



Brick's Retribution (Reapers Rejects MC: Second Generation: Mexico #2)

Author: *Elizabeth Knox*

Category: Action&Adventure

Description: She was supposed to be a job, but became so much more than that.

Brick

With one threat squashed, others came up from the woodwork like an infestation taking over our home.

This time, they werent just coming for the club. They were after our allies too. Favors were being requested one after the next, until one day Prez asked me to take a special assignment.

It seemed like a simple enough task—get Imani Torres from El Paso to Chihuahua.

I didnt know who she was then, only after I became well acquainted with the woman.

She was a cartel princess and it was my job to keep her alive, to get her to our clubhouse in one piece and keep her safe until her father would come for her.

I never planned to crave her like my favorite vice.

Her father may be coming for her, but he wont be leaving with whats mine.

***Bricks Retribution is the second book in the Reapers Rejects MC: Second Generation: Mexico charter. This book is intended for mature audiences only. Please proceed with caution.

Total Pages (Source): 17

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:06 pm

PROLOGUE

Brick

The fresh desert air hits my face as I roll into the club for the second time today, the rumble of my Harley echoing off the walls.

Three months.

Three fucking months of chasing ghosts, following dead-end leads, and coming up empty-handed.

My body aches from the long ride, but it's nothing compared to the hollow feeling in my chest.

Lashes is still out there somewhere, and I've failed to bring her home.

The club comes alive as I cut the engine.

Music pumps through massive speakers, the heavy bass vibrating beneath my boots.

Brothers and their ol' ladies fill the courtyard, drinks flowing freely.

The celebration for Sam—sorry, Compass—officially becoming a prospect is in full swing.

But guilt churns in my gut.

How can we be celebrating anything when one of our own is missing?

I spot Amara across the crowd, her sharp eyes finding mine instantly.

Our president doesn't miss a goddamn thing.

Even from this distance, I see the tension in her shoulders ease slightly at my return.

She gives me a small nod, then whispers something to her husband, Dante, before making her way toward me.

She hands me a cold beer. "You look like shit."

I accept it, but don't drink. "I need to head back out tomorrow. Got a lead in Juárez that?—"

"No." The single word cuts through the night air with the precision of a blade. "You've been running yourself into the ground for months. It's time to come home."

"I can't just?—"

"We still have people looking. Connections across the border, in every major city. Professional resources." Her voice softens slightly. "You can't save someone if you're dead on your feet, Brick."

I clench my jaw so hard my teeth might crack.

My road name—solid, dependable, the foundation others rely on—feels like a fucking joke right now.

What good is being the rock when I can't even find one of our own?

When I can't even find my best fucking friend in the entire world?

"This isn't your fault," Amara says, reading my thoughts with unnerving accuracy.

"And I need you here. We have a situation."

My attention sharpens. "What kind of situation?"

She scans the courtyard before jerking her head toward the clubhouse. "Inside."

I follow her through the crowd, forcing a tight smile when brothers clap my shoulder in greeting.

None of them sees the rage simmering beneath the surface, the helplessness that's been eating me alive since Lashes disappeared.

Inside the club, it's not as loud as the pounding music outside. Honestly, I'm grateful for the quiet.

Amara leads me to her office and closes the door, indicating the chair across from her massive oak desk.

I remain standing, arms crossed.

"You need rest, but I also need you for a run," she says, settling into her chair.

"Tomorrow, you're heading to El Paso."

"El Paso? That's the wrong fuckin' direction. If Lashes?—"

"This isn't about Lashes," she interrupts. "It's about our alliance with my uncle—the Ramirez cartel."

Yeah, her uncle, so why would this be more important than Lashes?

It's not like we're going to suddenly lose the alliance.

Her uncle, Alejandro Ramirez, is the most powerful cartel leader in Mexico.

The man whose protection allows our charter to operate in cartel territory, and our greatest ally.

"What about it?"

"Alejandro's goddaughter needs safe transport from El Paso to here. There's been an attempt on her life."

I blink. "And I'm what, a glorified Uber driver now?"

Amara's eyes flash dangerously. "You're a prospect who follows the fucking orders I give him. And right now, your president is telling you this is important."

I press my palms against my eyes, exhaustion washing over me in waves. "Why me? Boulder or one of the patched members?—"

"Boulder has been through enough lately, we all have. More importantly, I need someone with medical training for this assignment, just in case things go awry." She leans forward. "Imani Torres isn't just Alejandro's goddaughter. She's the daughter of Mateo Torres."

That gets my attention.

Everyone knows the Torres cartel controls distribution across the southwestern United States. "So, cartel royalty, then."

"The highest around besides my cousins. Which means the threat against her is serious. Not to mention, she's a good friend of mine. Someone's making a power play, and I need my most level-headed prospect handling this."

The compliment doesn't make it better for me. "For how long?"

"You'll escort her here, where she'll remain under our protection until her father sends for her." Amara studies me. "You leave tomorrow at dawn. Get some sleep. Eat something that isn't gas station trash. And Brick..." Her voice softens a fraction. "We will find Lashes. But right now, I need you here, focused on this."

I want to argue, to remind her that every day Lashes remains missing is another day she could be suffering, another day we might never get her back.

"Fine," I mutter. "I'll do it."

She nods. "Ruby cleaned up your room the other day. Washed your dirty clothes, said the room stunk worse than a dead skunk. She made sure to get you sorted. Take a breather while you can, prospect."

I recognize the silent dismissal and turn to leave, but her voice stops me at the door.

"And Brick? No heroics. Get the girl here safely. That's it."

Something in her tone makes me pause. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

Amara's face gives nothing away. "Just do your job."

I head up to my room and unlock the door.

The second I open it, eucalyptus hits me straight in the face. I guess Ruby thought it

would help with the smell.

I waste no time shredding my clothes off and head into the bathroom, turn on the water, and step inside.

The hot water pounds against my skin, washing away the dust and grime of the road.

I stand under the spray until it runs cold, then towel off and pull on the clean clothes.

My reflection in the steamy mirror looks like a stranger—hollow eyes, scruff that's well past a beard, dark circles that make me look a decade older than my twenty-eight years.

I run a hand over my head, thinking about what I'll be doing tomorrow.

Babysitting cartel royalty isn't what I signed up for when I asked to prospect with the Reapers Rejects MC, but the club is the only real family I've got, and family means doing what needs to be done.

My hand finds the folded piece of paper in my pocket—my ritual before every run.

The photograph is creased and worn from looking at it every day: Lashes and I, her wide smile revealing the gap between her front teeth, her eyes bright.

It's not right that she isn't here, in the club, partying with everyone else downstairs.

I sigh, knowing we'll find her and trust that Amara has something in the works.

But she's gone, taken by Sally and sold into a sex trafficking ring.

I tuck the photo away and finish getting ready.

I'm fucking exhausted but I'm too wired to sleep.

The club is still pulsing from the party, but I head to the club's small medical room instead.

Honestly, I'm not in the mood to celebrate anything, and this is my domain—the place where I'm most useful if you ask me.

The organized shelves of supplies—everything from bandages to surgical tools to prescription meds—provide a small comfort.

I've always been good at fixing things, at making broken people whole again.

It's what drew me to medicine in the first place, that and my past.

I wasn't really given the option to not pick up on a few things.

I take inventory, restocking what's low, organizing what's scattered.

The automatic task settles my mind, just as it did when I was a kid, organizing my mother's pill bottles after my father went to prison.

My father.

The thought of him brings a familiar ache.

Fifteen years behind bars for armed robbery, a desperate act to keep debt collectors from hurting his family.

Now that I'm an adult, I think it was understandable, but it destroyed our family.

He couldn't find a job, and we were going hungry.

My mother spiraled into depression and addiction.

And I learned how to dress wounds, administer medication, and eventually, how to shut down emotionally.

The medical room door creaks open, and Boulder's massive frame fills the doorway.

Despite his size, the man moves like a ghost—a skill that makes others think twice when he walks into a room.

He leans against the doorframe. "Heard you were back."

"Not for long."

"Yeah, Amara mentioned. The Torres girl." He watches me organize supplies. "You been sleeping at all?"

I shrug. "Enough."

"Bullshit." He enters the room fully, closing the door behind him. "Look, brother, I know you and Lashes were close?—"

"We're still close," I snap. "Present tense. She's not dead."

Boulder holds up his hands. "That's not what I meant. Christ, you're touchy."

I exhale slowly, reining in my temper. "Sorry. It's been a long few months."

"Which is why you need to stand down, recharge. Let the rest of us carry some of the

weight." He crosses his arms over his chest. "Kelsey's been worried about you."

The mention of his ol' lady brings a slight smile to my face.

"Tell her I'm fine."

His tone makes it clear this isn't a request. "Tell her yourself. She's expecting you for breakfast before you head out tomorrow."

I nod, knowing better than to argue.

Boulder might be my brother in the club, but he's also a fully patched member, while I'm still a prospect—even if I have put a few years in.

His voice grows quiet. "How's it been out there?"

I stop organizing, my hands gripping the edge of the stainless steel counter. "Cold trails. Dead ends. It's like she vanished into thin air."

"We'll find her."

"Everyone keeps saying that." I turn to face him. "But what if we don't? What if she's?—"

"Don't." Boulder's voice is sharp. "Don't go there. Not until we know for sure."

Unspoken words hang between us: her chances of survival lessen with each passing day.

"Get some sleep," Boulder says finally. "Tomorrow's run is important. More important than Amara's letting on."

That catches my attention. "How so?"

"The Torres-Ramirez connection runs deeper than most know. There's a sacred compadre relationship between the families. Alejandro is Imani's godfather. Mateo was made godfather to Amara."

This is news to me. "So, this Mateo guy is close to the Ramirez family in general, if he's Amara's godfather too. This isn't just about maintaining our alliance."

"It's family," Boulder confirms. "Family obligations trump everything. Even club business."

Jesus, this is going to be a lot riskier than I thought. "No pressure, then."

He grins, slapping my shoulder. "Just another day in paradise. Now get some fuckin' sleep before you fall over."

After he leaves, I finish my inventory and head back upstairs to my room.

It's simple—a bed, a dresser, a chair—but it's clean and quiet, and most importantly, it's mine.

I should sleep.

I need to sleep.

But when I close my eyes, all I see is Lashes's face, her smile replaced by fear, terrified, screaming for us to help her before she's killed.

I open my eyes and reach for my duffel bag, pulling out the stack of letters I've carried with me for years.

Each envelope bears the same return address: Central California Penitentiary.

Each bears my name in my father's neat handwriting.

Each is still sealed, unread.

For fifteen years, I've kept every letter he's sent, never finding the courage to open them.

They're my reminder of what happens when you fail to protect the people you love.

I add them to the nightstand, a silent vigil as I finally stretch out on the bed.

Tomorrow I'll head to El Paso to protect a woman I've never met, a cartel princess whose life apparently means enough to pull me off the search for Lashes.

She better be worth it.

Surprisingly, sleep hits me hard, and I drift off to sleep, but I don't get any rest.

In my dreams, I'm still searching, still failing, still watching helplessly as the people I care about disappear one by one.

Someone pounds on my door, and I jerk awake, hand automatically reaching for the gun under my pillow.

"Rise and shine, prospect!" Kelsey's cheerful voice filters through the wood.
"Breakfast in twenty!"

I grunt in acknowledgment, then drag myself to the small adjoining bathroom.

After another quick shower and shave, I look marginally more human.

The dark circles remain, but at least I no longer resemble a wild man from the desert.

My phone buzzes with a text from Amara:

Briefing. My office. 15 min.

I dress quickly in my riding clothes—dark jeans, heavy boots, plain black t-shirt that hides the holster at my back.

The prospect cut comes last, settling on my shoulders like armor I wear, ready for the battle ahead.

The bottom rocker reads CHIHUAHUA, marking me as part of this charter.

The prospect patch is a reminder that I haven't fully earned my place yet, but I'm on my way.

Boulder was patched in recently, so maybe I'm next.

Maybe if I find Lashes, I'll get my shot.

Fifteen minutes later, I'm in Amara's office, a coffee mug clutched in my hand like a lifeline.

"You look better," she observes, sliding a file across her desk. "Everything you need to know about Imani Torres."

I flip it open, scanning the basics.

Twenty-six years old.

Harvard Business School graduate.

Currently working for her father's import/export business.

The photo shows a stunning woman with caramel skin, dark eyes, and an expression that manages to be both regal and dangerous.

"She's been living in El Paso for the past six months," Amara continues. "Overseeing some of her father's legitimate business interests. Three days ago, someone tried to take her out at her apartment. Professional hit, not a random attack."

I glance up from the file. "Any suspects?"

"That's what her father's people are investigating. In the meantime, Alejandro requested our help getting her to safety."

"And her father couldn't send his own men because...?"

Amara's expression darkens. "Because he believes the hit came from inside his organization. Trust is in short supply right now."

Great, a cartel civil war.

"Your contact in El Paso is Diego." She hands me a burner phone. "He'll text you the meeting location once you're in the city. Get in, get the girl, get out. No detours, no side missions."

So basically, she means no looking for Lashes.

"The route's been mapped out," she continues, unfolding a detailed map of the border region. "You'll avoid main highways. Take the mountain passes. It's longer, but safer."

I memorize the route, noting the safe houses marked along the way. "What's her security situation? Armed escort? Decoy vehicles?"

"You're it."

I blink. "Just me? For cartel royalty under an active threat?"

"A larger group would attract attention. Two people on a bike can disappear easier." She leans back in her chair. "Besides, you're not just a pretty face with a gun. You're our medic. If anything happens, you can handle it. It's why I'm sending you."

The vote of confidence doesn't exactly comfort me. "And if I run into trouble I can't handle?"

"Call this number." She scribbles on a piece of paper. "Memorize it, then destroy it. It's a direct line to Alejandro's personal security. Use it only as a last resort."

I commit the number to memory, then rip the paper into tiny pieces. "Anything else I should know?"

Amara hesitates, which is unusual for her. "Imani isn't just a package to be delivered. She's... complicated. Smart. Dangerous in her own way."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning she watched her mother and brother get gunned down when she was five. Meaning she can handle herself in a fight. Meaning she's not going to take kindly to being treated like helpless cargo." Amara's eyes narrow. "So don't."

This isn't a damsel in distress situation.

This is a temperamental force of nature who happens to have a target on her back.

I nod, understanding. "Will I have any issues at the border with what I'm carrying?"

"No, you're all good."

I give her another nod, showing I understand her. "Got it."

"One more thing." Amara's voice drops. "There are rumors... whispers about a trafficking operation working the border. High-end merchandise. Exclusive buyers."

My pulse quickens. "You think it's connected to Lashes?"

"I don't know. But keep your eyes and ears open. Just... don't lose sight of what your focus needs to be until this run is over."

"Get the girl to safety. I got it."

She studies me for a long moment. "I know how hard these past months have been for you. I know what Lashes means to you. But I need you present, focused."

"I'm always focused."

"No. You're always searching. There's a difference." She stands, indicating our meeting is over. "Kelsey's waiting with breakfast. Don't keep her waiting, or Boulder

will have your ass."

I rise, tucking the file and burner phone into my inner pocket. At the door, I pause. "Why me, Amara? Really?"

Her expression softens almost imperceptibly. "Because you remind me of someone I used to know. Someone who would do anything to protect the people he cared about, even at a great personal cost."

Before I can ask who she means, she's already refocused on the paperwork on her desk, dismissing me with a wave.

Kelsey's breakfast is legendary—a spread that could feed a small army.

Boulder watches with amusement as I shovel eggs and bacon into my mouth, realizing only now how hungry I actually am.

"When was the last time you ate a real meal?" Kelsey asks, refilling my coffee.

I shrug. "Define 'real.'"

She rolls her eyes. "Something that didn't come wrapped in paper or from a gas station."

"It's been a while."

Boulder snorts. "Told you he's been running himself into the ground."

I ignore him, focusing on the food.

Kelsey's presence is calming, her steady hands and quiet strength a reminder of why

Boulder fell for her.

"Be careful out there," she says as I finish eating. "The borders are more dangerous than usual lately."

"I'm always careful."

"No, you're always reckless," Boulder corrects. "There's a difference."

I flip him off, but there's no heat behind it. He's not wrong.

After breakfast, I return to my room to pack the few belongings I've unpacked.

The stack of letters from my father catches my eye, and after a moment, I tuck them into my duffel.

A reminder of what failure looks like. A reminder of what happens when you abandon the people who need you.

My medical bag comes next—the specialized kit I've assembled over the years.

Beyond the standard first aid supplies, it contains everything needed for field surgery: suture kits, hemostatic agents, IV supplies, antibiotics, painkillers. Some obtained legitimately, others through club connections.

All potentially life-saving.

This, at least, is something I know I can do.

This is how I make myself useful to the club, to the world. I may have failed to find Lashes, but I won't fail at this.

Outside, my Harley has been serviced and refueled by Compass, formerly known as Sam.

Since I've been gone, he's somehow become the club's mechanic.

I secure my bags, check my weapons one last time, and swing my leg over the seat.

The engine roars to life beneath me, the vibration traveling up through my body like a familiar heartbeat.

Amara appears at the clubhouse door, arms crossed, watching.

She gives me a single nod—part blessing, part warning.

I return it, then pull on my helmet and ease the bike toward the compound gates.

The desert stretches before me, endless and unforgiving.

Somewhere out there, Lashes is waiting to be found, and right now, a cartel princess needs my protection.

I twist the throttle and head east, toward El Paso.

Toward my assignment.

Toward a woman who, according to Amara, is complicated and dangerous and somehow important enough to pull me away from the only thing that has mattered to me for months.

She better be fucking worth it.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:06 pm

CHAPTER ONE

Imani

The barrel of the gun feels cold against my palm as I slide it into the holster at the small of my back.

It's a familiar weight, a necessary evil.

The mirror reflects a woman I sometimes barely recognize—designer clothes and perfect makeup concealing the warrior beneath.

Harvard Business School never prepared me for this part of the family business.

My El Paso penthouse gleams with early morning sunlight, floor-to-ceiling windows offering a panoramic view of the city and the mountains beyond.

It's been three days since someone tried to put a bullet in my skull, so basically three days of being trapped in this cage while my father's men "investigate."

My patience is wearing thinner by the hour, and I'm going to completely lose it soon. That's the Latina blood that runs through my veins, the fire, as my mother called it when I was a little girl.

My phone buzzes on the marble countertop.

My father's name flashes on the screen, and I consider ignoring it.

Let him worry. Let him wonder if his precious heir has finally had enough of being treated like a chess piece rather than a daughter.

But he would only call again. And again. The brutal Mateo Torres doesn't accept being ignored.

"Yes, Papi ?" I answer, my voice deliberately cool.

"The arrangements are final," he says, not bothering with small talk.

No, how are you . No, I'm sorry someone tried to kill you . Just business, as always.

"You leave today."

I grip the phone tighter. "I'm not going anywhere. I have meetings scheduled with the shipping consortium, and the new distribution?—"

"Canceled. All of it." His tone leaves no room for argument, but I argue anyway.

"This is exactly what they want. To disrupt our operations. To make us look weak, and you're letting them."

"What looks weak is having my daughter's brains splattered across her living room floor." The rare flash of emotion in his voice catches me off guard. "You are leaving El Paso today. That's final, mija ."

I pace across the penthouse, frustration burning in my chest. "And go where? Back to the compound in Arizona? Another safe house? Another cage?"

"Chihuahua. To the Reapers Rejects MC."

I stop dead. "Excuse me?"

"Their Chihuahua charter. Alejandro's niece is their president, and Alejandro's assured me you'll be safe."

My godfather. The most powerful cartel leader in Mexico and my father's longtime ally.

The sacred relationship between our families runs deeper than blood—a bond formed when Alejandro stood as my godfather.

I can't keep the disbelief from my voice. "You're sending me to a biker gang?"

"It's the last place anyone would look for you." I hear papers rustling in the background. Always working, always fucking distracted. "And they're experienced in handling... delicate situations."

"Delicate? Someone tried to kill me in my own home. That's not delicate, that's a declaration of war."

"Which is why you need to be somewhere unexpected while I handle it."

I laugh, the sound bitter even to my own ears. "You mean while you figure out which of your trusted lieutenants ordered the hit?"

Silence stretches between us, confirmation enough.

The betrayal had to come from inside.

No one else could have known my schedule, my security protocols.

No one else could have gotten close enough to plant the bomb that would have killed me if I hadn't decided to work late at the office that night.

"Imani." My father's voice softens slightly. "Please. Just do as I ask."

The rare "please" almost breaks my composure. Almost.

"How long?"

"Until it's safe."

Which means indefinitely. I close my eyes, tamping down the urge to scream. "Who's escorting me?"

"One of the club's prospects. A medic."

"One man?" Now I'm genuinely angry. "Someone tries to assassinate me, and you send one man as protection? What kind of?—"

"It was Alejandro's suggestion," he interrupts. "Less conspicuous. And apparently this particular prospect is... uniquely qualified."

The vague praise doesn't make me happy in the slightest bit. "When?"

"He arrives at noon. Diego is bringing him to the secondary location."

Of course. Diego, my father's oldest friend and most trusted advisor—the only one besides my father who knows where I've been hiding these past three days.

"Fine." I make no effort to hide my displeasure. "Anything else?"

My father hesitates, something so rare it instantly puts me on alert. "Be careful, mija . Trust no one."

It's slapping me right in the face now. He's truly worried, and my father doesn't worry easily.

"I'll call when I arrive," I say, softening my tone slightly.

"No. No contact. Not until I reach out first."

The weight of it sinks like stones in a pool. This is worse than I thought.

" Papi ..." My voice breaks slightly. "What's really happening?"

For a moment, I think he might actually tell me the truth. The silence stretches, filled with two decades of things left unsaid between us.

"Just stay alive. That's all that matters." The line goes dead.

I stare at the phone, a sick feeling spreading through my stomach.

Fear is a luxury we can't afford, but right now, I'm afraid.

Not of dying—that particular fear burned away long ago when I watched my mother and brother get gunned down in our own home.

No, I'm afraid of something much worse: being kept in the dark while my family's empire crumbles around us.

I finish packing, focusing on practicality rather than comfort.

Clothes I can move in. Shoes I can run in. Jewelry valuable enough to bribe or barter with if necessary.

My laptop with triple-encrypted files detailing all of my father's legitimate business operations—the ones I've been working to expand, fulfilling my mother's dream of eventually transitioning our family away from the more dangerous aspects of the cartel business.

The custom Beretta goes in last, nestled between layers of silk.

A graduation gift from my father when I returned from Harvard.

His way of reminding me that, regardless of my Ivy League degree, I'm still a Torres. still cartel royalty, still a target.

A text from Diego arrives exactly at 11:30.

Location secure. ETA 30 minutes.

I check my appearance one last time. Designer jeans, blouse worth more than most people's monthly rent, leather jacket that conceals the other gun at my back without sacrificing style.

Hair pulled back in a sleek ponytail, makeup subtle but flawless.

The image of a successful businesswoman, not a cartel princess fleeing for her life.

The mask I've perfected.

The private elevator requires both a key card and a fingerprint scan.

Another layer of security that apparently wasn't enough to keep someone from wanting me dead.

I descend to the private garage beneath the building, where my rarely-used Mercedes waits.

Another text from Diego provides the address—an abandoned warehouse in the industrial district.

Clearly, subtlety has gone out the window.

The drive takes twenty minutes.

I'm careful, taking random turns, doubling back occasionally, watching for tails in my rearview mirror.

Old habits drilled into me since childhood.

The warehouse appears abandoned, windows boarded up, chain-link fence rusted and bent.

I park behind the building, out of sight from the street, and wait.

Exactly at noon, a black SUV with tinted windows pulls up beside me.

Diego emerges from the driver's side, his weathered face grim.

He's been with my father since before I was born—the closest thing to an uncle I've ever had.

"Princess," he greets me, using the nickname he's called me since I was small. "You

look well."

