?”

“Yes, please.”

I follow Stormy in the office. It has a small kitchenette on one wall. Stormy points to the coffeepot and the row of tea selections beside it. I peruse the selection of tea.

“Help yourself,” she says.

I choose one called ‘peaceful warrior,’ load the tea ball and fill a mug with the hot water on tap. My phone pings; it's the special phone.

Shots fired

Oh, my god.

“Shots fired at school,” I say as I run out of the room and make a mad dash to Wizard’s room. He has the entire school wired with cameras. When I reach his room, I throw open the door and race inside. I hear him on the phone giving information then barking orders. I’ve never heard him bark at anyone. He finishes the call and is up out of the chair and to me in record time.

“Bug is on his way here to run the command center. I’m going to go get our girls.”

“I want to go.”

“I know, Spitfire, but my brothers and I have military training. We stand a better chance of doing this without civilians no matter how good you are in a fight. And I know you are.”

Page 65

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:07 pm

My hackles go up immediately but by the time he finishes talking I'd calmed down enough to realize he's right. I could handle myself in a fight and I'm good with a gun, but I've never been in a live fire fight. If I hesitated or fucked up, it's my girls' lives on the line.

"I understand. I don't like it, but I understand."

He drops a kiss on the top of my head. "Thank you, tesoro."

Wizard takes a minute to get me settled at the command center. As he finishes giving me an overview, Bug arrives as do most of the Kings.

Heart beating in my throat I turn my attention to the monitors and watch the events unfold before my eyes.

Chapter 44

Wizard

As soon as Bug arrives, we haul ass to the armory. Five minutes later, we're all on our sleds and headed to the gate. I'm shocked as hell to find Vega and Simmons on police sleds ready for us. They turn on their sirens and we race through the streets of New Orleans.

My thoughts going to our prospects. Not a damn one we sent in the school is military trained. That doesn't mean they're going to fuck up. It just means they're going to have a harder time figuring out what to do.

Last count, there was a team of six gunmen on the campus. I have a feeling that's not all the forces they are sending. Barnes and Petrov have lost their fucking minds sending armed men into a school to kidnap three teenagers.

We park about half a block away and head into the back of the school grounds. Gambit leads the way, and we march double-time to the school grounds. Our cuts are over our full tac gear. I want those Russian fuckers to know who's ending their miserable lives.

Each of those low life fuckers is wanted DEAD or alive. I vote dead. Human trafficking filth doesn't deserve to breathe. Harsh? Maybe, but I've seen firsthand via Alena, the woman we rescued. We didn't get to her before she was raped and prostituted out.

A few of the prospects are zipping by the school on different streets as a distraction, taking time to rev their engines to cover our entrance onto school grounds. The marshals meet us by the back entrance. We speak in hushed tones using our coms.

"No sign of the girls," Marshal Balke says. "We have infiltrators in the school and headed to the sports complex."

Gambit nods. "Team Alpha first floor. Delta takes the second floor. Charlie heads to the sports complex. Beta hit the boiler room before floating. Doc, Nay, you're on triage. Everyone else, spread out. Save lives. Send some nasty fuckers to the crossroads and let's get our girls."

I head off to the sports complex with Angel, Boomer, and Smoke.

Pop! Pop! Pop!

Fuck, shots fired. We race in the direction of the gunfire. There are kids running and

screaming in all directions. It looks like there's at least one class in the complex. I think class size is around fifteen to twenty.

"Shots fired at the sports complex. Charlie team moving in," Smoke calls over the coms.

Then he signals us to divide into teams of two. Boomer and Angel take off in one direction while Smoke and I head in another. We pass the soccer field, ball-diamond, and approach the first field locker room.

The door is metal with no windows. I look at Smoke and he gives me the nod. I grab the handle, pulling it open. Smoke clears the door. I follow behind him. On silent feet, we search the locker room. First going down the rows of benches and lockers before heading into the bathroom area. There are two rows of stalls. I take one while Smoke handles the other. I look for feet first before opening each door.

Smoke and I meet at the end. He gives the all-clear signal. I nod and mirror the signal. The shower curtains end about three inches above the floor. A large three-foot mirror spans most of one wall of the room. Below is a waist high counter with sinks and faucets interspersed throughout. I look in the mirror and spot several pairs of shoes huddled in the far corner.

"Federal Marshalls, come out with your hands up."

"Who's the fifth president of the US?" a terrified voice asks.