"Considering someone tried to kill me, you mean?"

He doesn't smile. "Your father told you the arrangements?"

"Some biker degenerate is escorting me to Chihuahua. Hardly seems adequate."

Diego's expression shifts subtly. "Don't underestimate the Reapers Rejects. They're more than they appear. And isn't Amara a friend of yours?"

Before I can respond, the passenger door of the SUV opens, and a man unfolds himself from the seat.

My breath catches.

He's massive—at least six-foot-three, with shoulders broad enough to fill a doorway. Bald as a baby, revealing a face that's all sharp angles and hard planes.

Yet, the beard lining his jaw doesn't soften him.

Nothing could soften the intensity radiating from him like the Texas pavement heat in the middle of August.

His eyes find mine immediately, assessing, calculating.

Danger personified in a leather cut with a prospect patch.

"Imani Torres," Diego says formally, "meet Brick. He'll be your escort to Chihuahua."

Brick. The name suits him—solid, unyielding, capable of building or destroying.

He nods once, a minimal acknowledgment. "Ms. Torres."

His voice is deep, graveled, like he doesn't use it often.

His gaze sweeps over me, not in the way men usually look at me—with desire, or calculation, or greed—but with an assessment of threat and value.

"You're the medic," I say, keeping my voice neutral, even if my stomach is doing flips.

Something flickers in his eyes—surprise, perhaps, that I know this detail. "Yes."

"And you're supposed to protect me from professional assassins?"

His mouth tightens slightly. "That's the plan."

I turn to Diego. "This is absurd. One man on a motorcycle? We might as well paint a target on our backs."

"That's exactly why it will work," Diego counters. "They're expecting an armed convoy. Multiple vehicles. Professional security. Not a woman on the back of a bike with a club prospect."

I hate that his logic makes sense. Still, I look at Brick skeptically. "How exactly do you plan to get us to Chihuahua alive?"

For the first time, his expression changes—a slight hardening of the jaw, a dangerous flicker in his eyes.

"The same way I've kept myself and others alive in worse situations than this." He steps closer, and I force myself not to back away. "I'm not interested in dying today, Ms. Torres. And I take my assignments seriously."

The intensity rolling off him is almost physical, like standing too close to a fire.

There's something else there too—a weariness, a shadow behind his eyes that speaks of burdens I can only guess at.

"Fine," I give in, not because I'm convinced but because arguing further would only waste time. "When do we leave?"

"Now," Brick says, already moving toward a Harley parked behind the SUV. "Pack light. One bag."

I gesture to the single duffel I've brought. "Already done."

He looks mildly surprised, as if he expected more resistance or perhaps a princess with multiple suitcases.

Without another word, he secures my bag to his bike, then hands me a helmet.

"Ever ridden before?" he asks.

"Yes." It's not a lie. I've been on motorcycles before—just not on a long journey through cartel territory with a stone-faced biker as my only protection.

Diego approaches, his expression grave. "Your father wanted me to give you this." He holds out a small leather pouch.

Inside is a delicate gold medallion—St. Christopher, patron saint of travelers.

It belonged to my mother.

I haven't seen it since the day she died, her blood seeping into my shoes as I stood frozen, watching men drag her body away.

The reality of my situation hits me hard.

My father doesn't think I'm coming back, that's why he's giving me St. Christopher.

I slide the medallion around my neck, tucking it beneath my blouse.

When I look up, Diego is watching me with something like regret.

"Be safe, princess," he says softly. "Your father—" He stops, glancing at Brick. "Your father would be lost without you."

Coming from Diego, this is as close to an emotional declaration as I'll ever get.

I swallow hard, nodding once.

"Tell him..."

What? That I forgive him for shipping me off like cargo?

That I understand why he's kept me at arm's length all these years?

That, despite everything, I still desperately want his approval? "Tell him I'll be careful."

Diego nods, squeezing my shoulder briefly before returning to the SUV.

As he drives away, I'm left alone with Brick, the weight of St. Christopher heavy against my skin.

Brick swings his leg over the bike. "Ready?"

No, I'm not ready.

I'm not ready to leave the life I've carefully built here.

I'm not ready to abandon the progress I've made legitimizing our businesses.

I'm not ready to be shipped off to a motorcycle club while invisible enemies try to destroy everything my family has built.

But readiness is a luxury, like fear.

Like love. Like all the things I've learned to live without.

"Ready," I lie, and pull on the helmet.

Brick starts the engine, the rumble vibrating through my body like a warning.

I climb on behind him, trying to maintain some distance between us, but the first time he accelerates, I'm forced to wrap my arms around his waist, my chest pressed against his back.

He's solid beneath my hands, all muscle and heat.

For a wild moment, I imagine those hands on me, that intensity focused entirely on?—

I shut down the thought immediately.

This man is a means to an end.

A shield between me and whoever wants me dead.

Nothing more.

As we wind through El Paso's streets, heading for the outskirts of the city, I feel my phone vibrate in my pocket.

A text from an unknown number:

Package in transit. Proceed as planned.

Not meant for me.

Meant for someone tracking me.

Someone like Diego.

Ice flows through my veins as the pieces click into place.

Why my father seemed so worried.

Why he insisted on no contact.

Why he sent his oldest friend to deliver me to a stranger.

Diego is the traitor.

And we're riding straight into a trap.

I tighten my grip around Brick's waist, leaning forward to shout over the wind. "We need to stop! Now!"

He glances back, confusion obvious even through the visor of his helmet, but something in my expression must convince him because he nods once.

He takes a sharp turn down an alley, cutting the engine in the shadow of an abandoned building.

"What's wrong?" he asks as I practically leap off the bike.

I pull out my phone, showing him the text. "Diego. He's involved."

Brick's expression hardens as he reads the message. "You sure this wasn't meant for someone else?"

"The timing is too perfect. He just left us, and suddenly someone's talking about a package in transit?" I pace, mind racing. "We need to change our route, change everything."

Brick studies me for a long moment, his gaze unreadable.

Then he pulls out his own phone, sending a rapid text before turning back to me.

"If you're right, we can't use any of the planned safe houses. They'll be compromised."

"We can't go back to my penthouse either. It'll be the first place they look."

He nods, decision made. "I know somewhere. But it's a long ride, and we'll be exposed."

"Better than walking into an ambush."

"Agreed." He hesitates, then asks, "Why would Diego betray your father? They've been friends for decades, right?"

The question cuts deep because I've been asking myself the same thing. "Money. Power. Who knows? In my father's business, loyalty only lasts until a better offer comes along."

Something flickers in Brick's eyes—disagreement, perhaps.

The motorcycle club clearly has a different code.

It must be nice to believe in something so completely.

"We need to go," he says, already swinging his leg back over the bike. "Stay close. If I tell you to get down, you get the fuck down. If I tell you to run, you run like hell. No arguments."

Under normal circumstances, I'd bitch about being ordered around, but these aren't normal circumstances, and something tells me this man knows what he's doing.

"One condition," I say as I pull my helmet back on. "No more treating me like fragile cargo. I can handle myself. I can help."

He studies me for a long moment, then gives a single sharp nod. "Fair enough. But when it comes to your safety, I call the shots. That's non-negotiable."

I want to argue, to remind him that I'm a Torres, that I've been navigating dangerous waters my entire life.

But the determined set of his jaw tells me it would be wasted breath.

"Fine," I grumble. "Your show."

As I climb back on the bike, pressing myself against his solid warmth, a thought strikes me with crystal clarity: I've spent my entire life surrounded by my father's men, by security details and advisors and servants.

Not once have I ever felt as immediately, instinctively safe as I do with this stranger's body between me and danger.

It's a dangerous thought.

Comfort is an illusion in my world.

Safety is a myth.

But as we roar out of the alley, heading away from the planned route and into the unknown, I allow myself, just for a moment, to believe in both.

The wind whips past us, carrying away the last remnants of the life I'm leaving behind.

Ahead lies nothing but uncertainty—a motorcycle club I've never visited, a war brewing within my father's organization, enemies closing in from all sides.

And my only lifeline is a man called Brick, whose very presence makes my heart beat faster for reasons that have nothing to do with fear.

God help me.

CHAPTER TWO

Brick

The desert air whips against my face as I push the Harley to its limits, taking turns I normally wouldn't risk with a passenger.

The woman behind me seems to read my movements instinctively, leaning into each curve, tightening her grip when necessary.

For someone who claimed to have "some" experience on bikes, she's handling this like a pro.

Diego's betrayal changes everything.

The planned route, the safe houses, the check-in protocols—all compromised.

My mind races through alternatives as I navigate the outskirts of El Paso, deliberately choosing roads that will make pursuit difficult, adding random turns to shake any tails.

The burner phone in my pocket vibrates.

I ignore it.

It could be Amara responding to my alert, but it could also be Diego trying to track our movements.

I can't afford to trust anyone until we're somewhere safe.

Imani's arms remain locked around my waist, her body pressed against mine—no longer awkward, but anchored in place because our survival is dependent on working together.

The feel of her against me is a distraction I can't afford, but I'm human enough to notice.

She's all soft curves against my back, the faint scent of expensive perfume cutting through the desert dust.

Focus, damn it. This isn't about how smoking hot she is. This is about keeping her alive.

I take us deeper into the desert, following trails only locals would know.

My search for Lashes taught me every back road and hidden path in this godforsaken stretch of border country.

Now that knowledge might very well save our lives.

After an hour of evasive maneuvers, I spot what I'm looking for—a narrow canyon entrance partially hidden by rock formations.

Perfect for losing vehicles, but navigable on a bike if you know what you're doing.

I cut the engine to listen for any others who might be around us before heading in.

Nothing but desert wind, for now.

I kickstart the Harley back to life and head for the canyon, feeling Imani's questioning grip tighten slightly.

She doesn't ask, though.

Doesn't second-guess.

Just trusts me to know what I'm doing.

The canyon narrows as we push deeper, the walls rising like silent sentinels on either side.

The terrain grows treacherous—loose gravel, sudden drops, patches of sand that could send the bike sliding if I misjudge by an inch.

I slow our pace, hyper-focused on every inch of ground ahead.

Imani shouts over the engine and the echo of the canyon walls. "Where are we going?"

"Safe house," I call back. "One Diego doesn't know about."

I feel her nod against my shoulder, her body relaxing slightly at the news.

We continue in silence, the bike's engine the only sound echoing off the ancient rock.

Twenty minutes later, the canyon widens again, opening into a hidden valley ringed by steep cliffs.

I follow what barely qualifies as a trail to a small structure nestled against the far wall—a stone cabin, weathered by decades of desert wind but still standing.

It's one of the club's emergency shelters, off all official records.

Only patched members know about this place, and even then, only those Amara trusts completely.

I learned about it during my search for Lashes, when Boulder took pity on me after finding me half-dead from heat exhaustion.

"What is this place?" Imani asks as I cut the engine.

"Club safe house. Not on any maps Diego, your father, or even Alejandro have seen."

She dismounts first, stretching cramped muscles with a wince that betrays how uncomfortable the long ride was for her, despite her stoic silence throughout.

I follow, my own muscles protesting after hours of tension.

"Water first," I say, pulling bottles from my saddlebag. "Then we figure out our next move."

She accepts the water gratefully, draining half the bottle in one go.

I use the moment to really look at her for the first time since we left El Paso.

Even though we were riding hard, she still manages to look composed—dusty and wind-blown, but somehow still has that regal bearing—the one that marks her as cartel royalty.

But there's more to her than that.

The way she spotted Diego's betrayal.

The way she handled herself on the bike.

The intelligence in those dark eyes.

This woman is more than just a pampered princess.

"You're staring," she says without looking at me, recapping her water bottle.

"Assessing," I correct her. "There's a difference."

Now she does look at me, one eyebrow raised. "And what's your assessment, prospect?"

The challenge in her voice triggers something primal in me, but I push it aside. "That you're not what I expected."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning most cartel princesses I've met would be falling apart by now. Demanding luxury accommodations. Complaining about the dust." I gesture to the stark landscape around us. "Not spotting who could be the one behind this whole mess."

Something flashes in her eyes—surprise, maybe.

Like she's not used to being seen as anything more than Mateo Torres' daughter.

"Most degenerate bikers I've met wouldn't know the difference between a Harvard MBA and a high school dropout," she counters. "Yet you noticed I was pre-med before business school."

Touché.

I didn't realize I filed away that detail from her file.

I turn toward the cabin, slinging my medical bag over my shoulder. "We can't stay here long. Just need to regroup, figure out our next move."

The door creaks as I push it open, revealing a sparse interior—a small kitchenette, a table with two chairs, a worn couch, and a door leading to what I assume is a bedroom.

Basic, but it has what we need: shelter, supplies, and most importantly, a secure place to figure this shit out.

"Cozy," Imani comments dryly, running a finger along the dusty table.

"It's not the Ritz, but it's off the grid." I drop my bag on the table and start checking the place.

The generator out back still has fuel.

The pantry holds canned goods and bottled water.

The first aid kit is well-stocked, though not as comprehensive as my own.

"Any way to contact your father?" I ask, turning back to Imani.

She shakes her head. "He was explicit—no contact until he reaches out. And with Diego compromised..." She doesn't finish the sentence. She doesn't have to.

"What about your club? Can we trust them?" she asks, her voice careful.

"With my life," I answer without hesitation. "But any communication is a risk right

now. We need to assume everything digital can be tracked."

She nods, understanding the gravity of our situation.

We're truly on our own.

I pull out a map from the emergency supplies and spread it across the table. "We have two options. Wait here for a few days, see if things cool down, or push straight through to Chihuahua using back roads."

Imani studies the map, her finger tracing potential routes. "Waiting makes us sitting ducks if they find this place. Moving keeps us exposed but unpredictable."

"My thoughts exactly."

Our eyes meet across the table, and something shifts between us—a mutual understanding we're in this together now, partners by necessity if nothing else.

She breaks the connection first, turning back to the map. "These routes here," she points to several unmarked trails. "My father's men used them to move product before we established more legitimate shipping lines. They're dangerous—steep drops, flash flood zones—but they're virtually unknown."

I raise an eyebrow. "You're well-informed for someone who runs the legitimate side of the business."

A bitter smile touches her lips. "I wasn't always the suit-wearing Harvard graduate. Before my father decided I was more valuable in boardrooms, I learned every aspect of the family business."

There's a story there, something deeper than she's letting on, but now isn't the time to

dig.

"We'll need supplies," I say, running through mental calculations. "Food, water, extra fuel."

"There's a small town about twenty miles east," she says, her finger finding it on the map with surprising accuracy. "Off the main roads. We could?—"

The distant sound of an engine cuts her off.

We both freeze, heads turning toward the sound.

"Vehicle," I say quietly, already moving to the window. "Heavy. Likely an SUV or truck."

Imani joins me, careful to stay out of direct sight. "How the hell did they find us so quickly?"

"Could be coincidence," I say, though I don't believe it for a second. "Could be?—"

My burner phone—the realization hits like a punch to the gut.

If Diego has connections high enough, he could have tracked the burner Amara gave me.

"We need to move. Now." I'm already gathering essentials, stuffing them into my saddlebags. "Leave everything else."

To her credit, Imani doesn't question or panic. She grabs her bag, checks her weapon, and follows me to the back door.

"The bike's too loud," she whispers. "They'll hear us the second you start it."

She's right. Damn it.

"There's a wash about a hundred yards behind the cabin," I say, mind racing through options. "If we can get the bike there, the terrain will muffle the sound. But we'd have to push it."

She nods, already moving to help.

We get the heavy motorcycle out the back door, each step aching slow as we strain to listen for approaching vehicles.

The engine sounds are getting closer.

No longer just one vehicle—at least two, maybe three.

We push the bike across the rocky ground, every pebble that crunches under the tires sounding like an explosion in the tense silence.

Sweat trickles down my back, not just from exertion but from the knowledge that our lives depend on these precious minutes.

Imani stumbles on a loose rock, catching herself with a sharp intake of breath.

I steady her with one hand, our eyes meeting.

We've got this.

The dry wash appears ahead—a natural depression carved by flash floods, deep enough to hide us from view.

We guide the bike down the sloping bank just as the first vehicle crests the hill overlooking the cabin.

I whisper, pulling her against me as we crouch behind the bike. "Down."

We watch through the scrub brush as three black SUVs converge on the cabin, men spilling out with military precision.

Not cartel sicarios —these move like professionals, like Special Forces.

This is a whole other level of trouble.

"Those aren't my father's men," Imani whispers, her body tense against mine. "And they're not typical cartel muscle."

"Mercenaries," I agree. "High-end."

"Why would Diego hire mercenaries? That's not his style."

The question hangs between us as we watch the men systematically clear the cabin, their movements coordinated and efficient.

Whoever's bankrolling this operation has serious resources.

This isn't just about a cartel power play—this is something bigger.

"We need to move before they start sweeping the perimeter," I say, my lips close to her ear.

She nods, and I feel her take a steadying breath. "How far to the town you mentioned?"

"On back trails? Maybe an hour." I check my watch. "Sun sets in about two hours. If we can stay ahead of them until dark, we'll have a better chance."

"Then let's go."

I kickstart the bike as quietly as possible, the wash muffling the sound just enough.

We roll down the dry streambed until we're well clear of the cabin, then I open the throttle, sending us racing across the desert floor.

In the side mirror, I see men pouring out of the cabin, pointing in our direction.

They've spotted us.

I shout over the engine, "Hold on!"

Imani's arms tighten around me as I push the Harley to its limits, racing toward a ridge line that will temporarily shield us from view.

Behind us, engines roar to life as they start coming for us.

The next hour becomes a blur of adrenaline and instinct.

I navigate terrain that would challenge professional off-road riders, pushing both the bike and ourselves to the breaking point.

The SUVs fall behind in the rougher sections but reappear whenever we're forced onto more open ground.

These guys are good.

Too good to be just hired guns.

They know these back routes almost as well as I do.

As the sun begins to sink toward the horizon, casting long shadows across the desert, I spot the small cluster of buildings that marks our destination—Agua Seca, a town barely worthy of the name.

Population eighty-seven, according to the weathered sign we pass.

I slow the bike as we approach, trying to appear casual rather than like fugitives.

The town consists of little more than a main street with a gas station, a small grocery, and what looks like a bar doubling as the local gathering spot.

"Cover story," I say quietly as I pull up to the gas station. "Couple on a road trip. Got lost exploring back roads. Need fuel, supplies, and a place to crash for the night."

"Will they buy that?" Imani gestures to herself, then me.

Even dusty and disheveled, we don't exactly look like typical tourists.

I strip off my prospect cut, stowing it in the saddlebag.

Without it, in just my t-shirt, I look less like an outlaw biker and more like any other guy on a road trip.

"Better," she admits, then hesitates. "My clothes still scream money."

She's right. Her designer outfit, even covered in desert dust, is obviously expensive.

"Here." I pull out a flannel shirt from my bag, offering it to her. "Put this over your blouse. And maybe lose some of the fancy jewelry."

She takes the shirt without argument, slipping it on over her blouse.

It swallows her, the sleeves hanging well past her fingertips, but the effect is good—she looks like a girlfriend on a weekend getaway.

She removes her earrings and an expensive-looking bracelet, tucking them into her pocket.

Only a gold chain disappears beneath her collar, something she apparently won't part with.

"How do I look?" she asks, spreading her arms.

Something shifts in my chest at the sight of her in my shirt, something I don't have time to examine right now.

"You'll do," I say, my voice rougher than I want it to be.

The moment stretches between us, charged with something beyond the danger we're facing.

Her eyes search mine, and for a second, I forget that we're running for our lives, that she's a high-value target, that I'm just a prospect assigned to keep her alive.

For a second, we're just a man and a woman, standing too close in the fading desert light.

The spell breaks when a truck rumbles past, kicking up dust that swirls around us.

Reality crashes back—we're still being hunted, we're still in danger, and I still have a job to do.

"I'll fuel up," I say, turning to the pump. "You go inside, see if they have rooms available. Act casual, like we're just passing through."

She nods, straightening her shoulders and throwing on a relaxed posture.

As she walks toward the small office, I can't help but admire her adaptability.

Most people would be falling apart by now.

Hell, most people wouldn't have made it this far.

But Imani Torres isn't most people. That much is becoming clearer by the minute.

As I fill the tank, I scan our surroundings, noting everything of importance—ways to get out of here, everyone around us, and more.

Old habits from runs I don't talk about, and then stuff from my life before the club.

The town is quiet—a few locals sitting on porches, an old dog sleeping in the shade of a pickup truck.

No sign of our little buddies... yet.

Imani emerges from the office, a key dangling from her fingers.

She's smiling, a casual, carefree expression that looks so natural it takes me a moment to remember it's an act.

"They have one room left," she says, her voice pitched just loud enough for anyone nearby to hear. "The owner says there's a place down the street that serves decent food."

I nod, playing along. "Great. I'm starving."

We move the bike to the parking spot in front of our room—a small cabin at the end of a row of identical structures.

The door sticks slightly as Imani unlocks it, revealing a space that's clean but sparse: one bed, a small table with two chairs, a bathroom barely big enough to turn around in.

I lock the door behind us, immediately checking for alternate exits.

A small window in the bathroom might work in an emergency.

Not ideal, but better than nothing.

"We lost them for now," I say, dropping my voice to ensure we aren't overheard. "But they'll be checking every town within fifty miles. We need to be gone by dawn."

Imani sits on the edge of the bed, suddenly looking exhausted.

The facade of the carefree traveler drops away, revealing the strain beneath.

"Who are these people?" she asks, running a hand through her dust-streaked hair. "This isn't just Diego going rogue. This is... something else."

"Agreed." I lean against the wall, crossing my arms. "The men at the cabin moved like the military. Professional. Expensive."

"Could it be connected to the trafficking operation Amara mentioned?" She looks up, catching me by surprise. "Yes, I know about that. My father's been tracking a new player moving high-end merchandise across the border. Women mostly. But they've never come after our family directly before."

The mention of trafficking sends a spike of pain through my chest—Lashes. I push the thought away, focusing on the present situation I'm in.

"It's possible. Or it could be rival cartels seeing an opportunity." I hesitate, then add, "Or it could be something internal. Someone in your father's organization making a power play."

Her face darkens at this last suggestion. "If that's true, then my father could be in danger too."

For all her competence and strength, she clearly cares deeply about her father.

"We'll figure it out," I say, trying to sound more confident than I feel. "Our first priority is getting you to Chihuahua. Once you're safe with the club, we can work on the bigger picture."

She nods, though her expression remains troubled. "We should get food, supplies. Maintain our cover for now."

"Agreed." I push off from the wall. "You stay here, lock the door. I'll go?—"

"No." She stands, her posture making it clear this isn't up for debate. "We stick together. Splitting up is exactly what they'd expect. Besides, a couple traveling together doesn't separate. It would look suspicious."

She's right, damn it. "Fine. But stay close. And if anything happens?—"

"I know. Run, don't fight." She checks her weapon discreetly, then tucks it back into her holster. "I'm not helpless, Brick. I've been a target my entire life."

Something in her tone makes me see her differently yet again.

This woman has lived her whole life knowing she could be killed at any moment, and she's learned to function with that knowledge. Maybe even because of it.

"Never said you were helpless," I reply. "But my job is to keep you alive, and I take my job seriously."

A ghost of a smile touches her lips. "So I've noticed."

We head out, locking the room behind us. The small restaurant across the street is nearly empty—just a few locals nursing beers at the bar and an elderly couple finishing their meal in the corner. We choose a table near the back, with a clear view of both the entrance and the kitchen exit.

The waitress, a woman in her fifties with tired eyes and a kind smile, brings us menus and glasses of water. "You two just passing through?" she asks, her accent thick but her English clear.

"Yeah," I answer, adopting a more relaxed posture. "Taking the scenic route to San Miguel. Got a bit lost on the back roads."

"Hmm." She gives us a once-over that says she doesn't entirely buy our story but isn't paid enough to care. "Special today is carne asada. Best in the county, if you ask me."

"Sounds perfect," Imani says, her smile warm and natural.

She's good at this—the easy charm, the casual conversation.

Years of practice, I imagine, moving between cartel politics and legitimate business meetings.

As the waitress leaves, Imani leans forward slightly.

"We're being watched," she says, her lips barely moving. "Far corner, by the pool table. Three men. They've been tracking us since we walked in."

I resist the urge to look directly.

Instead, I stretch casually, using the motion to scan the room. She's right. Three men, locals by the look of them, but paying far too much attention to a random couple passing through.

"Could be nothing," I say quietly. "Small town, strangers are interesting."

"Or they could be waiting for someone to pay them for information about new arrivals." Her hand finds mine on the table, a girlfriend's affectionate gesture that also allows her to speak without being overheard. "A few hundred dollars goes a long way in a town like this."

Again, she's probably right.

And if these guys are willing to sell information, they won't care who's buying—cartel, mercenaries, cops.

We're exposed here.

"Eat quick," I say, squeezing her hand before releasing it. "Then we grab supplies and go. No point waiting for sunrise."

Our food arrives—plates piled high with carne asada, beans, rice, and homemade tortillas.

My stomach growls, God.

It's been too long since I've had a real meal, and the adrenaline crash is hitting hard.

We eat quickly but not suspiciously so, maintaining our cover while keeping an eye on the men in the corner.

They're definitely watching us, though they're trying to be subtle about it.

Just as we're finishing, the door opens, and two more men enter—these ones different from the locals.

They scan the room, their eyes landing on us for a fraction too long.

Imani's hand finds mine again, her grip tightening slightly. "Back exit?" she asks under her breath.

"Through the kitchen." I casually reach for my wallet, leaving cash on the table—enough to cover the meal plus a generous tip. "Ready?"

She nods, and we stand together, walking unhurriedly toward the back of the restaurant as if heading to the restrooms.

The newcomers watch but don't immediately follow—they're smart enough to avoid making a scene in public.

The kitchen staff barely glance at us as we push through the swinging doors.

A cook starts to object, but I flash a twenty-dollar bill and point to the back door.

He hesitates, then jerks his head toward the exit.

Money talks.

We slip out into the alley behind the restaurant, immediately pressing against the wall as we assess our surroundings.

The night air is cool now, the temperature dropping rapidly as it always does in the desert after sunset.

"Room first," I whisper. "Grab our things, then the bike. Stay in the shadows."

We move quickly but carefully through the back alleys of the small town, avoiding the main street where we might be spotted.

As we approach our cabin, I see headlights turning into the motel parking lot—another black SUV, identical to the ones at the safe house.

"Shit," I mutter. "They found us."

Imani's expression hardens with determination. "Plan B?"

"Side window. Now."

We circle around to the back of the cabin, keeping low.

The small bathroom window is our only option—barely big enough for Imani to squeeze through, and a tight fit for me, but we don't have a choice.

I boost her up first, supporting her weight as she wriggles through the narrow opening. A moment later, her hand appears, reaching down to help pull me up.

It's an awkward, ungraceful entry, but we make it, dropping quietly onto the bathroom floor.

Through the thin walls, we can hear voices outside—men giving orders, organizing a search pattern.

They're thorough, professional. And they're getting closer.

We grab our bags in silence, essential items only.

I shoulder my medical kit—won't leave that behind—and check my weapon.

Imani does the same, her movements precise and efficient.

The voices are right outside our door now.

Any second, they'll check the room and find us.

There's only one option left.

"When I say go, we run for the bike," I whisper, positioning myself by the bathroom window. "Full speed, no hesitation. I'll cover you."

She nods, adjusting her grip on her bag. "And if they start shooting?"

"Then I'll shoot back." I meet her eyes in the dim light. "I'm getting you to Chihuahua alive, Imani. That's a promise."

She reaches out, her fingers brushing my arm in a gesture that feels more intimate than it should.

"Ready," she whispers.

A key scrapes in the lock of our room door.

"Go!" I push her toward the window, covering her escape as she slips out into the night.

I follow immediately after, hitting the ground in a crouch just as shouts erupt behind us.

They've found the empty room and the open bathroom window.

We sprint for the bike, zigzagging to make harder targets.

A shot rings out, kicking up dust near my feet.

Then another, much closer.

Imani reaches the bike first, throwing her bag on and preparing to mount.

I'm seconds behind her when pain explodes across my ribs—a bullet graze, not a direct hit, but enough to steal my breath for a critical moment.

Imani turns back, reaching for me. "Brick!"

"Go!" I gasp, pushing her toward the bike. "I'm right behind you!"

She hesitates just long enough to see me regain my footing, then swings her leg over

the bike.

I'm there a heartbeat later, ignoring the fire in my side as I kick start the engine.

More shots ring out as we roar away from the motel, bullets whizzing past.

I keep our movements unpredictable, weaving between buildings until we hit the open desert, the darkness swallowing us.

Behind us, engines roar to life.

The chase is on again.

I push the bike harder, faster, ignoring the warm wetness spreading across my side.

The wound isn't serious—I've had worse—but it's a reminder of what a close call that was.

"You're hit," Imani shouts over the wind, her arms tight around my waist.

"It's nothing," I call back. "Just a graze."

She doesn't argue, but I feel her shift slightly, one hand moving to press against my side, applying pressure to the wound even as she holds on.

The gesture is unexpected—practical, yes, but also caring in a way.

We race into the night, the stars our only witness as we push deeper into the wilderness between borders.

The lights of the men grow smaller in the distance, then disappear altogether as we

navigate terrain their vehicles can't follow.

For now, we've escaped, but this is only the beginning.

As my adrenaline comes down, the pain in my side grows more insistent.

Imani's hand remains steady against the wound, her presence at my back a strange comfort.

I've always worked alone, relying on no one but myself for most of my life.

The club was the only time that changed.

Hell, it's how I've survived this long in a world that takes more than it gives.

But as we ride through the darkness, I can't deny the truth that's becoming increasingly clear—we need each other now.

CHAPTER THREE

Imani

The desert flies by in a blur of sand and scrub brush as Brick guides the Harley down back roads I didn't know existed.

His body is a shield between me and the wind, broad shoulders blocking the worst of the dust and debris.

I've given up maintaining any semblance of distance—survival trumps pride every time.

My arms are locked around his waist, thighs pressed against his, my chest against his back.

Every curve in the road pushes us closer together.

It's been hours since we left El Paso, changing direction multiple times, doubling back, cutting through terrain I would have thought impossible for a motorcycle.

If someone is still following us, they're either extremely skilled or determined.

Brick hasn't spoken much, just occasional instructions barked over his shoulder—hold tighter when the terrain gets rough, lean with me when we take sharp curves.

The raw power of the man is evident in every movement, in the controlled way he

handles the heavy bike through terrain that would challenge most riders.

It would be impressive if I weren't so damn uncomfortable.

My legs are cramping, my back aches, and even though I'm wearing a leather jacket, the desert wind has a bite to it as the sun goes down.

Just when I'm about to demand a break, Brick slows, turning onto what barely qualifies as a trail.

He navigates carefully between rocks and cacti until we reach a small outcropping that provides some shelter from prying eyes.

"Break," he says, killing the engine. "Fifteen minutes."

I dismount somewhat less gracefully than I'd like, my legs wobbling after hours of being locked around the machine.

Brick watches, a hint of amusement in his eyes. "Water?" He offers a bottle from his saddlebag.

I accept it gratefully, taking long swallows before handing it back.

As he drinks, I study him openly for the first time.

The man is a weapon—every movement precise, efficient, and controlled.

I get a good look at him, noting how I think bald men are typically ugly... but this bald man is the sexiest man on earth.

The prospect cut he wears shows off arms corded with muscle, tattoos snaking up to

disappear beneath his t-shirt.

But it's his eyes that catch me—deep amber flecked with gold, constantly scanning our surroundings, missing nothing.

The eyes of a predator.

His voice startles me out of my assessment. "See something interesting?"

"Just trying to figure out if my father's faith in you is justified," I answer coolly.

A muscle ticks in his jaw. "Not your father's. My Prez's."

Ah, a point of pride. "And how is Amara these days? We haven't caught up in months."

Surprise flickers across his face. "You two are close then? She mentioned you were friends."

"Since we were teenagers. The relationship between our families and all that, but we actually get along, unlike most arranged family alliances." I smile slightly at the memories. "She was always the wild one, even before the MC. Used to drive her father crazy with her rebellious streak."

Brick's expression softens slightly. "Sounds like the Prez I know. She runs the charter with the same fire."

"I'm not surprised. I always knew she'd end up leading something. Too stubborn to follow anyone else's rules." I pause, studying him. "She must think highly of you to trust you with this assignment."

"I trust her judgment completely," he says without hesitation. "With my life. With the lives of everyone in my club."

Something that feels like envy flickers through me.

I can't remember the last time I trusted anyone so completely.

Maybe I never have.

"And she trusts you to deliver me safely," I comment.

"That's the plan."

I step closer, curious. "What's in the bag?"

He follows my gaze to the medical bag secured to his bike—black canvas with a red cross, worn but maintained.

His tone suggests this should be obvious. "Medical supplies."

"I know it's medical supplies," I snap, irritated by his dismissive tone. "I'm asking what kind. Basic first aid, or something more intense?"

A flicker of surprise crosses his face. "Field surgery kit. Trauma supplies. Why?"

Instead of answering, I move to the bag. "May I?"

He hesitates, then nods once.

I open the bag carefully, impressed at how organized it is.

Everything neatly arranged, labeled, secured against movement.

The contents go far beyond basic first aid—surgical instruments, IV supplies, military-grade hemostatic agents, antibiotics, painkillers.

The kit of someone prepared to perform emergency surgery in the field.

"You know how to use all this?" I run my fingers over a suture kit.

"I wouldn't carry it if I didn't."

I close the bag, turning to face him. "Where did you learn? You're not old enough to be a doctor, I don't think."

Another tick in his jaw. "Self-taught, initially. To take care of my mother. Later, EMT training. Some courses through the VA medical center."

There's a story there, something personal that explains his defensive tone.

I decide not to push, at least not yet.

"I was pre-med," I say instead. "Before Harvard Business School."

Now I have his full attention. "What happened?"

The bitterness rises before I can stop it. "My father happened. Said the cartel didn't need another doctor. Needed someone who understood business, finance. Someone who could legitimize our enterprises." The old wound still stings, even after all these years. "Someone who could fulfill my mother's vision."

Brick leans against his bike, apparently willing to engage in actual conversation.

"Your mother's vision?"

"She wanted to transition our family business away from drugs, toward legitimate enterprises. Import/export, real estate, tech investments." I fiddle with St. Christopher's medallion around my neck. "She was killed before she could make much progress."

"I'm sorry," he says, and the simple sincerity in his voice catches me off guard.

I shrug, uncomfortable with the sudden intimacy. "It was a long time ago."

"Some wounds don't heal with time." His gaze is distant now, focused on something—or someone—I can't see.

Before I can respond, movement on the road behind us catches my attention.

A dust cloud, too deliberate to be natural.

"Company," I say quietly, hand already moving to the gun at my back.

Brick is instantly alert. "How many?"

"Can't tell yet. At least one vehicle." I squint against the setting sun. "Moving fast."

He's already in motion, securing the medical bag, scanning our surroundings for defensive positions. "Could be nothing. Could be trouble. We're not sticking around to find out."

I nod, already moving toward the bike.

The brief moment of connection between us is forgotten as our survival instincts take

over.

In moments, we're back on the Harley, engines roaring to life as Brick guides us deeper into the desert, away from established trails.

The pursuing vehicle—a black SUV, I can see now—adjusts course, maintaining distance but clearly following us.

"Faster!" I shout into Brick's ear, fighting the surge of adrenaline.

He doesn't respond verbally, just opens the throttle wider, pushing the bike to its limits across the uneven terrain.

His body is tense against mine, all his focus on navigating the dangerous landscape while evading our pursuer.

The SUV is gaining ground, its four-wheel drive handling the rough terrain better than our motorcycle, even if Brick is insanely skilled.

We need an advantage, something to even the odds.

"There!" I point toward a narrow canyon ahead. "They can't follow with a vehicle!"

Brick nods sharply, changing direction to head straight for the rocky passage.

It's a risky move—the narrow gap barely looks wide enough for the motorcycle, and the terrain is treacherous with loose rocks and steep drops.

But it's our best chance.

Hell, it might be our only chance.

Just as we approach the canyon entrance, a shot rings out.

The bullet whizzes past, close enough that I feel air against my cheek.

Brick curses, swerving sharply to present a more difficult target. "Keep your head down!" he barks, hunching lower over the handlebars.

I press myself against his back, making myself as small as possible while maintaining my grip.

More shots follow, but the shooter's aim is compromised by the bouncing vehicle and the increasing distance.

Then we're into the canyon, the rock walls rising on either side like protective arms.

The roar of the SUV's engine fades as our pursuers are forced to stop at the canyon entrance.

But our relief is short-lived.

The canyon narrows further ahead, the path becoming increasingly difficult to navigate.

Brick slows out of necessity, his entire body radiating tension as he guides the bike around obstacles, through shallow water crossings, along ledges barely wide enough for our tires.

"Who do you think they are?" he shouts over the engine and the echo of the canyon walls.

"No idea," I respond truthfully. "Diego's men, maybe. Or someone else who wants

me dead."

He nods grimly, focusing on returning to the path.

We continue for what feels like hours but is probably only twenty minutes, winding deeper into the maze of rock formations.

The light fades as the sun dips below the canyon walls, casting long shadows that make navigating it even more challenging.

Finally, the canyon widens, opening into a small valley surrounded by steep cliffs.

Brick cuts the engine, letting the bike coast to a stop in the shelter of an overhanging rock.

For a moment, we sit in silence, straining to hear if they're still following us.

Nothing but the whisper of wind through the rocks and the cooling tick of the motorcycle engine.

"We lost them?" I ask, unable to fully believe it was that easy.

"For now." Brick dismounts, helping me off with a steadying hand that I hate myself for needing. "But they'll find another way around. We need to keep moving."

I nod, stretching my cramped muscles. "Who shot at us?"

"Professionals," he answers, checking the bike for damage. "First shot was a warning. They were aiming to disable the bike, not kill us."

"That doesn't make sense." I pace, mind racing. "If Diego betrayed us, why not just

kill me? Why the elaborate chase?"

Brick straightens, eyes meeting mine. "Maybe they don't want you dead. Maybe they want you alive."

As much as I don't want to think about it, Brick's probably right.

Diego had helped us track down the last human trafficking operation that had infiltrated our border territories.

He knew exactly how valuable a cartel princess would be to the right buyers.

"They wouldn't dare," I whisper, but even as I say it, I know it's not true.

They would dare.

The right price would make any risk worthwhile.

"We need to contact your father," Brick says, pulling out his phone. "If Diego's involved, he might not be the only one. Your father needs to know who he can trust."

I shake my head. "No contact. That's what he said. No contact until he reaches out first."

Brick's eyes narrow. "That was before we knew Diego was compromised."

"It doesn't matter. We stick to what he said." Years of training makes this decision automatic. "Besides, my father doesn't trust electronic communications. Everything important goes through trusted messengers."

"Like Diego," Brick points out, frustration evident.

"Like Diego," I agree grimly.

He runs a hand over his head. "So we're on our own."

We're alone in hostile territory, pursued by unknown enemies, with no way to communicate with potential allies.

Our only option is to reach Chihuahua and the relative safety of Brick's club.

"We should get moving," I say, straightening my shoulders. "Use the darkness as our best weapon."

Brick studies me for a long moment, something like respect flickering in his amber eyes. "You're handling this well."

I give him a bitter smile. "This isn't my first life-or-death situation."

"The assassination attempt?"

"That, and others." I finger the medallion around my neck. "I was five when I watched men gun down my mother and brother in our own home. After something like that, everything else is just... Tuesday."

His expression shifts, softens almost immediately. "I'm sorry."

There it is again—that simple sincerity that bypasses all my defenses.

I turn away, uncomfortable with the way things suddenly seem to shift for us.

"We should eat something before we move on," I say, changing the subject. "No telling when we'll get another chance."

He accepts the deflection, turning to retrieve protein bars and some beef jerky from his saddlebag.

We eat in silence, each lost in our own thoughts.

The protein bar tastes like cardboard and chemicals, but I force it down, knowing I'll need the energy.

Brick checks his phone for the time. "We'll head out in twenty minutes. There's a town about thirty miles southeast. We can find a place to hole up for a few hours, maybe get some real food instead of this shit."

I nod, trying to ignore my aching muscles. "What's our cover story?"

"Couple on a road trip," he says without hesitation. "Exploring the back country. Got lost, need a place to crash for the night."

"Will they believe that?" I gesture to his prospect cut, my designer clothes—hardly the typical tourists.

He nods, then shrugs off his cut, folding it carefully and storing it in one of the saddlebags.

Without it, in just a plain black t-shirt, he looks less like an outlaw biker and more like a ruggedly handsome adventurer.

"Better?"

I nod, unable to deny that he's even more attractive without the leather vest.

The t-shirt clings to his broad chest and shoulders, revealing the full extent of his

muscular build.

The man is built like a brick wall—appropriate, given his nickname.

He gestures to my outfit. "You're still good, look like a typical girlfriend. The flannel is fine, jacket is good."

The tension between us shifts, taking on a different quality.

For a breath, two, we simply look at each other, the danger momentarily forgotten as awareness crackles between us.

He breaks the connection first, clearing his throat and turning back to the motorcycle. "We should go. Stay close once we hit town. Don't draw attention."

I nod, gathering myself.

This is no time for... whatever that was.

We're running for our lives, pursued by unknown enemies with unknown motives.

Attraction is a distraction we can't afford right now.

As I climb back onto the bike behind him, fitting myself against his body, I can't help but notice how perfectly we seem to fit together.

My arms wrap around his waist, my chest pressed against his broad back, my thighs cradling his.

The engine roars to life, vibrating between us.

In the darkness, with only the motorcycle's headlight illuminating the path ahead, we could be anyone—a couple on an adventure, not a cartel princess and her unlikely protector fleeing for their lives.

"Ready?" Brick asks, voice barely audible over the engine.

I tighten my grip around his waist, fighting the crazy feeling that I'm safer with this man I barely know than I've been with anyone in years.

"Ready," I lie, and we head into the night.

CHAPTER FOUR

Brick

The small border town appears like a mirage in the darkness, a scattered collection of lights breaking the endless black of the desert.

Agua Nueva, population 362, according to the battered sign we pass.

Too small to register on most maps, which is perfect for our needs.

The bullet graze on my side throbs with every heartbeat, a reminder of how close we came to disaster.

Imani's hand remains firmly pressed against the wound, applying steady pressure as we ride.

Her body is molded against mine, no longer hesitant or reserved like she was before.

Necessity has eliminated any pretense of personal space.

I guide the Harley down the town's single main street, scanning for threats disguising it as casual observation.

A gas station with an attached mini-mart.

A diner with neon signs flickering in the window.

A small motel at the edge of town—six rooms in a row, paint peeling, but cleaner than it looks at first glance.

Perfect.

I pull into the motel lot, cutting the engine.

For a moment, we just sit there, letting the silence wash over us after hours of hearing the wind and engine roar.

Imani's arms slowly release their grip on my waist, her fingers coming away dark with my blood.

"You need medical attention and soon," she says, her voice low but insistent.

"I'll handle it." I dismount, wincing slightly as the movement pulls at the wound.
"Let's get a room first. Keep our heads down."

The office is a small building separate from the rooms, a buzzing fluorescent light casting everything in a sickly glow.

An elderly man sits behind the counter, watching a small TV in the corner. He barely looks up when we enter and I'm grateful for it.

The last thing I need is this old geezer noticing the blood on my shirt.

I figure it's a good idea to keep my jacket closed to hide the bloodstain. "Need a room."

He eyes us for a split second before his eyes turn back to the TV. "Fifty cash. Check-out at eleven."

I slide three twenties across the counter. "Any place to get food this late?"

"Diner's open till midnight." He hands me a key attached to a plastic tag marked with the number 4. "Walls are thin. Keep it down."

I nod my thanks, taking the key.

The man's eyes linger on Imani for a moment too long, but there's no recognition there—just the usual male appreciation for a beautiful woman.

Even in my flannel shirt, dusty jeans, and with her hair windblown to hell, she has that effect.

We return to the bike, collect our bags, and head to room 4.

The door sticks slightly when I unlock it, revealing a space that's basic but clean—queen bed with a faded floral comforter, small bathroom, ancient TV on a particle board dresser.

Imani locks the door behind us, adding the security chain.

"Sit," she orders, dropping her bag and pointing to the edge of the bed. "Let me see how bad it is."

I almost argue out of habit, but the determination in her voice tells me it would be wasted breath.

Instead, I shrug out of my jacket, wincing as dried blood makes the fabric stick to my side.

"The medical kit's in the side pocket of my bag," I say, easing myself down onto the

edge of the bed.

She retrieves the kit and returns to stand between my knees. "Shirt off."

Something flickers in her eyes as I peel the blood-soaked t-shirt over my head—something that has nothing to do with assessing me medically.

She kneels to examine the wound, her touch gentle as she cleans away the blood with antiseptic wipes.

"Just a graze," she confirms, her breath warm against my bare skin. "But deep enough to need stitches."

"You know how to do that?" I ask, though I already suspect the answer.

A wry smile touches her lips. "Harvard pre-med, remember? Plus a lifetime in cartel territory. I've stitched up worse than this."

She works in silence, her fingers steady and precise as she preps the wound, administers a local anesthetic, and begins to stitch.

I watch her face rather than her hands—the intense concentration, the slight furrow between her brows, the way she bites her lower lip when she's focused.

"You would have made a good doctor," I say, surprising myself with the observation.

Her hands pause for just a moment before continuing. "Maybe. In another life." There's no bitterness in her voice now, just accepting the way life has worked out for her. "Hold still. Three more stitches."

The final stitches go in quickly, followed by antibiotic ointment and a clean bandage.

Her work is good, efficient—better than many field medics I've seen.

"Thanks," I say as she packs away the supplies.

She nods, washing the blood from her hands in the bathroom sink. "We should get food, then rest. You need to replace the fluids you lost."

She turns from the sink, and our eyes lock across the small room.

Something intense passes between us, something I've been trying to ignore since the moment I first saw her.

For a heartbeat, we're frozen in place, the air suddenly thick.

I'm not sure who moves first, but suddenly she's right in front of me, her hands on my chest, my hands at her waist.

It's like gravity, inevitable and overpowering.

Her eyes search mine, a question in them I answer by slowly lowering my head.

The first brush of her lips against mine is tentative, testing.

The second is anything but.

Her mouth opens under mine, her fingers sliding up to grip my shoulders as I pull her closer, mindful of my injured side.

The taste of her—sweet with an edge of danger—goes straight to my head like a shot of the best tequila.

I tangle one hand in her hair, angling her head to deepen the kiss as her nails dig into my skin.

There's nothing tentative about the way she kisses back, her body arching into mine like she's been starving for this as much as I have.

It's fire and gasoline, an explosion of desire that threatens to incinerate every professional boundary I'd tried to maintain.

My hand slides down to the small of her back, pulling her hips flush against mine.

She makes a small sound in the back of her throat—part surprise, part need—that nearly undoes my last shred of control.

My mouth leaves hers to trace the elegant line of her jaw, the pulse point at her throat.

"Brick," she gasps, her head falling back to give me better access. "We shouldn't?—"

"I know," I murmur against her skin, even as my teeth graze the sensitive spot where her neck meets her shoulder. "Tell me to stop."

Her hands tighten on my shoulders, but instead of pushing me away, she pulls me closer. "I don't want to."

The rawness in her voice brings me back to myself, enough to slow down and lift my head to meet her eyes.

They're dark with desire, but clear. Present. Like she's making a conscious choice.

"This complicates things," I say, my voice rougher than usual.