"James Monroe."

Smoke joins me as harsh whispers come from the back shower. About a minute later, the curtain opens, and a teen girl steps out with her hands up. Three others follow.

Smoke speaks up. "I'm calling for backup. They'll take you to safety. Do you know where the Caruso triplets are?"

One of the girls stammers. "They went to the field with the rest of the class."

"We were running behind," another stammers.

"Four need escorts, girls' field locker. Cerberus last reported on the way to the field," Smoke says.

Page 66

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:07 pm

“ETA, one minute,” Boomer’s voice comes over the coms.

We walk the girls toward the front.

“Stay behind us,” I say.

“Aren’t you Luci’s new stepdad?”

I smile. Something I didn’t think I would do under these circumstances.

“Something like that. You ladies did a good job getting away from the shooters.”

A blaring alarm goes off. Loud enough I cover my ears. I have them covered for a split-second before my training kicks in. That’s Valentina’s alarm.

“The girls’ alarm!”

“Go! I’m right behind you.”

I run toward the sound. It’s in the boys’ field locker

“Cerberus, boys’ field locker.”

I scan the perimeter slowly only when I get to the door. It’s ajar. I listen before quickly popping inside. Head still intact. I take a deep, quiet breath and get my bearings. I hear the girls screaming. They’re in the showers.

I can't use the com. I hit the silent button and make my way with stealthy speed to the locker room. I find two dead Russians along the way and Crab unconscious and bleeding. I glance long enough to see his chest moving. He'll need attention. I need thirty seconds.

Please, God, don't let him die. If my partner were with me, they'd take care of Crab while I continue on. I can't give myself away and endanger the girls.

"Come with me or I'll shoot him in the head." A thick Russian accent yells.

I use the mirror again and survey the scene. Lucia catches my eye in the mirror. I hold up a finger to my lips. Ace is on his knees with a gun to his head. Another dead Russian on the floor behind them.

I pull my flashlight and look in the mirror. Valentina's looking back and forth. I mimic turning on the flashlight. Then I mimic looking away. I line up my shot in the time it takes for her to turn on the flashlight. I close my eyes. He screams. I pull the trigger. The girls scream.

"Light!" Ace chokes out.

I open my eyes, thankful the flashlight is off, and run to the girls. They throw themselves in my arms. Seconds later, I hear pounding boots. I move out of their arms and put my body in between theirs and the door, M4 at the ready.

Smoke, followed by Blue, Demon, and Wrath, come through the door.

"You're safe, girls," I say.

They tackle-hug me again. Ace barely gets the gun out of my hand before the girls swarm me.

“I was so scared,” Valentina says.

“I knew you’d save us,” Lucia says, hugging me tighter.

Francesca silently weeps in my arms. I rub her back as soothingly as I can.

“All clear. We have all suspects accounted for. Either in custody or deceased,” Marshal Blake says over the coms.

“Let’s get you home.”

I lead the girls out of the lockers. Crab isn’t lying on the floor anymore. Someone must have gotten him medical attention.

I look at Smoke.

“Crab?”

Page 67

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:07 pm

“Doc and Nay have him. They’re on their way to the hospital.”

I look the girls over. They don’t have a scratch on them. Ace’s face is bruising and I haven’t seen Flea yet. Charlie will see us as soon as we step out of the lockers.

Chapter 45

Charlie

From the time I spot the guys on campus until I see my girls are safe only takes about ten minutes. It’s the longest ten minutes of my life. I about freaking lose my mind when they go into the locker room. For obvious reasons, there are no cameras in the locker rooms.

“They’re safe, Charlie,” Bug says, startling me.

I was so focused on watching the scene I’d forgotten he was in Wizard’s room, the command center, with me.

“I didn’t mean to startle you,” he adds.

“Sorry. I hate to admit this, but I was so engrossed watching the feed I forgot I wasn’t alone in the room.”

“That’s understandable. Four people you love with all your heart lives were in potential danger. I’d have been focused on watching the events, too.”

My body starts to shake, tears stream down my face, as a sense of relief washes over me. My phone rings. I look at it. It's Ma. Fuck! I forgot to call her and Pops. I answer the phone.

"They're okay. Wizard has them."

"Oh, thank God. I just saw shots fired on the news."

"Sorry, Ma. It all unfolded so fast."

A text came in.

School wants to send

the girls to the ED.

??