Her lips curve into a small smile. "Everything about this situation is already complicated."

She's right, of course.

But adding this—whatever this is between us—to the mix could be disastrous.

Or it could be exactly what we both need to get through what's coming.

The decision is taken out of our hands by the sudden noise of a vehicle pulling into the motel lot, headlights sweeping past our window.

We break apart instinctively, both moving to opposite sides of the curtain to peer out.

A pickup truck, nothing suspicious about it, but the threat of danger is enough to cool the heat between us.

The bubble of isolation bursts, reality flooding back in—we're being hunted, we're injured, and I have a run to finish.

"I'll go get us some food," I say, pulling a clean shirt from my bag, careful not to disturb the fresh bandage. "You stay here, lock the door."

"No." She crosses her arms, back to business as if that kiss never happened. "We stay together, just like before."

"Imani—"

"We already established this. Splitting up is what they'd expect." Her expression softens slightly. "Besides, you just took a bullet for me. The least I can do is help you get dinner."

There's logic in what she says, and honestly, I'm not in top form right now.

Having backup isn't the worst idea.

"Fine," I give in. "But we keep it quick. In and out. No drawing attention."

We make our way to the diner, walking close together like the couple we're pretending to be.

Her hand finds mine as we near the entrance, fingers intertwining like something a typical couple would do.

After what just happened in the room, the touch feels different now—charged with awareness, complicated by desire.

The diner is nearly empty—just a trucker at the counter and an elderly couple in a booth near the back.

A tired-looking waitress shows us to a booth by the window, dropping menus in front of us before wandering off to refill coffee cups.

"Order something hearty," Imani says quietly, scanning the menu. "You need protein after losing that much blood."

I raise an eyebrow. "I know the drill, doc."

A small smile tugs at her lips. "Old habits."

The waitress returns, pen poised over her notepad.

We order—steak and eggs for me, a club sandwich with fries for Imani, coffee for

both.

As the waitress walks away, I scan the diner again, looking for the exits, seeing if there are potential threats, lines of sight.

Old habits of my own, I suppose.

"If we ride through the night, we could reach Chihuahua by morning," Imani says, keeping her voice low.

I shake my head. "Too risky. You're exhausted, I'm hurt, and night riding in an unfamiliar area is asking for trouble. We get a few hours' rest, head out before dawn."

She doesn't argue, just nods her agreement.

Smart woman.

Knows when to push and when to yield.

Our food arrives, and we eat in silence.

The steak is overcooked, the eggs rubbery, but it's hot and filling.

Imani picks at her sandwich, her mind clearly elsewhere.

"Penny for your thoughts," I say, watching her push a french fry around her plate.

She looks up, meeting my eyes. "I was thinking about Diego. Twenty years he's been with my father. Twenty years of absolute trust. Hell, he was my mother's trusted ally before he was my father's."

"People change. Loyalty has a price," I say, though the words feel hollow even to me.

"Not his." She shakes her head. "There's something else happening here. This doesn't fit his pattern."

"What's your theory?"

She leans forward slightly, keeping her voice barely above a whisper. "What if he's being controlled? Threatened? Forced to cooperate?"

"It's possible," I admit. "But it doesn't change our situation. He betrayed us, willingly or not."

"I know. I just..." She trails off, frustration evident in her expression. "I hate not understanding the game being played around me."

I can relate to that feeling. It's the same gnawing uncertainty I've felt every day since Lashes disappeared. Pieces missing from the puzzle, shadows moving just beyond what I can see.

"We'll figure it out," I tell her, more certainty in my voice than I actually feel. "Once you're safe with the club, we can piece this together."

She studies me for a moment. "You mentioned your friend Lashes before. You think there's a connection between her disappearance and what's happening now?"

The question catches me off guard.

I haven't spoken much about Lashes to anyone outside the club, afraid that voicing my fears might somehow make them more real.

"There could be," I say carefully. "The timing lines up. She disappeared three months ago during that ambush at CatsandJava. No trace of her since then, no ransom demand. Just... gone. Just the fucking video. They want us to know they have her. But, there's some club shit along with that. You're not privy to that information, and we know who was rolling the dice behind the scenes. I just... I'd be a fool to think the gun and drug trafficking your father's associated with couldn't be part of what's going on here. Whoever has her, they're good at what they do."

"They're professionals."

"Exactly."

Something shifts in Imani's expression. "Tell me everything you know about her disappearance. Every detail."

I hesitate, then make a decision.

If we're going to trust each other with our lives, holding back information makes no sense.

So I tell her—about how she was ambushed at the cafe, how long we've been searching, how we were sent a video of her bound to a chair, how there was a man in front of her speaking Arabic.

About the three months of searching, the false leads, the dead ends.

Imani listens without interrupting me, her sharp mind clearly cataloging every detail. When I finish, she's quiet for a few moments.

"My father mentioned a new player moving into the border territories about four months ago," she finally says. "Someone with connections and resources, specializing

in high-end human trafficking. Girls with certain... qualifications."

My blood runs cold. "What kind of qualifications?"

"Education. Breeding. Skills. Girls who could be 'refined' for wealthy clientele." Her expression is grim. "We were investigating, trying to identify the organization, when the attempts on my life started."

The pieces click into place with sickening clarity. "They targeted you because you were getting too close."

She nods. "And if they're the same people who took your friend, or even the people who might have her now..."

"Then she might still be alive." The thought sends a surge of hope through me.

"It's just a theory," Imani cautions. "But if I'm right, it explains why they want me alive, not dead. I'd be quite the prize for their collection."

The casual way she says it like she's discussing the weather, not her potential fate as a trafficking victim sends a surge of anger through me.

"That's not happening," I say, my voice dropping lower, harder. "Not while I'm breathing."

Something flickers in her eyes—surprise, maybe, or something deeper. "You barely know me, prospect."

"I know enough."

The moment stretches between us, and that feeling comes back, along with the heat

neither one of us wants to talk about.

She's the one who breaks it, glancing at her watch.

"We should head back. Get some rest while we can."

I pay the bill, and we walk back to the motel in silence, the night air cool against our skin.

The few street lights cast long shadows across the empty road.

In the distance, a coyote howls, the sound echoing across the desert—lonely, haunting.

Back in the room, reality reasserts itself.

One bed. Two of us.

The memory of that kiss between us comes rushing back and I know I can't be in the same bed as her.

I'll be too damn tempted to do more.

I grab a spare pillow and move toward the small armchair in the corner.

"Don't be ridiculous," Imani says, setting her bag on the dresser. "You're injured, and that chair would cripple a healthy man. We're both adults. We can share the bed."

She's right, of course. It's the rational, practical solution.

Still, I hesitate, knowing the tension between the two of us won't just come to a halt.

"I don't bite, Brick," she adds, a hint of a smile softening her features. "Unless specifically requested."

Her joke breaks the tension, pulling a low chuckle from me, even though I should know better. "Fair enough. But if I bleed on your side, don't say I didn't warn you."

We take turns in the bathroom, the routine of preparing for bed almost surreal given the circumstances.

When Imani emerges in a tank top and sleep shorts, her hair loose around her shoulders, I have to remind myself of our situation—we're being hunted, we're in danger, how I need to be professional.

Not the time to notice how the soft cotton clings to her curves or how different she looks with her guard down, softer somehow.

I take my turn in the bathroom, washing away the desert dust as best I can with a quick shower, careful to keep the bandage dry.

When I return to the room wearing just sweatpants, Imani is sitting on the edge of the bed, checking her weapon one final time before placing it on the nightstand.

She glances up, her eyes briefly tracing the tattoos across my chest and shoulders before returning to my face. "Which side do you prefer?"

"I'll take the one closest to the door," I say, the decision automatic.

Placing myself between her and potential threats is second nature now.

She nods, sliding under the covers on the far side of the bed.

I follow, wincing slightly as I settle onto my uninjured side, facing the door.

The bed isn't large, but we manage to maintain a couple of inches of space between us.

I reach over and switch off the lamp, plunging the room into darkness broken only by thin strips of neon light filtering through the gaps in the curtains.

Sleep doesn't come easily.

My body is exhausted, but my mind is racing, processing the shit that happened today, planning our next move, thinking about all the threats coming our way.

From her breathing, I can tell Imani is awake too, her thoughts likely as turbulent as my own.

"Brick?" she says softly into the darkness. "Thank you. For taking that bullet. For getting us this far."

Her thanks catches me off guard. "Just doing my job."

"Is that all it is? A job?"

The question hangs in the air between us.

Is it just a job?

It started that way—a run, an assignment, a responsibility to the club.

But something has shifted, turned into something a little more complicated.

Hell, the kiss we shared earlier is proof of that.

"Not anymore," I admit finally. "Not after today."

She's quiet for so long I think she might have fallen asleep.

Then I feel her hand, warm and sure, finding mine in the darkness.

"Get some sleep," she whispers. "I'll watch your back."

The unexpected role reversal—her protecting me—pulls a smile from somewhere deep inside me. "I thought that was my line."

"We protect each other," she says simply. "That's the deal now."

Her hand remains in mine as sleep finally claims me, her words echoing in my mind.

We protect each other.

An unexpected partnership to say the least.

And right now, in this dingy motel room in the middle of nowhere, hunted by unknown enemies, I'm surprised to find I wouldn't want it any other way.

CHAPTER FIVE

Imani

I wake to the sound of engines—multiple vehicles, moving fast, getting closer.

The digital clock on the nightstand reads 4:47 AM, and pale light seeps through the gap in the curtains.

Dawn is starting to break, but we're not alone.

Brick is already moving beside me, instantly alert even though we were both in deep sleep moments before.

His hand finds his weapon on the nightstand as he rolls toward the window, careful not to aggravate his injury.

"How many?" I whisper, reaching for my own gun.

He peers through the gap in the curtains, his expression grim. "Three SUVs. Same as before." He turns to me, his amber eyes hard. "They found us."

My mind races through everything.

How did they track us to this small town?

We've been careful, used cash, avoided main roads. Unless...

"The motel clerk," I say, the realization catching me off guard. "He must have called it in after we left for dinner. Probably has a standing offer to report strangers."

Brick nods, already pulling on his jeans. "We've got maybe two minutes before they have the place surrounded."

I'm out of bed, grabbing clothes like my life depends on it, because it does. Growing up in the cartel world means you learn to dress quickly when danger comes calling.

Jeans, boots, jacket—all while keeping my weapon within reach.

"Back window?" I ask, though I already know the answer.

"Too small, and it faces the parking lot anyway." Brick shrugs into his shirt, wincing as the movement pulls at his stitches. "We go out the front, bold as brass. They'll expect us to run or hide."

It's insane enough to work. Maybe.

We gather our essentials in silence—weapons, my laptop, his medical kit.

Everything else gets left behind.

Brick cracks the door open, scanning the parking lot. "Three o'clock," he murmurs. "Right side of the lot. That's our target."

I see it—Brick's Harley, right where we left it when we checked into the motel.

Our bags are still secured to it, and more importantly, it's our fastest way out of here.

"The bike," I say, pointing toward it.

"Already on it," he replies, and I can see the relief in his expression.

The sound of car doors slamming echoes across the lot.

They're here.

We have to go.

"Now," Brick says.

We step out into the pre-dawn air like we belong there, like we're just another couple starting an early road trip.

The casual way we're walking together is a mask, but it's one I've worn my entire life.

Brick matches my pace, his body language relaxed even with the tension I can feel radiating from him.

Twenty yards to the bike. Fifteen. Ten.

"There!" A shout from behind us, followed by the sound of running boots on pavement.

Brick breaks into a sprint, and I'm right behind him.

We reach the Harley as the first shots ring out, bullets sparking off the asphalt near our feet.

Brick throws his leg over the bike and kicks the engine to life while I slide on behind him.

I draw my weapon, twisting to return fire over his shoulder.

The shot is hasty but accurate enough to make our pursuers duck for cover behind their vehicles.

"Hold on!" Brick shouts over the engine.

More gunfire erupts, this time closer.

A bullet whines past my ear, close enough that I feel the displaced air.

I adjust my position, using Brick's broad back for partial cover while still shooting back.

The Harley roars as Brick opens the throttle, the bike lurching forward faster than it has before.

I keep shooting until my magazine runs out, then duck down to reload as he weaves between the motel's parked cars toward the street.

A bullet sparks off the bike's frame, but the engine keeps running strong.

We're moving, putting distance between us and our hunters.

I shout over the wind, watching behind us for pursuit. "We can go places they can't."

"Exactly what I was thinkin'." He guides us onto a narrow side street. "Time to disappear."

The town is small enough that we reach its outskirts within minutes.

Behind us, headlights appear—at least two vehicles in our pursuit.

Ahead lies more desert and mountains, terrain that favors motorcycles over heavy SUVs.

"There." I point to a cluster of buildings ahead. "That looks like a trucking depot."

Brick follows my gaze and nods.

It's perfect—dozens of vehicles, early morning activity as drivers prepare for long hauls.

Easy to blend in, and more importantly even easier to disappear.

He guides the bike into the depot, parking between two eighteen-wheelers.

The moment we step out, we're just two more travelers in a place where there are loads of people already.

"We need a ride," Brick says, scanning the rows of trucks. "Something heading toward Chihuahua."

A horn honks behind us, making us both spin around.

But it's just a trucker backing out of his space, coffee cup in one hand, steering wheel in the other.

The normalcy of it almost makes me laugh.

"Over there," I say, spotting a driver doing his pre-trip inspection. "Let me handle this."

The driver is middle-aged, weathered face showing years of highway miles.

He looks up as I approach, his eyes doing everything a man always does—assessing my body.

"Excuse me," I say, switching to Spanish and adopting the slightly helpless tone that works on men like him. "My boyfriend and I are stranded. Our car broke down, and we need to get to Chihuahua for a family emergency."

He glances over at Brick, who's leaning against the truck with casual confidence. "What kind of emergency?"

"My grandmother," I lie smoothly. "She's in the hospital. We'll pay for gas, food, whatever you need."

The trucker considers it, clearly weighing the risks against the potential profit.

I pull out a roll of bills—American dollars, more than he probably makes in a week.

"Seven hundred now, three hundred when we get there," I offer.

That settles it. "I'm heading to Chihuahua anyway," he says, pocketing the money. "But if you bring trouble, you're out at the first truck stop."

"No trouble," I assure him. "We just need a ride."

He nods toward his cab. "Load up. We leave in five minutes."

I signal to Brick, who grabs our essentials and joins us.

The trucker—Carlos, he introduces himself—helps me into the passenger seat while

Brick climbs into the sleeper berth behind us.

As we pull out of the depot, I catch a glimpse of black SUVs entering the other end of the lot.

They're searching, but we're already gone, anonymous cargo in a sea of people.

I don't like the idea of leaving Brick's bike here, but I'm sure he'll get it back at some point.

"Your grandmother really sick?" Carlos asks as we merge onto the highway.

"Something like that," I reply, watching the side mirror.

No one is following us yet, but I know it's only a matter of time.

The cab is warm and smells like diesel fuel and old coffee.

Carlos has the radio tuned to a Mexican station playing norteno music, the familiar rhythms a comfort.

For a moment, I can almost pretend we're just regular people on a road trip.

"How long to Chihuahua?" Brick asks from the sleeper.

"Ten, twelve hours," Carlos replies. "Depends on the checkpoints."

Checkpoints. I'd forgotten about those—routine stops where authorities inspect cargo and documentation.

Usually not a problem for someone with my connections, but now...

"What kind of checkpoints?" I ask, trying to sound casual.

"Drug interdiction mostly. Sometimes immigration." Carlos glances at me. "You two got papers?"

"Of course," I lie smoothly. We have identification, but using it would be like sending up a flare. "Just prefer to avoid delays, you know?"

He nods, understanding. "There's a checkpoint about six hours out. Usually just wave truckers through, but sometimes they're thorough."

I file this information away. Six hours gives us time to plan, but not much. If they're looking for us specifically, even routine checks could be dangerous.

The highway stretches ahead, empty except for occasional traffic.

In the distance, mountains rise like jagged teeth against the pale sky.

Beautiful country, but unforgiving.

The kind of place where people disappear and are never found.

"You sleep," Brick says quietly from behind me. "I'll keep watch."

I want to argue, to insist I'm fine, but my exhaustion is weighing me down horribly.

The adrenaline crash after the motel escape, combined with too little sleep and too much stress, is taking its toll.

"Wake me if anything changes," I say, closing my eyes.

"Count on it."

I drift off to the sound of the engine and Carlos humming along with the radio.

My last conscious thought is how strange it is to feel safe in the cab of a truck with a stranger, protected by a man I've known for barely a couple of days.

When I wake, the sun is high up in the sky and the landscape is different.

We're in the mountains now, the highway winding through pine forests and rocky outcroppings.

The air smells different—cleaner, thinner.

"How long was I out?" I ask, stretching as much as the cab allows.

"Four hours," Brick replies. "We're making good time."

Carlos glances at me. "Checkpoint's coming up in about an hour. Might want to think about your story."

I nod, my mind already working through stories.

The truth is obviously out—we can't tell them we're fleeing assassins.

But, the cover story needs to be believable enough to pass.

"Business trip," I decide. "I'm a consultant, Brick's my security. We're heading to Chihuahua to meet with potential clients."

"What kind of consulting?" Carlos asks.

"Import/export," I reply. It's close enough to the truth to be believable, and vague enough to discourage follow-up questions.

Brick nods his approval. "I'll be the strong, silent type. Let you do the talking."

"That's probably best," I agree with a slight smile. "Your Spanish is terrible."

"Hey," he protests, but there's amusement in his voice. "It's not that bad."

"It really is," Carlos chimes in, grinning. "Sounds like a gringo trying to order tacos."

The checkpoint appears ahead—a small building beside the highway, several official vehicles parked nearby.

Carlos slows, joining the short line of trucks waiting for inspection.

"Documentos," Carlos says, holding out his hand.

I pass him our identification, my heart hammering as I see uniformed officers approaching each vehicle.

This is it—the moment of truth.

If they're looking for us specifically, if our photos have been circulated...

"Stay calm," Brick murmurs from behind me. "Just another routine stop."

The officer who approaches our truck is young, maybe mid-twenties, with the kind of authority that comes with the badge.

He glances at Carlos's papers, then at us.

"Purpose of travel?" he asks in Spanish.

"Business," I reply smoothly. "Import/export consulting. Meeting with clients in Chihuahua."

He nods, checking our identification against some kind of list.

My breath catches as I see him pause, studying my ID more carefully.

Does he recognize the name?

Is Torres on some kind of watch list?

"Imani Torres," he reads aloud. "Any relation to Mateo Torres?"

The question hangs in the air like a loaded gun.

How I answer could determine whether we continue to Chihuahua or end up in custody.

"Distant cousin," I lie, keeping my voice level. "Same last name, different family. You know how it is."

He studies me for a long moment, then hands back our documents. "Safe travels."

Carlos puts the truck in gear, and we roll forward.

I don't breathe normally until the checkpoint is well behind us.

Brick sighs. "That was close."

"Too close," I agree. "They're definitely looking for us."

"Your father's Mateo?" Carlos asks.

I glance at him, surprised. "You know who my father is?"

"Lady, everyone in this business knows who Mateo Torres is." He gives me a sideways look. "Question is, what kind of trouble are you running from?"

I consider lying, but Carlos has been straight with us so far, and if we're going to trust him with our lives, he deserves some version of the truth.

"The kind that gets people killed," I say simply.

He nods, as if that's explanation enough. "Well, you picked the right ride. I've been moving questionable cargo for twenty years. Know how to stay invisible."

The highway continues to wind through the mountains, the scenery spectacular even though we're in this shitty situation.

I think once we're finally in Chihuahua, I'm going to feel much better.

A little while passes and in the distance, I can see the sprawl of Chihuahua beginning to appear.

"How well do you know Amara?" Brick asks, breaking the comfortable silence.

I turn to look at him, noting the genuine curiosity in his expression. "We've known each other since we were teenagers. Why?"

"Just trying to understand the dynamics. She can be... intense."

"That's one word for it." I smile, remembering. "When we were kids, she was always the one pushing boundaries, testing limits. Drove her father crazy."

"Sounds familiar," Brick says with a slight grin. "She hasn't changed much."

"No, she hasn't. But that's why she's good at what she does. Why she's survived in that world." I pause. "Why I trust her with my life."

"And why she trusts you."

Trust is a precious commodity in our world, not given lightly or without reason.

"We protect each other," I say, echoing his words from the night before. "Always have."

The city sprawls across the valley like a concrete organism.

"Where do you want me to drop you?" Carlos asks.

I consider his question.

Going directly to the clubhouse might lead trouble to Amara's door.

It's better to maintain some distance, approach carefully.

"The bus station," I decide. "Central location, easy to blend in."

Carlos nods, driving through increasingly dense traffic.

The city is waking up around us—vendors setting up stalls, commuters heading to work, children walking to school.

Normal life continuing even with the danger that follows us. I guess that's how it is every single day.

We reach the bus station, a massive complex.

It's perfect for our needs—busy enough to hide in, with multiple exit routes if needed.

"This is where we part ways," I tell Carlos, handing him the promised payment.

"Thank you for the ride."

"De nada," he replies, pocketing the bills. "Stay safe, both of you."

We gather our belongings and step out into the morning heat.

The bus station is already bustling with activity—travelers, vendors, taxi drivers competing for fares.

We blend into the crowd, just two more people in a city of millions.

"Now what?" Brick asks.

I pull out my phone, checking for messages.

Nothing from my father, which means either he's maintaining radio silence or something's happened to him.

The thought sends a chill down my spine.

"Now we contact Amara," I say. "Let her know we're here."

But as I start to dial, I notice we're being watched.

A man in a business suit, standing by the taxi stand, his attention focused on us so hard that he doesn't dare look away.

When our eyes meet, he reaches for something inside his jacket.

"Brick," I say quietly, not taking my eyes off the man. "We've got company."

He follows my gaze, instantly alert. "How many?"

"One that I can see. Probably more."

The man is moving now, crossing the busy plaza toward us.

I scan for escape routes, but the crowd that seemed like protection moments ago now threatens to trap us.

"This way," Brick says, grabbing my hand and pulling me toward the nearest building.

We move quickly but not frantically, trying to avoid drawing attention while putting distance between us and our pursuer.

Behind us, I can hear the man speaking into a radio—calling for backup, giving our location.

"There." I point to a narrow alley between buildings. "We can lose them in the maze."

We duck into the alley, pressing ourselves against the wall as footsteps pound past the entrance.

My heart hammers in my chest, adrenaline sharpening every sense.

"They're getting closer," Brick says grimly. "We need to reach the clubhouse before they can coordinate a full search."

I nod, already planning our route through the city's backstreets.

Chihuahua is a big city, but it's not infinite.

Eventually, they'll box us in unless we find a way out of this.

"Follow me," I say, leading him deeper into the alley. "I know this city."

But as we move through the narrow streets, I can't shake the feeling that we're being herded—pushed toward a specific location, a trap waiting to spring on us.

The men hunting us are professionals, and they've had time to prepare.

We're walking into something, I'm sure of it.

The question is whether we'll recognize the trap before it's too late.

Chapter Six

Brick

The alley feels like a trap, but I'm determined we're getting the hell out of this shit.

All we need to do is make it to the clubhouse, and we can do that.

"This way," she says, leading us deeper into the maze of back streets.

I catch her arm, pulling her into the shadowed doorway of a closed shop. "We need to find somewhere safe. Regroup, figure out our next move."

She scans the area, her tactical mind working. "There's a safe house my family maintains about six blocks from here. Off the books, even Diego doesn't know about it."

"You sure?"

"My mother set it up years ago. Used it when she needed to disappear from my father's world for a while." There's pain in her voice when she mentions her mother. "I'm the only one with the access codes now."

We could go there, or right to the club. "How far is it?"

"Only a couple of blocks away."

Mmm, it would be smarter to go there.

The club is about ten blocks away. We could go to the safe house, let things cool off, and then reconvene.

We make our way through the streets, sticking to shadows and avoiding main areas.

The last thing I want is more attention on us, but if I had my damn cut on then people would know not to fuck with us.

We have the Ramirez cartel in our back pocket, and their people are everywhere.

Motherfucker.

With every step it feels like we might run into more trouble, but Imani goes on, leading us to a modest apartment building that looks like a thousand others in this part of the city.

She punches a code into a hidden keypad beside an unmarked door.

The lock clicks open, and we slip inside to find a narrow staircase leading to the upper floors.

"Third floor," she says quietly. "End of the hall."

The apartment is small but good enough—clearly maintained and recently used.

It's furnished like a temporary refuge rather than a home, with the basics but nothing personal except for a single photograph on the side table: a younger Imani with a woman who must be her mother.

Honestly, it more looks like an AirBnB than anything else.

"Nice place," I say, checking the windows and exits out of habit.

"My mother believed in having options. I don't remember a lot about her, but I remember odd things she'd tell me as a child," Imani replies, moving to what looks like a communications setup in the corner. "She said a smart woman always has somewhere to run. It's almost like she wanted me to know about the life I was born into, before I even understood it, if that makes sense."

"It makes plenty of sense."

I watch her work, noting how naturally she moves through the space.

This isn't just a safe house—it's a piece of her family history, a connection to the mother she lost.

"Are you thinking about trying to contact your father?" I ask.

She shakes her head, frustration evident. "No, he said he'd make contact with me first, but...I want to hear from him." She turns from the equipment, and I can see the worry she's trying to hide. "This doesn't feel right, and it's getting to me, Brick."

The confirmation of what we already suspected settles between us like a lead weight.

Diego's betrayal goes deeper than just selling us out—it's compromised Mateo's entire organization.

"We're going to figure it out," I tell her, though I'm not sure how. "Once we reach the clubhouse, Amara will have resources we can use."

She nods, but I can see the doubt in her dark eyes.

The woman who impressed me the first moment I met her is showing cracks in her armor.

I find myself studying her more intently—the way she moves with unconscious grace, the subtle scent of her perfume cutting through the dust and sweat of our journey, the intelligence that flashes in her eyes when she's processing information.

Everything about her draws me in, even though I should know better than to get involved with someone I'm on a protection detail with.

"You're staring again," she says without looking at me, unpacking her bag.

"Thinking," I correct, though she's not wrong.

"About what?"

About how you make me forget why I'm here.

About how protecting you has become personal in ways I didn't expect.

About how much I want to taste those lips that always seem to be set in that determined line.

"About how to keep you alive," I say instead.

She pauses in her unpacking, something flickering across her expression. "Is that all I am to you? A mission? A quest? An assignment?"

The question catches me off guard with its directness. "You were," I admit. "When this started."

"And now?"

Now you're the first thing I think about when I wake up and the last thing on my mind before I sleep.

Now the thought of someone hurting you makes me see red in ways that have nothing to do with the club.

"Now it's complicated," I say.

She moves closer, close enough that I can see the gold flecks in her dark eyes. "Complicated how?"

"Imani..." I start, but she's standing right in front of me now, her hand coming up to rest on my chest.

"Tell me," she says softly.

The words get caught in my throat as her fingers trace over the fabric of my shirt.

Every nerve ending where she touches feels like it's on fire.

This is dangerous, but I can't seem to care about the risks right now.

"You make me want things I have no business wanting," I admit roughly.

Her lips curve into a small smile. "Such as?"

Instead of answering with words, I cup her face in my hands, my thumb tracing the elegant line of her cheekbone.

Her skin is soft as silk, warmed by the desert sun.

She leans into the touch, her eyes fluttering closed for a moment.

When she opens them again, the heat I see there nearly undoes me.

"Brick," she whispers, and hearing my name on her lips in that breathless tone breaks whatever restraint I was clinging to.

I lower my head slowly, giving her time to pull away if she wants to.

But she doesn't move—instead, she rises on her toes to meet me halfway.

The kiss starts soft, tentative, a question asked and answered.

But the moment her lips part under mine, something ignites between us.

My hands slide into her hair, tilting her head back as I deepen the kiss.

She tastes like danger and desire, like everything I've ever wanted and shouldn't have.

Her hands fist in my shirt, pulling me closer as she kisses me back with a hunger that matches my own.

Years of walls and control crumble under the assault of her mouth, her body pressed against mine.

I back her against the wall, my mouth leaving hers to trail down the column of her throat.

She makes a small sound—part gasp, part moan—that goes straight to my head like the finest tequila.

"We shouldn't," she breathes, even as her head falls back to give me better access.

"I know," I murmur against her skin, tasting the salt and sweetness of her. "Tell me to stop."

Her hands slide up to grip my shoulders. "I can't."

The honesty in her voice, the admission that she's as lost in this as I am, makes me lift my head to look at her.

Her lips are swollen from our kiss, her eyes dark with desire, her chest rising and

falling with rapid breaths.

She's beautiful.

Not just physically, though she's stunning enough to stop traffic.

The urge to claim her, to mark her as mine, rises with such intensity it frightens me.

This isn't just attraction anymore.

This is something much more dangerous.

I force myself to step back, breaking the spell between us.

The loss of contact feels like tearing away part of myself.

"We should get some rest," I say, my voice rough. "It'll be a long day tomorrow."

Hurt flashes in her eyes before she masks it with icy composure. "Of course. The assignment."

"Imani—"

"It's fine," she says, turning away to busy herself with checking her weapon. "You're right. We need to stay focused."

But it's not fine, and we both know it.

The tension between us has shifted into something intense and unresolved, crackling in the air whenever we look at each other.

I settle into the chair by the window, positioning myself to watch the street while she takes the bed.

Silence stretches between us, filled with all the things we're not saying.

Hours pass. I can tell from her breathing that she's not sleeping any more than I am.

Every small sound she makes—the rustle of sheets, a quiet sigh—sends awareness shooting through me.

Around three in the morning, she cries out in her sleep.

Not loud, but sharp with terror.

I'm on my feet and beside the bed before I consciously decide to move.

"Imani," I say softly, not wanting to startle her awake too suddenly. "Hey, you're okay."

She jerks awake, eyes wide with fear before focusing on me.

For a moment, she looks young and vulnerable, nothing like the strong cartel princess she usually presents to the world.

"Nightmare?" I ask gently.

She nods, pushing herself up to sit against the headboard. "The same one I've had since I was five. My mother and brother... their blood on the floor..."

Without thinking, I sit on the edge of the bed and pull her into my arms.

She resists for a moment, then melts against me, her face buried in my chest.

"I can still hear the gunshots," she whispers. "Still smell the gunpowder and blood. Sometimes I wake up thinking I'm still that little girl, hiding behind the couch while men kill my family."

I hold her tighter, one hand stroking her hair. "You're safe now. I've got you."

"Do you?" she asks, lifting her head to look at me. "Have me, I mean?"

The question hangs between us, loaded with meaning.

She's not just asking about protection—she's asking about something deeper, more personal.

"Yeah," I say quietly. "I do."

She searches my eyes, looking for something.

Whatever she finds there seems to satisfy her, because she relaxes against me again.

"Tell me about your family," she says after a while. "What happened to your father?"

The subject I never talk about, the wound I keep buried.

But something about the darkness, about holding her in my arms while she shares her pain, makes me want to tell her.

"Armed robbery," I say finally. "Fifteen years ago. He held up a liquor store to get money for food and rent."

"He was desperate?"

"Broke, no job, debt collectors threatening the family. He saw it as his only option." I can still remember that night—the police at the door, my mother's screams, the way my world changed in a matter of minutes. "Got fifteen to twenty-five. Could be out in a few more years if he behaves himself."

"Have you seen him? Since he went in?"

I shake my head. "He writes letters. I keep them, but I've never opened them. Don't know what he could say that would make any difference."

Her fingers trace patterns on my chest as she thinks about what I've said. "Maybe he wants to explain. Tell you why he did it."

"I know why he did it. Doesn't change what happened after."

"What happened to your mother?"

The harder question.

The one that explains why I became the club's medic, why I'm driven to fix what's broken.

"She fell apart," I say simply. "Started drinking, then pills, then harder stuff. I learned to take care of her—basic medical stuff, managing her medications, keeping her functional. By the time I was sixteen, I was more of a parent than a child."

"That's why you became a medic."

"Partly. Also because I was good at it. Turns out I have a talent for putting people

back together." I look down at her, noting how right she feels in my arms. "What about you? Ever think about going back to medicine?"

"Sometimes. But my father needs me in the business side. Someone he can trust to handle the legitimate operations."

"Is that what you want? Or is it what he wants?"

She's quiet for so long I think she might not answer. "I don't know anymore. For so long, I've defined myself by what the family needs, what my mother would have wanted. I'm not sure who I am outside of that."

"You're brilliant," I tell her. "Brave, strategic, tougher than most men I know. You could be anything you wanted to be."

She lifts her head to look at me again, something vulnerable in her expression. "You see me differently than most people do."

"How do most people see you?"

"Mateo Torres's daughter. A valuable asset. A potential threat. A prize to be won or a target to be eliminated." She pauses. "You're the first person in a long time to see me as just... me."

The admission hits me harder than it should.

This woman, who has everything money can buy, is starved for something as simple as being seen for who she is rather than what she represents.

"You're not just anything to me," I say quietly.

The words hang between us, an admission that changes everything. Her eyes search mine, and I can see the exact moment she makes her decision.

She leans up and kisses me, soft and sweet this time, not the desperate hunger from earlier but something more sincere.

I should pull away.

I should remember what the goal is, what my responsibilities are, the dozen reasons why this is a bad idea.

But when she looks at me like that, like I'm something she cares about, it's hard to stop.

The kiss deepens gradually, her hands sliding up to cup my face as I gather her closer.

When we finally break apart, both breathing hard, she rests her forehead against mine.

"Stay with me," she whispers. "Tonight."

"Imani," I start, but she silences me with a finger against my lips.

"I know what I'm asking. I know it complicates things." Her eyes are steady on mine.

"But I need you. Not the protector, not the prospect on a mission. You, Brick."

The simple honesty in her words breaks the last of my resistance.

Whatever consequences come from this, whatever complications it creates, I can't deny her.

I can't deny us.

"Okay," I say.

She smiles then, the first truly carefree expression I've seen from her since this all started. It transforms her face, making her look younger, happier.

But our moment is interrupted by the sound of vehicles pulling up outside—multiple engines, moving fast.

Through the window, I can see headlights converging on the building.

"Shit," I breathe, grabbing my weapon. "They found us."

The moment of peace shatters as reality crashes back in.

We're not just two people finding comfort in each other—we're hunted prey, and the hunters have found our scent.

"How?" Imani demands, already moving to gather our gear.

"Doesn't matter now," I reply, checking the magazine in my gun. "What matters is getting out of here alive."

The sound of boots on the stairs echoes through the building.

Multiple sets, moving fast. Professional again, just like all the others.

"Back exit?" I ask.

"Fire escape," she confirms, pointing to the window facing the alley.

We grab our essential gear and head for the window. Behind us, I can hear doors being kicked in, systematic searches getting closer.

As I help Imani onto the fire escape, I can't help but think about what almost happened between us.

What should have happened, if we'd had more time.

But time is a luxury we don't have.

The only thing that matters now is survival.

The fire escape creaks under our weight as we descend, the metal protesting after years of neglect.

Below us, the alley stretches into darkness—our escape route to whatever comes next.

CHAPTER SIX

Brick

The alley feels like a trap, but I'm determined we're getting the hell out of this shit.

All we need to do is make it to the clubhouse, and we can do that.

"This way," she says, leading us deeper into the maze of back streets.

I catch her arm, pulling her into the shadowed doorway of a closed shop. "We need to find somewhere safe. Regroup, figure out our next move."

She scans the area, her tactical mind working. "There's a safe house my family maintains about six blocks from here. Off the books, even Diego doesn't know about it."

"You sure?"

"My mother set it up years ago. Used it when she needed to disappear from my father's world for a while." There's pain in her voice when she mentions her mother. "I'm the only one with the access codes now."

We could go there, or right to the club. "How far is it?"

"Only a couple of blocks away."

Mmm, it would be smarter to go there.

The club is about ten blocks away. We could go to the safe house, let things cool off, and then reconvene.

We make our way through the streets, sticking to shadows and avoiding main areas.

The last thing I want is more attention on us, but if I had my damn cut on then people would know not to fuck with us.

We have the Ramirez cartel in our back pocket, and their people are everywhere.

Motherfucker.

With every step it feels like we might run into more trouble, but Imani goes on, leading us to a modest apartment building that looks like a thousand others in this part of the city.

She punches a code into a hidden keypad beside an unmarked door.

The lock clicks open, and we slip inside to find a narrow staircase leading to the upper floors.

"Third floor," she says quietly. "End of the hall."

The apartment is small but good enough—clearly maintained and recently used.

It's furnished like a temporary refuge rather than a home, with the basics but nothing personal except for a single photograph on the side table: a younger Imani with a woman who must be her mother.

Honestly, it more looks like an AirBnB than anything else.

"Nice place," I say, checking the windows and exits out of habit.

"My mother believed in having options. I don't remember a lot about her, but I remember odd things she'd tell me as a child," Imani replies, moving to what looks like a communications setup in the corner. "She said a smart woman always has somewhere to run. It's almost like she wanted me to know about the life I was born into, before I even understood it, if that makes sense."

"It makes plenty of sense."

I watch her work, noting how naturally she moves through the space.

This isn't just a safe house—it's a piece of her family history, a connection to the mother she lost.

"Are you thinking about trying to contact your father?" I ask.

She shakes her head, frustration evident. "No, he said he'd make contact with me first, but...I want to hear from him." She turns from the equipment, and I can see the worry she's trying to hide. "This doesn't feel right, and it's getting to me, Brick."

The confirmation of what we already suspected settles between us like a lead weight.

Diego's betrayal goes deeper than just selling us out—it's compromised Mateo's entire organization.

"We're going to figure it out," I tell her, though I'm not sure how. "Once we reach the clubhouse, Amara will have resources we can use."

She nods, but I can see the doubt in her dark eyes.

The woman who impressed me the first moment I met her is showing cracks in her armor.

I find myself studying her more intently—the way she moves with unconscious grace, the subtle scent of her perfume cutting through the dust and sweat of our journey, the intelligence that flashes in her eyes when she's processing information.

Everything about her draws me in, even though I should know better than to get involved with someone I'm on a protection detail with.

"You're staring again," she says without looking at me, unpacking her bag.

"Thinking," I correct, though she's not wrong.

"About what?"

About how you make me forget why I'm here.

About how protecting you has become personal in ways I didn't expect.

About how much I want to taste those lips that always seem to be set in that determined line.

"About how to keep you alive," I say instead.

She pauses in her unpacking, something flickering across her expression. "Is that all I am to you? A mission? A quest? An assignment?"

The question catches me off guard with its directness. "You were," I admit. "When

this started."

"And now?"

Now you're the first thing I think about when I wake up and the last thing on my mind before I sleep.

Now the thought of someone hurting you makes me see red in ways that have nothing to do with the club.

"Now it's complicated," I say.

She moves closer, close enough that I can see the gold flecks in her dark eyes. "Complicated how?"

"Imani..." I start, but she's standing right in front of me now, her hand coming up to rest on my chest.

"Tell me," she says softly.

The words get caught in my throat as her fingers trace over the fabric of my shirt.

Every nerve ending where she touches feels like it's on fire.

This is dangerous, but I can't seem to care about the risks right now.

"You make me want things I have no business wanting," I admit roughly.

Her lips curve into a small smile. "Such as?"

Instead of answering with words, I cup her face in my hands, my thumb tracing the

elegant line of her cheekbone.

Her skin is soft as silk, warmed by the desert sun.

She leans into the touch, her eyes fluttering closed for a moment.

When she opens them again, the heat I see there nearly undoes me.

"Brick," she whispers, and hearing my name on her lips in that breathless tone breaks whatever restraint I was clinging to.

I lower my head slowly, giving her time to pull away if she wants to.

But she doesn't move—instead, she rises on her toes to meet me halfway.

The kiss starts soft, tentative, a question asked and answered.

But the moment her lips part under mine, something ignites between us.

My hands slide into her hair, tilting her head back as I deepen the kiss.

She tastes like danger and desire, like everything I've ever wanted and shouldn't have.

Her hands fist in my shirt, pulling me closer as she kisses me back with a hunger that matches my own.

Years of walls and control crumble under the assault of her mouth, her body pressed against mine.

I back her against the wall, my mouth leaving hers to trail down the column of her throat.

She makes a small sound—part gasp, part moan—that goes straight to my head like the finest tequila.

"We shouldn't," she breathes, even as her head falls back to give me better access.

"I know," I murmur against her skin, tasting the salt and sweetness of her. "Tell me to stop."

Her hands slide up to grip my shoulders. "I can't."

The honesty in her voice, the admission that she's as lost in this as I am, makes me lift my head to look at her.

Her lips are swollen from our kiss, her eyes dark with desire, her chest rising and falling with rapid breaths.

She's beautiful.

Not just physically, though she's stunning enough to stop traffic.

The urge to claim her, to mark her as mine, rises with such intensity it frightens me.

This isn't just attraction anymore.

This is something much more dangerous.

I force myself to step back, breaking the spell between us.

The loss of contact feels like tearing away part of myself.

"We should get some rest," I say, my voice rough. "It'll be a long day tomorrow."

Hurt flashes in her eyes before she masks it with icy composure. "Of course. The assignment."

"Imani—"

"It's fine," she says, turning away to busy herself with checking her weapon. "You're right. We need to stay focused."

But it's not fine, and we both know it.

The tension between us has shifted into something intense and unresolved, crackling in the air whenever we look at each other.

I settle into the chair by the window, positioning myself to watch the street while she takes the bed.

Silence stretches between us, filled with all the things we're not saying.

Hours pass. I can tell from her breathing that she's not sleeping any more than I am.

Every small sound she makes—the rustle of sheets, a quiet sigh—sends awareness shooting through me.

Around three in the morning, she cries out in her sleep.

Not loud, but sharp with terror.

I'm on my feet and beside the bed before I consciously decide to move.

"Imani," I say softly, not wanting to startle her awake too suddenly. "Hey, you're okay."

She jerks awake, eyes wide with fear before focusing on me.

For a moment, she looks young and vulnerable, nothing like the strong cartel princess she usually presents to the world.

"Nightmare?" I ask gently.

She nods, pushing herself up to sit against the headboard. "The same one I've had since I was five. My mother and brother... their blood on the floor..."

Without thinking, I sit on the edge of the bed and pull her into my arms.

She resists for a moment, then melts against me, her face buried in my chest.

"I can still hear the gunshots," she whispers. "Still smell the gunpowder and blood. Sometimes I wake up thinking I'm still that little girl, hiding behind the couch while men kill my family."

I hold her tighter, one hand stroking her hair. "You're safe now. I've got you."

"Do you?" she asks, lifting her head to look at me. "Have me, I mean?"

The question hangs between us, loaded with meaning.

She's not just asking about protection—she's asking about something deeper, more personal.

"Yeah," I say quietly. "I do."

She searches my eyes, looking for something.

Whatever she finds there seems to satisfy her, because she relaxes against me again.

"Tell me about your family," she says after a while. "What happened to your father?"

The subject I never talk about, the wound I keep buried.

But something about the darkness, about holding her in my arms while she shares her pain, makes me want to tell her.

"Armed robbery," I say finally. "Fifteen years ago. He held up a liquor store to get money for food and rent."

"He was desperate?"

"Broke, no job, debt collectors threatening the family. He saw it as his only option." I can still remember that night—the police at the door, my mother's screams, the way my world changed in a matter of minutes. "Got fifteen to twenty-five. Could be out in a few more years if he behaves himself."

"Have you seen him? Since he went in?"

I shake my head. "He writes letters. I keep them, but I've never opened them. Don't know what he could say that would make any difference."

Her fingers trace patterns on my chest as she thinks about what I've said. "Maybe he wants to explain. Tell you why he did it."

"I know why he did it. Doesn't change what happened after."

"What happened to your mother?"

The harder question.

The one that explains why I became the club's medic, why I'm driven to fix what's broken.

"She fell apart," I say simply. "Started drinking, then pills, then harder stuff. I learned to take care of her—basic medical stuff, managing her medications, keeping her functional. By the time I was sixteen, I was more of a parent than a child."

"That's why you became a medic."

"Partly. Also because I was good at it. Turns out I have a talent for putting people back together." I look down at her, noting how right she feels in my arms. "What about you? Ever think about going back to medicine?"

"Sometimes. But my father needs me in the business side. Someone he can trust to handle the legitimate operations."

"Is that what you want? Or is it what he wants?"

She's quiet for so long I think she might not answer. "I don't know anymore. For so long, I've defined myself by what the family needs, what my mother would have wanted. I'm not sure who I am outside of that."

"You're brilliant," I tell her. "Brave, strategic, tougher than most men I know. You could be anything you wanted to be."

She lifts her head to look at me again, something vulnerable in her expression. "You see me differently than most people do."

"How do most people see you?"

"Mateo Torres's daughter. A valuable asset. A potential threat. A prize to be won or a target to be eliminated." She pauses. "You're the first person in a long time to see me as just... me."

The admission hits me harder than it should.

This woman, who has everything money can buy, is starved for something as simple as being seen for who she is rather than what she represents.

"You're not just anything to me," I say quietly.

The words hang between us, an admission that changes everything. Her eyes search mine, and I can see the exact moment she makes her decision.

She leans up and kisses me, soft and sweet this time, not the desperate hunger from earlier but something more sincere.

I should pull away.

I should remember what the goal is, what my responsibilities are, the dozen reasons why this is a bad idea.

But when she looks at me like that, like I'm something she cares about, it's hard to stop.

The kiss deepens gradually, her hands sliding up to cup my face as I gather her closer.

When we finally break apart, both breathing hard, she rests her forehead against mine.

"Stay with me," she whispers. "Tonight."

"Imani," I start, but she silences me with a finger against my lips.

"I know what I'm asking. I know it complicates things." Her eyes are steady on mine.

"But I need you. Not the protector, not the prospect on a mission. You, Brick."

The simple honesty in her words breaks the last of my resistance.

Whatever consequences come from this, whatever complications it creates, I can't deny her.

I can't deny us.

"Okay," I say.

She smiles then, the first truly carefree expression I've seen from her since this all started. It transforms her face, making her look younger, happier.

But our moment is interrupted by the sound of vehicles pulling up outside—multiple engines, moving fast.

Through the window, I can see headlights converging on the building.

"Shit," I breathe, grabbing my weapon. "They found us."

The moment of peace shatters as reality crashes back in.

We're not just two people finding comfort in each other—we're hunted prey, and the hunters have found our scent.

"How?" Imani demands, already moving to gather our gear.

"Doesn't matter now," I reply, checking the magazine in my gun. "What matters is getting out of here alive."

The sound of boots on the stairs echoes through the building.

Multiple sets, moving fast. Professional again, just like all the others.

"Back exit?" I ask.

"Fire escape," she confirms, pointing to the window facing the alley.

We grab our essential gear and head for the window. Behind us, I can hear doors being kicked in, systematic searches getting closer.

As I help Imani onto the fire escape, I can't help but think about what almost happened between us.

What should have happened, if we'd had more time.

But time is a luxury we don't have.

The only thing that matters now is survival.

The fire escape creaks under our weight as we descend, the metal protesting after years of neglect.

Below us, the alley stretches into darkness—our escape route to whatever comes next.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Imani

We move through the shadows like ghosts, every footstep calculated to avoid detection.

Brick matches my pace perfectly, his larger frame somehow managing to be silent, even with his large size.

The man moves like a predator—controlled, efficient, deadly.

Behind us, flashlight beams sweep the darkness as our hunters spread out to search the surrounding area.

"There." Brick points to a narrow gap between two buildings. "We can lose them in the residential district."