"Ma, Wizard sent me a text. The school insisted the girls get looked at. They're taking them to the emergency room. Come to the clubhouse. We can go together."

"Pops and I are on our way."

Wizard

HOURS LATER, WE'RE sitting in Gambit's living room with Charlie and her entire family. My family. Papa, Nay, Bug, and Doc are here as well. The prospects just dropped off a ton of pizza, breadsticks and salad. Charlie and Stormy insisted the kids have vegetables.

After we eat, the ladies settle the younger kids in the media room with a movie.

Genni and Teagan agreed to monitor the younger kids while the rest of us processed the day.

I take a long pull from my beer while we wait for the kids to become engrossed in their movie.

Crab is propped up on the couch. He has a nasty bump on his head, a mild concussion, and a bullet graze to his left arm. Stormy fluffs the pillows behind him and brings him a soda.

“Mom, I’m alright, stop fussing.”

I watch Stormy’s face light’s up when he calls her ‘mom.’ Crab, Bastian, recently turned eighteen. Stormy and Gambit adopted him and his siblings when he was sixteen. To say the kid had a rough life before would be an understatement. The kids' mother disappeared after the twins were born. Bastian was eleven. His father, a no-good son of a bitch, was completely worthless. Bastian took on the role of mother and father to his four younger siblings at that tender age.

Charlie, the girls, Regina, Pops, and I are all sitting on the sectional in Gambit’s enormous living room.

“Are you girls ready to talk about today?” Gambit asks gently.

They nod their head. Valentina speaks first.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:07 pm

“My sisters have agreed to let me speak. We were out on the lawn on break in between periods. It’s one of our two longer ones that gives us an extra ten minutes to stretch our legs. We walked toward the complex to meet with the rest of the cheer squad. We wanted to go over our newest cheer for next week's game.

“It’s one we’re still working on. Lucia and I were going over the new moves while Franni was teaching us the words. Crab and Flea came running in our direction and told us there were bad guys on campus. The team scatters and then we hear pop, pop, pop.”

My anxiety climbs as she describes what happens next. It’s ten minutes of cat and mouse through the campus as the triplets and the prospects play keep away. The prospects trade off searching the grounds for the Russians while two stay with the girls.

By the time she finishes the story, tears are streaming down all three girls' faces. I start to speak, but Valentina holds up her hands. She swallows back a sob.

“I.. have... something... else to say.” She takes deep breaths between each word, struggling to get them out.

“I’m sorry Ma, for everything. I’ve been an ungrateful brat. I listen to Dad’s words and let him poison my mind. I mean, he was sleeping with other women, and he blamed you. He convinced me to blame you.”

Tears stream down her face.

“You didn’t deserve that.” She hiccups and breaks into tears for a few seconds.

Charlie pulls the teen onto her lap. The girl keeps repeating the words “I’m sorry” repeatedly while she sobs. I can’t stand it anymore and I pull them both on my lap. Sure, it feels a little odd for a second, but when I wrap my arms around both, that feeling disappears.

I hold them while they cry. Lucia and Francesca joined our hug, one from each side.

“It’ll be alright. Together, we can get through anything.”

“Wizard?”

“Yeah, V?”

“V?” she asks.

I look down and see a smile on her face. I nod.

“I like it and I’m sorry.”

“You’re forgiven. No need to say more. We all make mistakes. I’m just glad you realize your mom is not a bad person. That she loves you and only wants the best for you and your sisters.”

She nods her head. “I realized that today. I was so scared, and I wanted my mom, not my dad. I knew she’d protect me.”

“Oh, baby girl,” Charlie says. “Of course I’ll protect you. I’ll always protect you. If I had more training, you bet your ass I would’ve been there today.”

“I thought I was going to have to tie her to a chair,” Bug says, with a laugh.

“When we build the house, do we each get our own room?” asked Francesca,

“Do you want your own room?” I ask.

I see the girls look at each other for several seconds in silent communication. I’ve seen them do it before.

“No.” They respond in unison.

There’s a knock on the door. Gambit goes to answer it and comes back with Marshal Hayes.

Riley

“GOOD EVENING, FOLKS, I hope I’m not interrupting. I wanted to stop by and give you an update.”

“Not at all,” Gambit says. “We were talking after dinner. Would you like some pizza? There’s plenty.”

She smiles and shakes her head. “Maybe after I fill everyone in. I’m not sure how much you want the girls to know, Charlie.”