But as we approach the gap, gunfire erupts from the rooftops above.

Muzzle flashes strobe in the darkness as bullets spark off concrete walls around us.

"Snipers!" I shout, pressing myself against the nearest wall.

Brick is already moving, his gun coming up to return fire at the rooftop positions.

His shots are precise, controlled bursts that force the snipers to take cover.

"We need to get off the street," he says, reloading with practiced efficiency. "They've got overwatch on all the main escape routes."

I scan our surroundings, looking for options.

The alley is a killing field now, with elevated positions providing perfect fields of fire.

But there—a drainage tunnel, barely visible in the shadows beneath a concrete overpass.

"Storm drain," I say, pointing to the tunnel entrance. "It connects to the city's underground system."

More gunfire erupts, this time from ground level as foot teams close in on our position.

We're caught in a crossfire between rooftop snipers and advancing assault teams.

"Go!" Brick shouts, laying down covering fire as I sprint toward the drainage tunnel. "I'll be right behind you!"

I reach the tunnel entrance and turn back to see Brick fighting with at least three assailants at once.

He moves like a machine, dropping targets with ruthless efficiency.

But as he turns to follow me, a sniper's bullet catches him high on the left shoulder, spinning him around and sending him stumbling.

"Brick!" I scream, starting back toward him.

"Stay back!" he growls, clutching his shoulder as blood seeps between his fingers.

But he's still moving, still fighting, using his good arm to return fire while backing toward the tunnel.

A second bullet grazes his ribs, opening up his previous wound.

Now there's blood soaking through his shirt on both sides, but he keeps moving, keeps shooting, keeps protecting me even as his own life bleeds away.

He reaches the tunnel entrance and practically falls through, his face pale with blood loss but his eyes still fierce.

I help him deeper into the tunnel where we'll have some cover. "Jesus, you're hit bad."

"I'll live," he grunts, though the amount of blood suggests otherwise. "We need to keep moving."

"Like hell," I reply firmly. "You're bleeding out. Sit down and let me look at it."

For once, he doesn't argue.

Maybe because he's too weak from losing blood, or maybe because he recognizes the medical authority in my voice.

Either way, he slumps against the tunnel wall while I assess his injuries.

The shoulder wound is clean—through and through, missing the major arteries.

But the bullet that reopened his ribs has torn the previous stitches and created a much

larger wound.

Blood flows freely, soaking his shirt and pooling on the tunnel floor.

"Medical kit," I say, already reaching for his bag. "I need to stop this bleeding before you go into shock."

My hands shake slightly as I prepare the supplies, but my training takes over.

"This is going to hurt," I warn, cleaning the wound with antiseptic.

He grits his teeth but doesn't make a sound as I work.

The tunnel around us echoes with distant shouts and gunfire as our pursuers search for our escape route, but my entire world has narrowed to the man bleeding in my hands.

"Why?" I ask as I suture the worst of the damage. "Why did you do that? You could have been killed."

"Couldn't let them hurt you," he says simply, as if it's the most obvious thing in the world.

The casual way he says it—like my life is worth more than his own—does something to my chest, makes it tight with emotions.

My hands are steady even though his words went straight to my heart. "You barely know me."

"I know enough." His amber eyes find mine in the dim light filtering through the tunnel entrance. "I know you're brave and smart and stronger than you realize. I know

you taste like sin and salvation all at once. And I know I'd rather die than see you hurt."

The honesty in his voice, the raw emotion beneath him, breaks something loose inside me.

This man—this beautiful, dangerous, impossibly loyal man—nearly died protecting me.

And not because it's his job, but because I matter to him.

"Brick," I breathe, my hands stilling on his bandages.

"Finish fixing me up first," he says with a weak smile. "Then we can talk about whatever's happening between us."

I finish his medical treatment in silence, hyper-aware of every place our skin touches, every breath he takes, every flutter of his pulse under my fingers.

By the time I finish, the immediate bleeding has stopped, but he's still pale from blood loss.

I secure the last bandage. "Better?"

"Much," he replies, though I can see the pain he's hiding. "Thanks, doc."

The simple endearment shouldn't affect me as much as it does, but something about the way he says it—with such warmth and trust—makes my heart race.

We're sitting close together in the narrow tunnel, his blood on my hands, the sound of our pursuers growing distant.

The adrenaline from the fight is fading, replaced by something else entirely.

"Imani," he says softly, his good hand coming up to cup my face.

I lean into his touch, closing my eyes at the gentle contact.

When I open them again, I see everything I've been trying to deny reflected in his gaze—desire, tenderness, possession.

"This changes things," I whisper.

"Yeah," he agrees. "It does."

I should pull away.

I should remember that we're still being hunted, still in danger, still operating under impossible circumstances. But when he looks at me like that—like I'm something precious and perfect and his—nothing else seems to matter.

I lean forward and kiss him, soft and careful of his injuries.

He responds immediately, his good arm coming around my waist to pull me closer.

"Are you sure?" he asks against my lips, his voice rough with want and pain.

"I've never been more sure of anything in my life," I reply honestly.

Brick makes me feel seen, valued, protected—not as Mateo Torres's daughter or a cartel asset, but as a woman worth fighting for.

His mouth finds mine again, hungrier this time, and I lose myself in the taste and heat

of him.

My hands slide over his chest, careful of his injuries but needing to touch, to reassure myself he's alive and whole and mine.

"Not here," he says, breaking away with visible effort. "You deserve better than a drainage tunnel."

"I don't care where we are," I tell him truthfully. "I just need you."

Something in my voice makes his eyes darken with desire.

His thumb traces my lower lip, and I catch it gently between my teeth, drawing a sharp intake of breath from him.

"Imani," he warns, his voice strained.

"What?" I ask innocently, though there's nothing innocent about the way I'm looking at him.

Instead of answering, he threads his fingers through my hair and pulls me into another kiss, this one deeper and more demanding.

I can taste his need, his restraint cracking under the pressure of everything we've been through together.

My hands find the hem of his shirt, sliding underneath to touch warm skin and hard muscle.

He hisses at the contact, whether from his injuries or desire, I'm not sure.

"Careful," he breathes. "Don't want to start bleeding again."

"Then let me take care of you," I whisper, my lips finding the pulse point at his throat.

He groans, a sound that goes straight through me like liquid fire.

His good hand fists in my hair as I trail soft kisses along his jawline, down his neck, careful to avoid his bandaged shoulder.

"This is crazy," he says, even as his body responds to my touch.

"Everything about this situation is crazy," I reply, pulling back to look at him. "But this—us—this is the first thing that's felt real since this nightmare started."

The truth of that statement hangs between us.

"I've wanted this since the moment I saw you," he admits, his thumb stroking along my cheekbone. "Even when I was trying to convince myself it was just the job."

"It stopped being just a job for me too," I confess. "You make me feel things I didn't know I was capable of feeling."

The admission costs me something—a piece of the armor I've worn for so long I'd forgotten what it felt like to be without it.

But with Brick, I don't need armor. I can just be myself.

He seems to understand the significance of my words because his expression goes tender.

When he kisses me this time, it's with a gentleness that brings tears to my eyes.

"I've got you," he whispers against my lips. "Whatever happens, I've got you."

And for the first time in longer than I can remember, I believe it.

This man who barely knows me has committed himself to my protection—not just physically, but emotionally.

He sees me, values me, wants me for who I am rather than what I represent.

It opens something inside me, releases feelings I've kept locked away for years.

When I kiss him back, I put everything into it—all my gratitude, my desire, my growing feelings for this impossible man who's turned my world upside down.

We lose ourselves in each other here in the darkness, the danger outside forgotten as we discover this new connection between us.

His hands map my body with care, every touch sending sparks through my nervous system.

When I touch him in return, he responds with an intensity that makes me feel powerful and feminine and utterly desired.

We're careful of his injuries, turning the limitations into an opportunity for slow exploration rather than desperate coupling.

Every kiss is savored, every caress deliberate and meaningful.

It's unlike anything I've ever experienced—not just physical gratification, but

emotional connection, two souls finding solace in each other.

"Let me see you," Brick murmurs against my throat, his voice rough with need.

I'm worried about his injuries, but his good hand moves, sliding beneath my shirt to trace the curve of my waist.

I shiver at his touch, my body responding instantly to the heat in his amber eyes.
"Your wounds?—"

"Are worth it," he interrupts, capturing my mouth in a kiss that steals my breath.
"Every drop of blood was worth it to keep you safe."

The protectiveness in his voice undoes me.

I straddle him carefully, mindful of his bandaged ribs, and his sharp intake of breath has nothing to do with pain.

His hand tangles in my hair, angling my head to deepen the kiss until I'm drowning in him.

"Imani," he groans when I rock against him, feeling exactly how much he wants this.
"You're going to be the death of me."

"Not on my watch," I whisper, nipping at his lower lip. "I just put you back together. I'm not letting you go anywhere."

His laugh is dark and full of promise. "Bossy little thing, aren't you?"

"Someone has to be," I breathe, trailing kisses along his jaw. "Since you seem determined to throw yourself in front of bullets for me."

His hand slides up my back, pulling me closer until there's no space between us. "I'd do it again," he says simply, and the rawness in his voice making my heart race. "In a heartbeat."

I kiss him then, pouring everything I can't say into the connection between us.

I undo his buckle and free his hard cock, sinking onto him in one fluid motion.

"That's it," he encourages, his voice strained as I move above him, careful not to put pressure on his wounds. "Just like that, baby."

He responds with just as much need as I have, his touch demanding, treating me like something precious and desired all at once.

I don't stop until we're both falling over the edge.

I don't know if it's the danger of what we're doing, or if this is because our connection is undeniable, but I'll take it.

"When we get out of here," he promises against my lips, his voice strained with the effort of holding back, "I'm going to worship every inch of you properly. Somewhere with a bed and all the time in the world."

The images his words conjure make me tremble. "I'll hold you to that."

"Good," he growls, claiming my mouth again in a kiss that promises everything and delivers just enough to leave me aching for more.

"That was..." I start, then trail off, unable to find the right words.

"Yeah," he agrees, understanding what I can't articulate.

We lie there in silence, the reality of our situation temporarily held at bay by the afterglow of what we've just shared.

For these few precious moments, we're not a cartel princess and her protector—we're just two people who've found something beautiful together.

But eventually, the sound of distant voices reminds us that we can't stay here forever.

Our hunters are still out there, still searching for us, still trying to get me.

"We should move," Brick says reluctantly, though he makes no immediate effort to release me.

"I know," I reply, but I don't move either.

Whatever comes next, we'll face it together.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Brick

The storm drain system stretches for miles, a concrete maze that I know will lead directly under the city toward the clubhouse.

Every step away from that tunnel where we fucked feels like I'm leaving a piece of myself behind.

Everything has changed between us, and I can't stop thinking about it.

The way Imani felt in my arms, the way she looked at me when we came together, the trust she's shown me since we've been on this adventure.

If I can even call it an adventure, that is.

Things should be simple—protect her, complete my assignment, deliver her safely to the club, then get back to looking for Lashes, for my best friend in the entire fucking world.

But nothing about this feels simple anymore.

What happened in that tunnel wasn't just sex, wasn't just two people finding comfort in each other.

It was primal as fuck, like I was claiming her.

I've never felt this way toward a woman, and something about Imani makes me desire her.

Not in the typical way like a clubwhore or random piece of ass on the street. It's more intense, deeper.

Fuck, I can't even be thinking about this shit.

My duty is to the club, to finding Lashes.

For months, finding Lashes has been my obsession, the thing pushing me to get through the day.

But now there's Imani to consider.

Every instinct I have has shifted, becoming personal in ways that terrify me.

This isn't just about getting her back to the club safe and sound anymore.

The thought of losing Imani, of failing to keep her safe, triggers something—the same fear of abandonment that's haunted me since my father went to prison.

"You're thinking too hard," Imani says softly, her voice echoing off the concrete walls.

There's something different in her tone now, an undertone that wasn't there before.

She knows my body now, has seen me at my most vulnerable, and that adds to the connection.

"Just processing," I reply, though that's an understatement.

I'm trying to figure out how protecting her has become more important to me than finding my best friend.

The guilt of that sits heavy in my chest.

We emerge from a maintenance tunnel into a wider section of the drain system.

Natural light filters down from storm grates above, creating patterns on the wet concrete.

I can smell the industrial district—motor oil, welding fumes, the god-awful odor of the meat processing plant that sits three blocks from the clubhouse.

Home is close.

"We're close," I tell her, checking my mental map of the underground system.
"Maybe another ten minutes."

Amara makes sure we know everything, how to get out of numerous situations whenever the situation arises.

She trains us to think on our feet, and do whatever is necessary.

She nods, adjusting the strap of her bag.

Even after everything we've been through—the gunfights, escaping through the city, hours in these damp tunnels—she still looks beautiful.

Messy and dirty, but beautiful.

Her tight curls have come loose, framing her face in soft spirals.

There's a smudge of dirt on her cheek that I have the sudden urge to wipe away.

"What happens when we get there?" she asks, and I can hear the uncertainty beneath her composed exterior.

"You meet the club, my family," I say, the words carrying more weight than they should. "And we figure out our next move."

But even as I say it, I'm not sure what our next move should be.

Amara will want some sort of report, an explanation of what happened during the run.

How do I explain how it became so personal?

How do I tell them that I'm falling for the woman I was supposed to protect?

As we continue through the tunnels, my phone buzzes with an incoming message.

I almost ignore it—we've been maintaining communication silence to avoid tracking.

But something makes me check it, and what I see makes my blood run cold.

The message is from Amara:

You've been radio silent. At least check in and let me know you're safe.

"Fuck," I breathe, reading it again.

I should check in, but there's a reason I've been so fucking quiet.

We know we're being tracked, and I thought it could've been through any calls or

texts I was making, maybe even Imani's burner phone, but is it something else?

If my Prez is asking me to contact her, then I need to do it.

I text her back:

En route. Will be there soon. Make sure you have the gates ready for us.

"What is it?" Imani asks, moving closer to read over my shoulder.

Her body presses against mine, her perfume hitting my nostrils.

She reads the message, her face going pale. "Amara wanted you to contact her? Okay, that's fine, right?"

"Yeah, it's fine," I reply, though something in my gut says otherwise. "She's probably just worried since we've been dark for so long."

But the timing feels off.

Amara doesn't usually check in like this unless something's wrong.

The woman has ice in her veins and trusts her people to handle their business without constant contact.

We continue through the drainage system, the familiar scents of home growing stronger with each step.

The tunnel system opens into a larger chamber, and I recognize the landmarks.

We're directly in front of the clubhouse now, obviously underneath it.

"There," I point to a heavy iron gate marked with the Reapers Rejects MC emblem.
"That leads directly into the compound."

I get out of the drain first, squeezing through.

I offer a hand to Imani and as I pull her up, pain radiates through my side.

God damn bullet wounds.

Once we're both out, she slings the bag over her shoulder.

"Ready to meet everyone?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," she says, and I don't miss the nervousness in her voice.

We walk in through the gate, Rooster and Doom standing guard.

As soon as we're in, they shut it behind us and my brothers come up, patting me on the back and telling me how good it is to see me.

We head right toward the clubhouse because I'm tired as fuck.

This simple escort run has sucked the life out of me.

We walk in the garage area and see brothers working on bikes.

"Brick!" Compass voice cuts through the noise.

He's bent over his bike, grease covering his hands, but his face breaks into a relieved grin when he sees me. "Fuck, man, Prez has been asking about you."

Other heads turn our way, and I can see the curious glances as the brothers take in Imani.

She doesn't flinch at the rough language or the casual display of weapons hanging on the walls.

If anything, she looks right at home, which surprises me more than it should.

"This is Imani Torres," I say, making the introduction clear. "Alejandro's goddaughter."

The mention of Alejandro's name gets immediate respect.

Boulder emerges from the other side of the garage, his ol' lady, Kelsey, right behind him.

Relief floods his scarred face when he sees us. "About damn time, brother."

"Good to see you too," I reply, accepting the bone-crushing handshake he offers.

Kelsey steps forward, her smile warm as she looks at Imani. "You must be Amara's friend. She's mentioned you."

"All good things, I hope," Imani replies with a slight smile.

I can see her assessing the room, searching faces and I swear she's looking for potential threats.

She won't find any here—she's safe.

"Where's Amara?" I ask, looking around the garage for our president.

"Office," Boulder replies, but there's something in his tone that makes the hair on my arm stick up. "She's been waiting for you. Both of you."

As we make our way through the clubhouse, I can feel the weight of curious stares following us.

"They're all looking at us," Imani murmurs quietly.

"They're curious," I correct. "It's not often someone brings a woman into the clubhouse who isn't a clubwhore, piece of ass, or an ol' lady."

"And which am I?"

The question stops me cold.

What exactly is Imani to me? To the club?

The assignment was simple—transport and protect, but that's not what this is anymore.

"You're mine," I say simply, and the possessiveness in my voice surprises even me. "That makes you family."

Her smile in response transforms her entire face. "Good answer, prospect."

We reach Amara's office, and I can hear voices inside—multiple people, which is unusual for a standard debrief.

I knock once and wait for permission.

"Come in," Amara's voice calls out.

I open the door to find not just Amara behind her desk, but Ruby organizing medical supplies in the corner.

"Brick," Amara says, rising from her chair.

Relief flashes across her face before being replaced by her usual stoic expression. "Imani."

"Amara," Imani replies, and I'm surprised by the warmth in her voice. "It's been too long."

"Too long and under shitty circumstances," Amara agrees, moving around her desk to embrace Imani briefly.

The gesture tells me their friendship goes deeper than just some political shit between their families.

"Ruby." I nod to the club's unofficial medic. "Thanks for having supplies ready."

"Always do," she replies, her eyes taking in my visible injuries. "You need looking at?"

"I'm fine," I say automatically, though the bullet graze on my shoulder is throbbing and my ribs ache where the previous wound reopened.

"Bullshit," Imani says firmly. "He's been shot three times and is too damn stubborn to admit he needs medical attention."

Ruby's eyebrows rise. "Three times? Sit your ass down, prospect. I don't care how tough you think you are."

"Later," I say, though I can see from Ruby's expression that 'later' isn't going to fly.
"Right now we need to talk about the trip."

Amara gestures for us to sit as she gets up and closes the door, then returns to her chair.

"Report," she says simply.

I tell her everything I can.

How Diego betrayed Imani, how there were professionals hunting us the entire fucking time.

There isn't one detail I leave out.

As I speak, I watch Amara's expression grow increasingly grim.

"Professional military contractors," she repeats when I finish. "Not local sicarios ."

"Definitely not," Imani confirms. "These were trained operatives. Coordinated, well-equipped, disciplined."

"Which means this goes beyond Diego," Amara says, leaning back in her chair.
"Someone with serious money is orchestrating this."

"The trafficking angle makes the most sense," I say. "Imani's investigation threatens their operation, so they're trying to eliminate the threat."

"Or acquire it," Amara points out darkly. "A cartel princess with business training would be valuable merchandise to the right buyers."

The casual way she says it makes my blood boil, even though I know she's just thinking about everything.

The thought of anyone viewing Imani as 'merchandise' triggers something inside me.

"Over my dead body," I growl.

"That might be exactly what they're planning," Amara replies. "If they can't take her alive, eliminating her removes the threat to their operation."

"So what's the plan?" Imani asks.

Amara is quiet for a few moments, "Short term, you stay here under club protection. Long term..." She shrugs. "We need more intel. Who's behind this, what their capabilities are, what their end game looks like."

"I might be able to help with that," Imani says carefully. "My investigation turned up financial connections, shell companies, money trails. If I can access my research..."

"Where is it?" Amara asks.

"Encrypted files on a secure server. I can access it remotely, but I'll need a clean computer and secure internet connection. Mine... well, it's in the bag but there might be a bullet caught in it, so I think it's a goner."

"Ruby can set that up," Amara says, nodding to her. "But first, she's going to look at those bullet wounds before you bleed all over my furniture."

I start to object, but the look on both women's faces tells me bitching about this won't make a difference. "Fine. But make it quick."

"Take your time," Amara says with a slight smile. "I want to catch up with Imani anyway. It's been too long since we've talked."

As Ruby leads me to the adjoining medical room, I catch Imani's eye.

"Strip," Ruby orders the moment we're in the medical room. "Let's see what we're working with."

I peel off my shirt, wincing as the fabric pulls at the reopened wound on my ribs.

Ruby whistles low when she sees the damage.

"Jesus, Brick. What happened to those stitches?"

"Gunfire happened," I reply. "Imani patched me up as best she could under the circumstances."

"She did a good job," Ruby admits, examining the wound. "Clean sutures, but you've torn several of them open again."

"So," Ruby says as she cleans the wound, "you going to tell me what's really going on here?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the way you look at her, the way she looks at you. I've been in the club life for a long time, prospect. I know something's going on with you and Miss Cartel Princess."

I'm quiet for a moment, trying to figure out how to explain something I don't understand myself. "It's complicated."

"It always is," Ruby replies with a smile. "But complicated doesn't mean wrong. Just means you better be sure about what you're getting into."

"I'm sure," I say, and realize I mean it. Whatever this thing is between Imani and me, I'm all in.

"Good," Ruby says, applying fresh bandages. "Because that woman in there? She's not going anywhere anytime soon. And neither are you, if you're smart."

She's right.

CHAPTER NINE

Imani

Silence stretches between us, and I feel like things are awkward.

They shouldn't be, I've known Amara for so long, but it's been years since we've seen each other.

"So," Amara says, settling back into her chair with that knowing look I remember from our teenage years. "Want to tell me what's really going on between you and my prospect?"

Heat floods my cheeks, and I hate that she can still read me so easily. "It's complicated."

"It always is with you." She leans forward, her expression serious now. "But I've never seen you look at a man the way you look at him. And I've definitely never seen Brick look at anyone the way he looks at you."

I fidget with the strap of my bag, avoiding her penetrating stare.

How do I explain that in the space of a few days, this man has turned my entire world upside down?

That this has become something that terrifies and thrills me at the same time?

"He makes me feel..." I start, then stop, struggling to find the right words. "Different. Like I'm more than just Mateo Torres' daughter. Like I'm worth something beyond my name and connections."

"You've always been worth more than that," Amara says gently. "But I'm glad you're finally seeing it."

"Are you?" I ask, meeting her eyes. "Because getting involved with him complicates everything. The club, the alliance between our families, my father's expectations."

Amara is quiet for a long moment, studying me, "Your father's expectations have been running your life for too long, girl. Maybe it's time you started living for yourself."

The words hit harder than they should, probably because they're true.

I've spent so many years trying to be the perfect daughter, the perfect heir, the perfect representative of the Torres name.

But with Brick, I'm just Imani.

Not a cartel princess or a Harvard graduate or a valuable political asset.

Just a woman falling for a man who sees her for who she really is.

"It scares me," I admit quietly. "How much I want this. Want him."

"Good," Amara replies with a slight smile. "The best things in life should scare you a little. Otherwise, they're not worth having."

Before I can respond, she's moving to the computer setup in the corner of her office.

"Come on. Let's take a look at those files you mentioned. If we're going to figure out who's behind this trafficking operation, we need all the intel we can get."

I follow her over, pulling up the secure server where I've stored months of research.

The financial data fills the screen—bank transfers, shell companies, shipping manifests, property records.

What started as a simple investigation into money laundering has revealed something much more sinister.

"Jesus," Amara breathes, scanning the information. "That's a lot."

"And it's just the tip of the iceberg," I reply, pulling up additional files. "Look at these shipping routes. They're using legitimate businesses to move merchandise across international borders. Import/export companies, art dealers, even charitable organizations."

Amara's expression grows darker as she processes the scope of the operation. "High-end human trafficking with global reach. This isn't some backwater cartel operation."

"No, it's not." I point to a series of financial transfers. "These payments—they're going to shell companies in Prague, Dubai, Singapore. Places where wealthy buyers can bid on 'special merchandise' without too many questions being asked."