“Give them the basics for now. Wizard and I can fill them in later,” Charlie says with a smile.

Then adds. "Thank you."

"No problem. Everyone involved in the incident today is deceased or behind bars," Riley says.

"Girls, you can join the other kids in the movie room or head to the bedroom Stormy set up for you," Charlie says.

Regina stood up when the girls did. "I think Pops and I will turn in, too. We'll see you all in the morning."

I give everyone a few minutes to settle. Nabbing a slice of cheese pizza. Damn, my hips will pay for these carbs later. Extra workout, here we come. I finish the slice and take the proffered soda. Another thing I rarely consume.

"Once the girls tipped us off, the Bratva was moving on the campus. We deployed all our teams. Caught a lot of fish in our WIDE net. Petrov is in custody, as is the rest of his crew. Well, the ones that are alive. Barnes is dead."

Stormy gasps. The man was her stepfather. I look at her. She shakes her head. I see it was surprise and not sorrow that caused her to gasp.

"Through leads Bug and Wizard dug up, we've been able to identify people all the way to the top in this ring. While we were connecting the dots between Barnes and Petrov, we found another link to Petrov. One Noreen Dawson."

"Excuse me, Marshal," Gambit says.

“Riley.”

“Excuse me, Riley. I’d like to call Nitro and put the phone on speaker so he can hear.”

“Of course.”

I wait while Gambit makes his call.

“Brother, there’s something you need to hear. Yeah, let me know when.”

He looks at me. “Okay, he’s alone and can listen. Can you repeat the last part?”

I nod my head. “While we were connecting the dots between Barnes and Petrov, we found another link to Petrov. Noreen Dawson.”

A loud “fuck” comes from the phone.

“In fact, Noreen also knows Barnes. They go way back. Decades of illegal dealings together. I’m not sure who met who first but the three of them were on quite the crime spree when Noreen mysteriously disappeared. We’re not looking too hard, by the way. Or at all. I, for one, say good riddance.”

“Can you send me a copy of what you have on her?” Nitro asks.

“I can’t technically, but Bug has clearance. I can send it to him.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Off the record, Allesandro Grimaldi and his crew are filling in the Bratva gap. It will keep another organization from trying to move in. Grimaldi does

not peddle unwilling flesh.”

“What’s that mean?” Charlie asks.

“It means he’s not into sex trafficking or human trafficking, but he does have a stable of high-end escorts run by a Madam friend. While prostitution is illegal, all the information we have is the women are willing, and clean. They can’t use and be in the stable. He also owns a few strip clubs. Same rules. If he finds the girls using, they get a warning. Second time they get the boot.

“I’m not condoning his illegal activity, but the truth is some criminal organization will fill the void the Bratva left. Grimaldi has something many criminals do not, morals. One last piece, Charlie, the dentist who placed the tracker in your tooth, he’s behind bars. Barnes hired him. We have enough evidence without Barnes to nail him.

“Any questions?”

I wait a couple minutes, snagging another slice. After I polish off the second slice, I excuse myself and head back to the hotel.

I have a feeling this is not the last I’ll see of the Kings. A smile curves the corners of my mouth. I look forward to sparring with Doc.

Epilogue

Two months later

Charlie

IT'S A COLD WINDY AS we walk along the streets of Little Italy in Chicago. Wizard is showing us the neighborhood he grew up in. And tonight, we're meeting his family. His entire family. They had to rent a place to fit everyone. To say I'm nervous maybe the understatement of the year.

Our hands are threaded together as we head to his favorite bakery, Scafuri. The girls are behind us. Ma and Pops are behind them. When we arrive, Wizard gets the door for us. The first whiff makes my stomach rumble. We got in yesterday morning and the girls wanted to see everything. By dinner time I was too exhausted to eat and passed out in bed fully clothed.

"What's good?" Luci asks.

"Everything," Wizard replies.

"What's your favorite?" Val asks.

"For breakfast, I like their kiwi Danish and sweet croissants. They stuff them with different things. Oh, and you can never go wrong with a cream puff. They often have fresh fruit with their homemade whipped cream."

"We should get a few boxes of stuff to try," Franni suggests.

I laugh. "Get what you want."

I stand back and watch my family as they gleefully choose everything that catches their eye. They've come so far over the last two months. A few days after the event, we sat down as a family with Saber and told him what we want our dream home to look like. Everyone in the family was included in the meeting.

A week later, Wizard moved into the guest house with us. It's bigger than my old home, which is currently up for sale. When it sells, we're putting the proceeds into mutual funds accounts for the girls. It took a couple of weeks, but we fell into a happy routine. I found evidence that tied Brooks, Robillard, DeLuca, and Jacobs to Lola Biaz.

They intended to sell her and the twins. Only Brooks fucked up and kept giving her drugs. He was supposed to wean her off after they kidnapped her. Instead, he gave her drugs, then left her with one of the underlings; who panicked when she overdosed and dumped her at the hospital.

The four of them are sitting in jail on multiple felony charges. The marshals linked the four men to the Bratva and the trafficking ring. With Wizard and Bugs help, the feds found where the shipment was taking place. They raided the warehouse and saved twenty men, women, and children.

We sit at the table and stuff our faces with perhaps the best pastry I've ever had in my mouth. JR is in the witness protection program indefinitely. The girls have come to terms with it.

Wizard

WHAT A WHIRLWIND THE last two months were. Riley stayed in town. She's heading a task force to make sure we didn't miss anyone in the sweep. Plus, she's working with me and Bug to put together extensive dossiers on each criminal.

Crab healed quickly and surprised everyone enlisting in the marines. Flea and Ace joined him, deciding they wanted at least one tour in service. After being on campus during the Bratva attack, they all wanted more training. Smoke agreed to give them extra training when they're home.

I'm nervous as hell as we make our way to dinner. We're staying a few blocks away from the restaurant private dining room my parents rented out. Ma was heartbroken that she wasn't cooking for us. I told her we'd make a trip up during the holidays and she could cook to her heart's content.

It's too cold to walk even a few blocks with the ladies all dressed up. I arranged for a limo to take us.

The girls oohed and ahed all the way there and I can't take my eyes off Charlie in her little black dress. My cock's half-masted just sitting next to her. Our fingers are intertwined. I use my thumb to rub lazy circles on the back of her hand.

"Are you ready to meet my family, Spitfire?"

"Yes, but I'm nervous."

"They're going to love you. I hope you love them."

"I'm sure I will. They did raise a pretty spectacular person."

I lean down close to her ear. "You're just saying that because I gave you half a dozen orgasms last night."

A blush spreads across her cheeks. The limo stops. I get out first and help everyone else out. Pops holds open the door for everyone. An employee ushers us to the private dining room. There must be close to fifty people. The cousins and aunts are here.

The next ten minutes are our introductions. The girls are immediately taken under nonna's wing and whisked off. We're seated close to my parents. My mother asks Charlie a billion questions, which she graciously answers. Over the next couple of hours, we eat, drink, and laugh.

Before dessert arrives. A few of my cousins take the stage and start playing Lean on Me. I join them on stage and start singing the song. When the chorus begins, the triplets join me on stage and sing along. We all sing the second verse. This time, when the chorus starts, I change the lyrics and step off the stage and head toward my woman.

Will you marry me

Will you be my bride

Page 71

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:07 pm

And stand by me for

The rest of our lives.

Charlie

I'M BLOWN AWAY AND when he starts singing Will, you marry me. I'm speechless. Wizard drops down on one knee in front of me, pulling a velvet box from his pocket.

"I knew from the moment I laid eyes on you; you were the one for me. Over these past few months, my feelings have only grown stronger. I can't imagine a day without you in it and a night I'm not lying next to you. Will you make me the happiest man on earth and be my wife?"

I nod my head. He slips the ring on my finger. I grab his hand and pull him up off the floor, throwing my arms around his neck and kissing him for all I'm worth. When the kiss ends, he whispers in my ear.

"I'm not done yet."

I look at him and his smile melts me to the spot. He takes one step back, snagging my hand. I watch him give Pops the nod. Pops ushers the girls off the stage and over to us. They're all squealing with excitement. When the girls surround us, Wizard shocks the hell out of me, pulling three small boxes out of his jacket pocket. He hands one to each of the girls.

“Francesca, Valentina, and Lucia, will you do me the honor of becoming my bonus children. My first born and let me spend the rest of my life taking care of you like a father should. I’m not looking to replace your father. I hope I’ll be a bonus father figure you can come to, if nothing else. Inside each box is a necklace with a beautiful open heart. In the middle of the heart is a diamond solitaire.

“Yes!” they say in unison, throwing their arms around him.