"Auctions," Amara says grimly.

"Exclusive ones. The kind where you need connections and serious money just to get an invitation." I pause, a light bulb coming on in my head. "The kind where someone with my background and resources would be welcomed with open arms."

Amara turns to look at me, understanding immediately where I'm going with this. "You want to infiltrate them."

"I think I can," I say, my voice gaining confidence. "Mateo Torres' daughter, looking to diversify the family business into new ventures. I have the connections, the financial backing, the reputation. They'd see me as a potential high-value client."

"It's insane," Amara says, but I can see her mind working through the possibilities. "Dangerous as hell. If they made you as a threat instead of a customer..."

"Then I'd be in the same position I'm in now," I point out. "Except this way, we might actually be able to find Lashes too, and shut down their operation."

Amara is quiet for a long moment, "We'd need to plan this out the right way. I'd want intel on their security protocols, backup plans, extraction strategies for when shit hits the fan, because nothing ever goes according to plan."

"All things the club specializes in," I reply. "And with my father's resources..."

"Speaking of your father," Amara interrupts, "any word on his condition? The reports we're getting are conflicting."

The question hits hard.

In all the chaos of the past few days, I've been trying not to think about what might be happening to my father.

"Nothing," I say quietly. "Radio silence since I left El Paso. That's not like him, even if things are a little nuts."

"We'll find out what's happening," Amara promises. "I have people working on it."

Before I can respond, the door opens and Brick emerges, his shoulder and ribs freshly bandaged.

Ruby follows behind him, shaking her head like she's someone who's used to patching up stubborn men.

"Try not to get shot again," she tells him. "I'm running low on supplies."

Brick grins, but soon enough, it's transforming into his usual expression. "I'll do my best."

My heart does something complicated in my chest when I see that smile. This man, who's been shot three times protecting me, who's faced down professional killers without so much as flinching, can still find humor in the situation.

There's something incredibly attractive about that kind of resilience.

"How are you feeling?" I ask, moving closer to examine Ruby's handiwork.

"Better," he says, and the way his eyes heat when he looks at me makes it clear he's not just talking about himself physically.

"Good," Amara interrupts before things can get too intimate. "Because we have some planning to do. Imani's come up with an idea for how we might be able to get inside this trafficking operation."

Brick's attention immediately sharpens, his protective instincts clearly triggered. "What kind of idea?"

I explain my plan to infiltrate the auction networks, using my cartel connections and financial resources to pose as a potential buyer.

As I speak, I watch his expression grow increasingly stormy.

"Absolutely not," he says when I finish. "You're not walking into the middle of a trafficking ring, no matter how good your cover story is."

"It's the best chance we have of finding Lashes," I argue. "And of stopping these people before they hurt more women."

"I don't care," he replies, his voice dropping, "I'm not letting you put yourself in that kind of danger."

The possessiveness in his tone should annoy me, but instead it sends heat spiraling through my body.

The way he's looking at me—like I'm something precious he'll protect at any cost—makes me feel desired and cherished in ways I've never experienced.

"It's not your decision to make," I say gently, stepping closer to him. "This is my choice."

"Like hell it is," he growls, but I can see the conflict in his amber eyes.

He knows I'm right, even if he hates it.

"She wouldn't be going in alone," Amara interjects. "She'd have backup, extraction plans, communication protocols. And Brick, you'd be her security. Wealthy clients don't travel without protection."

I watch something shift in Brick's expression as he processes this.

The idea of being my partner rather than just my protector seems to appeal to him.

"We'd be together?" he asks.

"Every step of the way," I confirm. "You'd be my bodyguard, my right hand. No one would question a cartel princess traveling with some serious muscle."

He's quiet for a long moment, his mind clearly working through the scenario. "It could work," he admits reluctantly. "If we do it right. I'd want us to have other people around, in the event things went sideways."

"Then we start planning," Amara says decisively. "But first, one thing at a time. I need more information about how you've been tracked since you left El Paso. You've been careful, avoided electronic surveillance, changed routes multiple times. How are they staying one step ahead?"

Every time we thought we were safe, they appeared.

Every escape route we took, they seemed to know what we were doing.

"I've been wondering the same thing," I say, settling into the chair across from Amara's desk. "We ditched the phones, avoided main roads, and used secure locations. But somehow they always knew where we were."

Brick takes the chair beside me, his presence both comforting and distracting.

Even injured and exhausted, he calls to me.

"You think they had people watching?" he suggests. "Drones, maybe even satellite coverage?"

"It's possible, but I doubt they had someone in every town from El Paso to Chihuahua watching for you both," Amara agrees. "Something isn't adding up for

me. You weren't using your phones, hardly at all, right?"

"Correct, we weren't," I confirm for her. "It makes me think maybe a government agency was involved, or military contractors, or intelligence services."

If we're up against an organization with official backing, or at least official connections, our situation is even more dangerous than we thought.

"We need to assume the worst-case scenario," Amara says. "Full surveillance capabilities, unlimited resources, professional operators. Now, about the auction, we need to do the same—assume the worst-case situation."

"Which will make everything more risky," Brick adds. "They'll have background checks, verification procedures."

"Then we make sure our cover is bulletproof," I reply. "My father's reputation speaks for itself. The Torres name opens doors that stay closed to everyone else. "

We spend the next hour going over the details of my investigation, sharing what I know with Amara, discussing potential approaches to the trafficking networks.

"I should go check in with Dante, see if he knows anything," Amara says eventually, rising from her chair. "Why don't you two go get some rest? It's been a long few days."

She pauses at the door, looking back at us with something I can't name. "There's a guest room upstairs, Imani. Clean sheets, private bathroom. Ruby stocked it with everything you might need. Brick, I take it you'll go over and show it to her."

After she leaves, Brick and I sit in silence for a moment.

"You sure about this plan?" he asks quietly.

"No," I admit. "But I'm sure about wanting to help you find Lashes. And I'm sure about wanting to stop these people before they hurt more women."

He reaches over and takes my hand, his thumb tracing patterns on my palm.

The simple contact sends electricity up my arm.

"You don't have to do this," he says. "You could disappear, use your family's resources to go somewhere safe. Start over."

"Without you?" I ask, meeting his eyes.

Something possessive flashes in his amber gaze. "I'd find you," he says simply. "Wherever you went, however long it took. I'd find you."

The promise in his voice makes my heart race.

This man, this beautiful, dangerous, impossibly loyal man, is mine.

Or at least... I think he could be. It's not like we've talked about it.

The thought should terrify me—the complications it creates, the impossibility of our situations.

Instead, it sends a shock of heat through my entire body.

"Then I guess it's a good thing I'm not planning to go anywhere," I say, leaning closer to him.

He cups my face in his free hand, his thumb tracing my cheekbone. "You sure about that? Because once this is over, once we find Lashes and deal with the people hunting you, there's no going back to your old life."

"I don't want my old life," I reply honestly. "I want this. You. Us. Whatever that looks like."

The kiss he gives me is soft and sweet and full of promise.

When we break apart, I'm breathless and aching and completely his.

"Come on," he says, standing and offering me his hand. "Let's go see this room Amara made sure was ready for you."

The guest room is on the second floor, tucked away from the main area of the clubhouse.

It's simple but comfortable—a queen bed with clean white sheets, a dresser, a chair by the window that looks out over the club's courtyard.

There's a small bathroom with a shower that looks like heaven after days of running.

"I'm going to clean up," I tell Brick, gathering some clothes from my bag.

"I'll be here," he replies, settling into the chair by the window.

Even relaxed, he's watchful, aware of our surroundings in a way that makes me feel safe.

The hot water feels incredible against my skin, washing away the dust and tension of the past few days.

I stand under the spray longer than necessary, letting the heat penetrate my muscles, trying to process everything that's happened.

Three days ago, I was Mateo Torres' daughter, living in El Paso, focused on legitimizing the family business.

Now I'm starting to fall for a motorcycle club prospect, preparing to infiltrate an international human trafficking ring, and considering a future I never could have imagined.

All of this should scare the living daylights out of me, instead, I feel like I'm alive.

When I emerge from the bathroom in clean clothes, I find Brick exactly where I left him, but his expression has shifted.

"What is it?" I ask, settling on the edge of the bed.

"Just thinking about what you said earlier. About them always being one step ahead of us." He turns from the window to look at me. "We've been careful, Imani. Really careful. But somehow they've tracked us through two cities, multiple safe houses, even underground tunnels."

"I know," I say, frustration creeping into my voice. "I just can't understand how they did it."

I absently reach up to touch St. Christopher's medallion, a habit I've had since childhood when I'm thinking or worried.

The familiar weight of the gold against my throat is comforting, a connection to my mother that's gotten me through countless difficult moments.

But as my fingers close around the medallion, something clicks in my mind.

A horrible, sick realization that makes my stomach drop.

"Oh my God," I breathe, looking down at the necklace.

"What?" Brick is on his feet immediately, reading the distress in my voice.

With shaking fingers, I unclasp the chain and hold the medallion up to the light.

It's beautiful, antique gold with intricate engravings, exactly as I remember from my childhood.

But now, looking at it with suspicious eyes, I can see something that was never there before.

A tiny, almost invisible seam around the edge.

A modification so subtle it's barely noticeable unless you're looking for it.

"This," I say, my voice barely above a whisper. "It's been this the whole time."

Brick takes the medallion from my trembling hands, examining it with his trained eyes.

"Tracking device," he confirms grimly. "Sophisticated one. Probably GPS and audio capability."

This necklace, this precious connection to my mother, has been turned into a weapon against me.

Someone took the most sacred thing I own and violated it, used it to hunt me like an animal.

"They could have been listening," I say, horror washing over me. "This whole time, they might have heard everything we've said, everywhere we've been."

Brick's face goes deadly still. "Who had access to this? Who could have modified it?"

"Diego," I whisper, the pieces falling into place. "When my apartment was broken into six months ago, he insisted on having all my jewelry checked and cleaned. Said it was a security precaution."

"Son of a bitch," Brick growls. "He's been tracking you for months. Setting you up, waiting for the right moment."

This isn't just about Diego selling information or taking money from my father's enemies.

This is something he's planned for a long time, a cruel way he's manipulated me, a chess game where I've been the unwitting target from the beginning.

"We need to tell Amara," I say, though part of me just wants to smash the medallion against the wall.

"We will," Brick agrees. "But first..."

He moves to the window, opens it wide, and without even thinking, throws the medallion as far as he can into the darkness beyond the club.

I watch it disappear, carrying with it the last connection to my mother—and to the people who've been hunting us.

The loss should devastate me.

Instead, I feel strangely liberated.

Like I've finally cut the last tie to a life that was never really mine.

"I'm sorry," Brick says, turning back to me. "I know that meant something to you."

"It did," I agree. "But it wasn't really mine anymore, was it? The moment they put that tracker in it, it stopped being my mother's gift and became their weapon."

He sits beside me on the bed, pulling me into his arms. I melt against his warmth, letting myself take comfort in his strength.

"We'll get you another one," he promises. "When this is over, we'll find one just like it. Something that's really yours."

The gesture touches me more than expensive jewelry ever could.

This man understands that it's not about the monetary value—it's about the connection, the meaning, the love it represented.

"Thank you," I whisper against his chest.

The immediate danger is gone—the tracker is destroyed, our location is secure.

"If Diego's been planning this for months," I say eventually, "then this trafficking operation isn't just some opportunistic grab. It's targeted, personal."

"Which means they want you specifically," Brick agrees. "Not just any cartel princess. You."

The thought is chilling, but it also confirms what I already suspected.

My investigation into their financial networks made me a threat.

Now they want to eliminate that threat—or turn it into an asset.

"All the more reason to move forward with the plan," I say. "If they want me, let's give them what they want. On our terms."

Brick's arms tighten around me. "You sure about this?"

"I've never been more sure of anything," I reply. And it's true. Whatever comes next, whoever we're facing, I want to end this.

Not just for Lashes, not just to stop the trafficking ring, but for us.

For the future, I'm starting to believe we might actually have if we make it through this mess.

CHAPTER TEN

Brick

I wake up to the sound of engines revving in the courtyard outside of the room.

For the first time in months, I feel rested.

Actually rested, not just the exhausted collapse I've been calling sleep while searching for Lashes.

Imani is curled against my side, her dark curls spread across my chest, one hand resting over my heart.

The sight of her in my arms, safe and whole and mine, does something to me that I'm still getting used to.

Three days ago, she was just another assignment.

Now she's become everything.

Discovering the tracking device last night still pisses me off in ways I can't explain.

The thought of Diego violating something so precious to her, using her mother's memory as a weapon against Imani, makes me want to find the bastard and tear him apart piece by piece.

But we destroyed the tracker, and for the first time since leaving El Paso, we're actually safe.

For now, that is.

Imani murmurs against my chest, her voice rough from just waking up. "Morning,"

"Afternoon," I correct, checking the clock on the nightstand. "We slept for twelve hours."

"We needed it." She stretches like a cat, careful not to jostle my bandaged ribs. "How are you feeling?"

"Better." And I mean it.

Ruby did a good job doctoring me up thanks to the way Imani already prepped me when we were on the run, combined with actual rest, have done wonders for me.

The bullet wounds still ache, but the constant throb has faded to a manageable level.

Nothing a few ibuprofen can't fix.

"Good," she says, pressing a soft kiss to my chest. "Because I can hear your brothers getting ready for something downstairs."

She's right.

The usual background noise of the clubhouse has taken on a different quality—less routine maintenance, more party preparation.

Voices calling out instructions, the sound of tables being moved, someone testing a

sound system.

"Probably planning a party or some shit," I say, running my fingers through her curls.

"It's been a rough few weeks for everyone. Time to blow off some steam."

"Will I be welcome?" she asks, and I can hear the uncertainty beneath her casual tone.

"You're with me," I reply simply. "That makes you always welcome."

The smile she gives me is radiant. "I like the sound of that."

We take our time getting ready, sharing the small bathroom like we've been doing it for years instead of days.

There's something domestic about it that should feel strange but doesn't.

Watching her brush her teeth while I shave, stealing glances at her in the mirror—it feels right in a way nothing else ever has.

Downstairs, the clubhouse is in full party preparation mode.

Brothers are setting up tables in the courtyard, stringing lights between the buildings, hauling kegs of beer from storage.

The atmosphere is relaxed, celebratory, so different from what it's been like these last few months.

"Brick!" Compass waves me over from where he's adjusting something on the sound system. "Can you test this setup?"

I walk over, Imani's hand in mine, and help him fine-tune the speakers.

It's mindless work once you get the hang of it, the kind of routine club shit I've missed during my months of searching for Lashes.

"Sounds good," I tell him after we run through a few test songs.

"Perfect. This is going to be epic." He grins, then looks at Imani. "You drink margaritas? I make the best ones in Mexico."

I won't say this to his face, but I highly doubt this gringo makes the best margaritas in all of Mexico.

"I'd love to try one," she replies with a warm smile. "Thank you."

Compass beams like she's just made his entire week. "One specialty margarita coming up. Secret recipe."

As he heads off to the bar area, I can see other brothers stealing glances at her, clearly curious about the woman who's managed to capture my attention.

We both can tell people are watching, they have been since we arrived yesterday.

She handles it with the grace of someone used to being watched and evaluated, but I can tell she's working to make a good impression.

"Relax," I tell her quietly. "You don't have to prove anything to them."

"Don't I?" she asks. "I'm an outsider walking into the club, your family. That has to mean something."

Before I can respond, a massive shadow falls across us.

Doom, one of the other prospects, approaches me. "Brick, it's good to have you back," he says in his gravelly voice. "Got a minute?"

I nod, squeezing Imani's hand before releasing it. "I'll be right back."

Doom leads me to a quieter corner of the courtyard, away from the party preparations.

He's a man of few words, so when he wants to talk, it's usually important.

"How you holding up?" he asks, leaning back against a concrete planter.

"Good. Better than I have in months."

He nods slowly, studying me with those dark eyes that miss nothing. "You look different. More settled."

I don't need to ask what he means.

The manic energy that's driven me for months, the desperation that came from searching endlessly for Lashes, has finally eased.

Not because I've given up on finding her, but because I'm not carrying that burden alone anymore.

"It's Imani," I say simply.

"Yeah, I figured." Doom crosses his arms over his massive chest. "She seems solid. Handles herself well."

"She does." I pause, then decide to trust him with the plan that's been forming. "We

think we might have a lead on Lashes."

His attention sharpens immediately. "What kind of lead?"

I explain the trafficking operation, the financial connections Imani uncovered, the possibility that Lashes is being held for an exclusive auction.

Honestly, Sally Bernard wanted to fuck with us in the worst way possible. Taking one of our own and selling her to the highest bidder would've been yet another way to do that.

As I talk, Doom's expression shifts.

"International trafficking ring," he says when I finish. "With the kind of resources to run professional kill teams."

"Yeah."

"And your plan is to infiltrate them using your cartel princess as bait."

"That's the idea."

Doom is quiet for a long moment, processing everything I've said to him. "It's fucking insane," he says finally.

My heart sinks.

If Doom thinks it's too dangerous...

"But," he continues, "it's insane enough that it might actually work. These bastards will see a Torres and think profit, not threat."

"You think it could work?"

"I think if anyone can pull it off, it's you and her." He claps a heavy hand on my shoulder, careful of my bandages. "Just make sure you have proper backup. You talk to Amara about it yet?"

"Yeah, all is good. We're supposed to have backup, but she hasn't said who yet."

"I'll volunteer for that shit if she'll let me head out with you." He's been itching for some action, I can tell. "Now go enjoy the party. You've earned it."

As the afternoon flies by, the courtyard fills with brothers and their ol' ladies and prospects.

The atmosphere is relaxed, celebratory, everyone eager to blow off steam after weeks of stress.

Imani fits in better than I expected.

She talks shop with Kelsey about business stuff, swaps stories with some of the ol' ladies about dealing with dangerous men, and listens as the brothers tell exaggerated stories of runs they've been on in the past.

"Here you go, sweetheart. Made this one a little different." Compass says, appearing at her elbow with another massive margarita decorated with lime wheels and salt. I think this is the third one she's had today.

She takes a sip and her eyes widen. "Oh my God, that's incredible. What's in it?"

"Uh-uh, not gonna tell ya," he replies with a grin. "But I'm glad you like it."

I watch her charm my brothers without even trying, just by being herself—smart, interested, unafraid.

She asks Boulder about his tattoos, compliments Oakleigh on her braids, even gets a laugh out of Rooster, who barely talks to anyone.

Kelsey appears at my side with a beer. "She's good for you."

"Yeah, she is."

"You look happier than I've seen you since..." She trails off, not wanting to mention Lashes directly.

"Since before Lashes disappeared," I finish. "I know."

Kelsey nods, understanding. "It's okay to be happy, Brick. Finding someone doesn't mean giving up on your friend."

The words hit deeper than they should, probably because they address the guilt I've been carrying.

For months, Lashes has been my only focus.

The fact that I can feel happiness, can plan a future with Imani while my best friend is still missing, feels like I'm betraying her in some way.

"She'd want you to be happy," Kelsey continues gently. "Lashes, I mean. She'd kick your ass for feeling guilty about finding someone who makes you smile."

She's right, of course.

Lashes always believed in grabbing happiness when you found it, not wasting the good moments worrying about the bad ones.

She'd probably love Imani, would tease me mercilessly about falling for a cartel princess.

The thought makes me smile.

As the sun sets, someone cranks up the music, and the party gets a little crazier.

The sound system Compass and I set up earlier fills the courtyard with a mix of classic rock and country, the kind of music that makes people want to move.

I'm sitting at one of the picnic tables, nursing a beer and watching Imani laugh at something Boulder is telling her, when the opening chords of a slow song fill the air.

It's an old one, the kind they play at wedding receptions and high school dances.

I stand and offer her my hand. "Dance with me."

"You sure your ribs can handle it?" she asks, but she's already rising from her seat.

"For you? I'll risk it."

The courtyard isn't exactly a dance floor, but couples are swaying together near the speakers, lost in their own worlds.

I pull Imani into my arms, careful of my bandages, and we move together slowly.

She fits perfectly against me, her head resting on my shoulder, her body warm and soft in all the right places.

For a moment, I forget about trafficking rings, the people trying to kill us, and all the dangers waiting for us the second we leave the safety of the club.

Right now, there's just this—her in my arms, music playing, my brothers and their families around us.

"This is nice," she murmurs against my neck.

"Yeah, it is."

"I never imagined myself at a motorcycle club party," she admits with a soft laugh.

"What did you imagine?"

She's quiet for a moment, thinking. "Boardrooms. Business dinners. Political events where everyone's calculating the value of every conversation." She pulls back to look at me. "Not this. Not feeling like I belong somewhere."

"You do belong here," I tell her firmly. "With me. With us."

The song ends, but we don't move apart.

Around us, the party continues, but it feels like we're in our own bubble.

Her dark eyes search mine, and I can see everything I'm feeling reflected back at me—love, desire, hope for a future neither of us could have imagined a week ago.

"Take me upstairs," she says quietly.

I don't need to be asked twice.

We slip away from the party, climbing the stairs to her room hand in hand.

The music from below provides a distant soundtrack as I close the door behind us, sealing us into our own private world.

"Come here," she says, backing toward the bed with a smile that makes my blood boil.

I follow, drawn to her like gravity.

When I reach her, she starts sliding my cut down my arms, placing it on the corner of the bed, her fingers gentle around my bandages.

Soon after, she's sliding my shirt over my head.

"We have to be careful," she says, looking at the fresh medical tape. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't," I reply, though part of me thinks she could destroy me completely and I'd thank her for it.

Her hands trace the tattoos that cover my chest and arms.

Her touch is reverent, exploring, like she's memorizing every inch of ink and skin.

"You're beautiful," she whispers, and the way she says it makes me believe it might be true.

I cup her face in my hands, tilting her head up so I can kiss her properly.

She tastes like lime and tequila from Compass's margarita, sweet and sharp and

perfect.

When she parts her lips for me, I lose myself in the taste of her.

My hands find the hem of her shirt, lifting it slowly over her head.

She's not wearing a bra underneath, and the sight of her bare skin in the lamplight makes my mouth go dry.

"God, you're perfect," I breathe, my hands skimming over the curves I've been dying to touch again.

She shivers at my touch, her nipples hardening under my palms.

When I lean down to take one into my mouth, she gasps, her hands fisting in my hair.

"Careful," she reminds me, and I realize I've been pressing against her harder than I should with my ribs.

"Right," I say, forcing myself to slow down, to be gentle even though I want to be deep inside her right the fuck now.

We undress each other slowly, carefully, her hands mapping the bandages and bruises that mark our journey to Chihuahua.

When she presses soft kisses to the edge of my shoulder bandage, something tight in my chest loosens.

"I almost lost you," she whispers against my skin.

"I'm here," I reply, gathering her closer. "I'm not going anywhere."

She straddles my lap, careful to keep her weight off my ribs.

The position puts her perfect breasts right at eye level, and I take full advantage, lavishing attention on each nipple until she's squirming against me.

"Brick," she breathes, grinding down against my cock.

The friction is maddening, especially when I can feel how wet she already is.

I slide one hand between us, finding her clit with my thumb while two fingers slip inside her.

She's so fucking tight, so hot, that I groan against her breast.

"That's it, baby," I murmur as she rides my hand, her movements becoming more desperate. "Take what you need."

She comes apart beautifully, her head thrown back, my name on her lips like a prayer.

Before she's even finished shuddering, she's reaching between us to wrap her hand around my cock.

"I need you inside me," she says, lifting up on her knees.

"Then take what you want."

We both groan as she sinks down, taking me inch by inch until I'm buried to the hilt.

The angle is perfect, letting her control the pace while keeping pressure off my injuries.

"Fuck, Imani," I grit out, my hands gripping her hips. "You feel incredible."

She starts to move, slow at first, then faster as we find our rhythm.

I watch her ride me, mesmerized by the way her breasts bounce, the flush spreading across her chest, the look of pure pleasure on her face.

When I feel her starting to tighten around me again, I slide my hand between us to circle her clit.

When we come together, it's different from that first time in the tunnel.

This is slower, more deliberate, two people who know they have time to savor each moment.

I move carefully, mindful of my injuries, but also wanting to worship every inch of her body.

She's responsive and giving, meeting every touch with one of her own, every kiss just as need-filled.

"I think I'm falling in love with you," I say without thinking, the words torn from somewhere deep inside me.

Her eyes widen, then fill with tears. "I feel the same way, Brick." she whispers back.

We fall onto the bed and lie tangled together, her head on my chest, my arms wrapped around her like I can keep the world at bay through sheer will.

The music from the party below has shifted to something quieter, more mellow.

"What happens now?" she asks, her fingers tracing patterns on my chest.

"Now we figure out how to make this work," I reply. "All of it. Finding Lashes, stopping the trafficking ring, our relationship, if that's what you want..."

Imani is playful as all hell. "Wait a second, are you asking to be my boyfriend?"

"No, I'm not. I'm askin' you to be my ol' lady, because being my girlfriend means you can just dip out when you want. I don't want to lose you, Imani."

She lifts her head to look at me, "Yes, I'll be your ol' lady." She smiles brighter than I've ever seen her before.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Imani

I wake to the sound of laughter drifting up from downstairs, the smell of bacon and coffee cutting through the morning air.

For a moment, I'm disoriented—this isn't my penthouse in El Paso, isn't any of the safe houses I've stayed in over the years.

Then I feel Brick's arm draped across my waist, his solid warmth at my back, and everything clicks into place.

I'm at the clubhouse.

I'm Brick's ol' lady.

The thought sends a thrill through me that has nothing to do with the danger we're facing and everything to do with the man sleeping beside me.

Last night feels like a dream—the party, the dancing, Brick asking me to be his in that direct, no-bullshit way of his.

No games, no politics, no calculations—all things I'm used to in my everyday life.

Just raw honesty and a promise of something real.

I turn carefully in his arms, not wanting to wake him yet.

In sleep, his face is softer, relaxed into something almost peaceful.

The bandages on his shoulder and ribs are stark white against his tanned skin, reminders of how close I came to losing him before we even had a chance to begin.

"You're staring again," he murmurs without opening his eyes, his voice rough with sleep.

"Maybe I like what I see," I reply, pressing a kiss to his chest.

His eyes open then, amber catching the morning light. "Morning, baby."

The casual endearment shouldn't affect me as much as it does, but coming from him, in that gravelly morning voice, it makes my stomach flip.

"Morning."

He pulls me closer, burying his face in my hair. "How are you feeling about everything? Last night, I mean."

"No regrets," I assure him. "You?"

"Only regret is that my ribs are still fucked up," he says with a slight grin. "Otherwise I'd show you exactly how I feel about having you as my ol' lady."

The possessive note in his voice sends heat spiraling through me, but the laughter from downstairs reminds me we're not alone in the clubhouse.

"We should get up," I say reluctantly. "Sounds and smells like breakfast is in full

effect."

"Doom and Rooster's turn to cook," Brick explains, stretching carefully. "They make a mean breakfast spread. Plus the ol' ladies usually help out—it's like a family thing."

Family.

We both get up out of bed and dress casually—me in jeans and one of Brick's t-shirts that smells like him, him in his usual black tee and jeans with his cut over it.

I really need to get some new clothes, but I'm not exactly trying to leave the clubhouse right now.

Not with everything so fresh.

The prospect patch seems to mock the authority he naturally carries, but I understand the club hierarchy enough to know earning a patch takes time.

He pulls me close for a quick kiss. "You look good in my shirt."

"Trying to mark your territory?" I tease.

"Maybe," he admits without shame. "Want everyone to know you're mine."

The primal tone in his voice makes me shiver.

This is so different from the careful political maneuvering I'm used to—just raw, honest possession that goes both ways.

Downstairs, the common area has been transformed into a breakfast buffet.

Doom is at the massive griddle, flipping pancakes with surprising delicacy for such a large man.

Rooster mans the bacon station while Kelsey and another woman I don't recognize work on what looks like enough scrambled eggs to feed an army.

"Well, well," Kelsey says with a smile when she sees us. "Look who finally made it down."

"Leave them alone," the other woman says, though she's grinning too. "Young love needs sleep."

I feel heat rise in my cheeks, but Brick just pulls me closer, his hand resting possessively on my hip.

"Imani, this is Astra," he introduces. "Python's ol' lady."

Astra is a petite and curvy fire-engine redhead with intricate tattoos covering her arms, her smile warm and welcoming. "Nice to finally meet you properly. Heard you gave these boys quite the run getting here."

"They gave as good as they got," I reply, which earns approving nods from the men.

"Grab plates," Doom rumbles from his station. "Food's ready."

The spread is impressive—pancakes, bacon, eggs, hash browns, fresh fruit, toast.

It's the kind of hearty breakfast I haven't had in years, too used to quick protein bars or business meeting pastries.

We settle at one of the long tables, and I'm struck by how natural this feels.

Brothers, their women, and kids eating together, casual conversation flowing, no pretense or power plays.

Just family sharing a meal.

"So," Astra says, settling across from me with her own loaded plate. "I heard you went to Harvard?"

"Business school," I confirm. "Though I was pre-med before that."

"No shit?" Rooster looks impressed. "What made you switch?"

The honest answer—that my father demanded it—feels too heavy for breakfast conversation. "Family business needed someone with financial expertise."

"Smart," Kelsey observes. "Medical knowledge and business brains. Useful combination."

"Especially now," I agree, thinking of everything we went through to get to the clubhouse.

As if reading my thoughts, Brick's hand finds mine under the table, squeezing gently.

The quiet support grounds me, reminds me I'm not facing this alone anymore.

Astra takes a bite of bacon and chews quickly. "You cook, Imani?"

"Not really," I admit. "Never had much opportunity to learn."

"We'll fix that," she says decisively. "Can't have Brick living on takeout and protein bars. Man needs proper feeding."

"I feed myself just fine," Brick protests, but there's warmth in his voice.

"Barely," Kelsey interjects. "I've seen your definition of a meal. Gas station burritos don't count."

"They do if you add hot sauce," Doom chimes in, which earns him a playful slap from Astra.

"Don't encourage him," she scolds. "These boys would live on junk food if we let them."

The gentle teasing continues as we eat, and I find myself relaxing into it.

This is what normal looks like for them—not the formal dinners and calculated conversations of my world, but genuine connection over simple food.

I catch myself watching how the couples interact—little touches, inside jokes.

It's so different from the arranged relationships and political marriages I've witnessed in cartel circles.

Astra stares at me, but it's like she's really looking into the depths of my soul. "First time at a club breakfast?"

"First time at any kind of family breakfast in years," I admit.

Something in my tone must give away more than I intended because her expression softens.

"Well, get used to it. This is every Sunday when we're not on runs. Sometimes Wednesdays too if someone's feeling ambitious."

"Amara wants to see you both when you're done," Doom mentions between bites of pancake. "Said it's important."

The reminder of why we're really here settles over me like a weight.

For a moment, I'd let myself forget about tracking devices and trafficking rings and the danger stalking us.

After breakfast, Brick and I help clear the tables—apparently another club tradition that everyone participates in regardless of anyone's rank.

I find myself beside Astra at the sink, washing dishes while she dries. "He's different with you," she observes quietly. "Brick, I mean. More settled."

"How long have you known him?"

"A few years. Python and I got together... well, it feels like a century ago." She glances at me. "You know, Brick's been wound tight for months, looking for his friend. But with you... he seems more free. We all know Lashes is important to him, but finding her has been suffocating every part of his life."

The guilt that statement brings is sharp.

Am I a distraction from finding Lashes? Or am I helping him be strong enough to continue the search?

"We're going to find her," I say, not sure if I'm trying to convince Astra or myself.

"I know," she replies simply. "And having you in his corner will make all the difference."

After cleanup, Brick and I make our way to Amara's office.

She's already sitting behind her desk, papers spread across it. "Morning," she greets us. "Coffee?"

"Please," I accept gratefully, settling into one of the chairs.

Amara pours from a pot that looks like it could strip paint, the brew black as midnight.

"We need to talk about the tracker," she says without preamble. "Specifically, the audio capability."

Did Brick tell her?

He must have.

My stomach drops. "You think they heard everything?"

"Have to assume they did," Amara confirms grimly. "Every conversation, every plan, every..." She glances between Brick and me.

Heat floods my cheeks as I realize what she's implying.

They could have heard us in the tunnel, heard our confessions, our intimate moments.

The violation of it makes me want to shower for a week.

"Motherfuckers," Brick growls, his jaw clenching.

"Indeed," Amara agrees. "Which means they know about the plan to infiltrate the

auction."

"So we adjust," I say, pushing past the disgust. "They know we're coming, but they don't know how or when. And more importantly, they don't know everything we know."

Amara leans back, studying me. "You still want to proceed?"

"More than ever," I confirm. "If they've been listening, they've heard me talk about legitimizing the family business. They'll expect me to be careful, calculated. What they won't expect is for me to walk right into their trap."

"Because that's exactly what it'll be," Brick interjects. "A trap. They'll be ready for us."

"Good," I say simply. "Let them think they're in control. Overconfidence makes people sloppy."

Amara's smile is sharp as a blade. "Spoken like a true cartel princess. All right, what do you need?"

"First, I need to make contact." I pull out my phone. "I have business associates who move in those circles. One call should get us an invitation."

"Speaker," Amara instructs. "We all need to hear this."

I scroll through my contacts until I find the right name—Marcus Webb, an art dealer who's helped my father launder money through inflated appraisals.

He also has connections to the darker sides of the collection world.

The phone rings twice before a cultured voice answers. "Imani Torres. What an unexpected pleasure."

"Marcus," I greet warmly. "How's the collection coming along?"

"Magnificently. Just acquired a Basquiat that would make your father weep with envy." His tone is light, but I can hear the calculation beneath his words. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"Actually, I'm calling on my father's behalf," I lie smoothly. "He's looking to diversify into... certain markets. I've heard whispers about an exclusive auction. The kind that deals in rare finds." The pause on the other end of the line tells me he's shocked I'm inquiring about this. "That's quite a specific interest."

"We're prepared to spend some serious money for the right product," I continue, letting him hear the determination in my voice. "My father is particularly interested in unique acquisitions. One of a kind pieces that can't be found anywhere else."

"I see." Another pause. "These auctions are... highly selective. Invitation only. Significant vetting process."

"I understand. But surely the Torres name carries some weight? Combined with our financial resources..."

"Let me make some calls," Marcus says finally. "See what I can arrange. You understand there are no guarantees?"

"Of course. But I have faith in your abilities, Marcus. You've never let us down before."

"I'll be in touch," he promises. "Give my regards to your father."

The line goes dead, and I set the phone down with hands that want to shake.

"Well played," Amara observes. "He bought it."

"He's greedy enough to," I reply. "The commission on brokering our entry would be substantial."

"How long until he calls back?" Brick asks.

"Few hours, maybe less. Marcus doesn't like to leave money on the table."

Brick's studying me with those amber eyes that see too much. "You okay?"

The question is simple, but the concern behind it threatens to undo my composure.

"I'm worried about my father," I admit. "Still no word from him. That's not like him, even with everything that's happened. He said he would contact me, remember?"

"We have people looking into it," Amara assures me. "Discrete inquiries through our network. If something's happened to Mateo, we'll find out."

But what if it's already too late?

What if Diego's betrayal went deeper than just selling me out?

The thought of my father—difficult and distant as he is—being hurt because of me is almost unbearable.

"Hey," Brick says softly, reaching across to take my hand. "We'll figure it out. All of it."

I nod, drawing strength from his touch.

Whatever comes next, I'm not facing it alone.

"I should work on building our cover," I say, forcing myself to focus. "If we're going in as buyers, we need a believable backstory."

"Use the other office," Amara offers. "We set up a clean laptop for you yesterday. Untraceable connection."

As I stand to go, Brick rises with me. "I'll come with you."

"Don't you have prospect duties?" I tease gently.

"Yeah," he agrees. "Keeping you safe."

Amara snorts. "Smooth, prospect. Go on, both of you. I need to coordinate with our contacts anyway."

Back in the office Amara indicated, I find a setup that would make any hacker proud.

Clean laptop, encrypted connection, all the tools I need to build our cover identities.

"You know what you're doing with all this?" Brick asks, gesturing to the equipment.

"Harvard wasn't just about spreadsheets," I reply with a slight smile. "Had to learn how to hide money trails, create shell companies, all the fun stuff that keeps cartels running."

"Your father taught you well."

"He taught me to survive," I correct. "There's a difference."

I spend the next hour crafting our digital footprints—recent transfers from Torres family accounts to new shells, travel patterns that support our story, even social media posts backdated to show a gradual interest in "alternative investments."

Brick watches me work, occasionally asking questions but mostly just being a steady presence at my back.

"There," I say finally. "Imani Torres, looking to expand the family portfolio. And her bodyguard, essential for any cartel princess traveling in dangerous circles."

"Think they'll dig this deep?"

"They'd be stupid not to," I reply. "But everything will check out. Money talks, and ours screams we're legit."

My phone buzzes—Marcus calling back already.

"That was fast," Brick observes.

"Told you he was greedy." I answer on speaker again. "Marcus. Good news, I hope?"

"Indeed," he sounds pleased with himself. "I've spoken with the relevant parties. There's an auction scheduled for next week. Very exclusive, very... specialized merchandise."

My stomach turns at the casual way he discusses human trafficking, but I keep my voice level. "Excellent. What do we need to do?"

"There's a vetting process," he explains. "Financial verification, background checks,

the usual. I've vouched for you personally, which carries weight. You'll receive encrypted coordinates seventy-two hours before the event."

"Security?"

"Extensive. They take privacy very seriously, as I'm sure you understand. You can bring one bodyguard, but weapons will be checked at the door."

I meet Brick's eyes, seeing my own concerns reflected there.

Walking in unarmed is dangerous, but refusing would look suspicious.

"Understood," I say. "Send me the account information for the buy-in."

"Already done," Marcus confirms. "Check your encrypted email. And Imani? Do give your father my best. Tell him I look forward to facilitating many profitable ventures."

After he hangs up, silence fills the room.

"One week," Brick says quietly.

"One week," I confirm.

The plan is in motion now, no turning back.

In seven days, we'll walk into the heart of a human trafficking ring, hoping to find Lashes, hoping to survive long enough to shut them down.

"We should tell Amara," Brick says. "Start working on extraction plans."

"In a minute," I say, turning to face him fully. "Just... give me a minute."

He understands immediately, pulling me into his arms.

I breathe in his scent and let myself be weak for just a moment.

"Scared?" he asks against my hair.

"Terrified," I admit. "But not of them. Of losing you. Of failing to find Lashes. Of letting everyone down."

"Hey." He pulls back to look at me. "You're not in this alone. We're partners, remember? Your fights are my fights now."

"When did you get so wise?" I ask, managing a small smile.

"Must be your influence," he replies, then grows serious. "We're going to get through this, Imani. Find Lashes, stop these bastards, keep you safe. All of it."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

He seals it with a kiss that makes me believe anything is possible.

When we finally break apart, I feel steadier, ready to face whatever comes next.

"Okay," I say. "Let's go tell Amara. We have a rescue to plan."

We head back to Amara's office, where she's now joined by Boulder and Doom.

"Good timing," she says as we enter. "Brick, these two have volunteered for backup duty."

"Wouldn't let you go in without proper support," Boulder says firmly.

"Appreciate it, brothers," Brick responds, genuine gratitude in his voice.

"So we have confirmation?" Amara asks.

"One week," I confirm. "Marcus is sending the buy-in information. We'll get location details seventy-two hours before."

"That doesn't give us much time to scout," Doom observes.

"It's designed that way," I explain. "Keeps law enforcement from setting up stings, prevents rivals from organizing hits. We'll be going in relatively blind."

"Then we prepare for everything," Amara says decisively. "Multiple extraction routes, communication protocols, backup plans for the backup plans."

We spend the next hour planning everything out.

Boulder and Doom will shadow us to the location, staying outside as our extraction team.

"What about weapons?" Brick asks. "They'll check us at the door."

"Ceramic blades," Doom suggests. "Small enough to conceal, won't trigger metal detectors."

"I can arrange that," Amara confirms. "What else?"

"Money," I say. "We need to look like serious buyers. That means actually being prepared to bid."

"How much?"

I think about the markets I've studied, the prices these monsters charge for human lives.

"Minimum five million liquid. More if we want to be taken seriously."

Amara doesn't even blink. "I'll make the arrangements. Alejandro will understand the necessity."

The Ramirez cartel connection runs deep within the club, deeper than most realize.

"There's something else," I say carefully. "If Lashes is there... she might not recognize us. Might not trust us. These operations, they break people. Use drugs, conditioning, torture."

The room goes silent at that, the weight of what we might find settling over everyone.

"We bring her home regardless," Brick says firmly. "Whatever state she's in, whoever she's become. She's still our family."

"Agreed," Amara says. "Ruby's already prepared medical supplies for that possibility. Detox protocols, trauma medications, everything we might need."

My phone buzzes with an encrypted email—the buy-in instructions from Marcus.

"Swiss account," I read. "One million deposit to secure invitation, refundable against purchases. Non-refundable if we don't show or don't buy."

"Transfer it," Amara instructs. "Make it look eager but not desperate."

I work through the financial maze, moving money from Torres family accounts through several shells before landing in the Swiss account.

To anyone watching, it looks like standard cartel money laundering.

Which, technically, it is.

"Done," I confirm. "We're officially on their radar as buyers."

We'll need to get the other five million from the Ramirez accounts, but that can be done later.

At least the deposit will be where it needs to be.

"Good," Amara says. "Now we wait. And prepare. Boulder, I want you and Doom running drills. Brick, you and Imani need to practice your cover stories until they're second nature."

"What about backup inside?" Brick asks. "If things go sideways?—"

"You'll have each other," Amara interrupts. "That has to be enough. These operations have people who are paranoid as all hell. One buyer and one bodyguard is standard. Anything more raises flags."

I reach for Brick's hand under the table, needing the contact.

He squeezes back, steady and sure.

"We've got this," I say, projecting more confidence than I feel.

"Yes," Amara agrees. "You do. Because failure isn't an option. Not with Lashes's life

on the line. Not with what these bastards are doing to innocent women."

The meeting breaks up, but the weight of what's coming lingers.

One week to prepare for walking into hell.

One week to get ready to face the monsters who took Brick's best friend and want to add me to their collection.

One week to plan a rescue that could get us all killed.

But as I look at Brick, see the determination in those amber eyes, I know we'll take the risk.

For Lashes.

For all the women these bastards have taken.

For the chance to burn their whole operation to the ground.

"Come on," Brick says, standing and pulling me with him. "Let's go practice being criminals. Well, bigger criminals than we already are."

I laugh, even if I shouldn't, because he's right.

We're all criminals here in our own way.

The difference is we have lines we won't cross, people we protect, family we'd die for.

That's what separates us from the true monsters.

And in one week, we'll prove it.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Brick

The sound of flesh hitting leather echoes through the clubhouse gym as I work the heavy bag, sweat dripping down my bare chest even though I shouldn't be doing this.

I'm supposed to be resting, careful, not doing anything to open my stitches... but I need to get some of this fucking energy out.

Each punch is calculated, precise—the way I need to be when we walk into that auction in six days.

My ribs protest with each hit, but the pain keeps me focused.

"You're dropping your left shoulder," Doom observes from where he's spotting one of the other prospects on the bench press.

I adjust my stance, throwing another combination.

He's right—I'm favoring my injured side without realizing it.

Can't afford tells like that where we're going.

"Better," he grunts. "But you're still?—"

The gym door slams open, and Amara strides in.

The look on her face makes my stomach drop.

"Brick. My office. Now."

I grab a towel, wiping sweat from my face as I follow her out.

She doesn't speak as we walk through the clubhouse, but the tension rolling off her tells me everything I need to know.

Something's happened.

Imani is already in Amara's office when we arrive, still wearing one of my t-shirts she slept in, her hair messy from bed.

The early hour and the fact she hasn't changed tells me Amara woke her up for this.

I move immediately to Imani's side. "What's wrong?"

Amara closes the door firmly behind us. "We got intel through our network. About Mateo."

Imani's entire body goes rigid. "Is he...?"

"Alive," Amara confirms quickly. "But being held. Diego has him."

The relief that flashes across Imani's face is immediately replaced by fury.

I've seen her angry before, but this is different—this is the rage of a cartel princess who's been betrayed by someone she considered family.

"Where?" Her voice is deadly quiet.

"Unknown. But our sources confirm Diego has seized control of several Torres operations. He's using your father's capture as leverage to legitimize his takeover."

"That fucking bastard," Imani breathes, her hands clenching into fists. "Twenty years. Twenty years of trust, of being part of our family..."

I place a hand on her shoulder, feeling the tremors running through her.

She's holding herself together by sheer will, but I can see the cracks forming.

"There's more," Amara continues. "My uncle Alejandro wants to meet. Today."

That gets my attention.

Alejandro Ramirez—Amara's uncle, Imani's godfather, and one of the most powerful cartel leaders in Mexico.

When men like that want meetings, you don't say no.

"Where?" I ask.

"Secure location outside the city. You're both coming with me and Dante." She glances at me. "My uncle wants to meet the man protecting his goddaughter."

Great.

No pressure or anything.

Just meeting one of the most dangerous men in Mexico while I'm fucking his goddaughter.

This should go well.

Imani stands up. "When do we leave?"

"Two hours. Gives us time to gather more intel and prepare." Amara's expression softens slightly. "Imani, I know this is?—"

"It's fine," Imani cuts her off. "I need to get ready."

She leaves the office quickly, too quickly.

I start to follow, but Amara stops me.

"Let her process for a minute," she advises. "This kind of betrayal... it hits different when it's someone you always thought was family."

"Diego wasn't blood."

"In our world, that doesn't matter. He watched her grow up. Probably bounced her on his knee as a baby." Amara's jaw tightens. "That kind of betrayal hits hard, Brick. Fuck, it demands payment in blood."

The casual way she discusses violence should bother me, but I've been in this life long enough to understand.

Some betrayals can only be answered one way.

"What should I expect from this meeting?" I ask.

"Alejandro is old school. Respectful, but traditional about certain things." She gives me a meaningful look. "He's going to know about you and Imani. Don't try to hide it,

but don't flaunt it either."

"Understood."

"Good. Go check on her. We leave in ninety minutes."

I find Imani in her room, standing at the window staring out at nothing.

She's changed into jeans and a black blouse, her hair pulled back in a tight ponytail with her curls just as tight.

The transformation from vulnerable woman to cartel princess is complete.

"Hey," I say softly, closing the door behind me.

"He has my father," she says without turning around. "Diego has my father, and it's my fault."

"Bullshit." I cross to her, turning her to face me. "Diego's betrayal isn't on you."

"Isn't it?" Her dark eyes are bright with unshed tears. "If I hadn't been investigating the trafficking ring, if I hadn't gotten close to the truth?—"

"Then they would have found another reason," I interrupt firmly. "Men like Diego don't turn overnight. This has been planned for a long time, probably years in the making."

She searches my face, looking for reassurance I'm not sure I can give.

All I can do is pull her into my arms, holding her as the tears finally come.

"We'll get him back," I promise against her hair. "Your father and Lashes both. Whatever it takes."

She clings to me, her body shaking with silent sobs.

This is the first time I've seen her truly break down, and it tears at something deep in my chest.

This woman who's been so strong, so composed through everything, finally letting herself be vulnerable.

"I can't lose him," she whispers. "He's all the family I have left."

"You won't," I say firmly. "And you're wrong about the family thing."

She pulls back to look at me, confusion in her tear-stained face.

"You have me now," I remind her. "The club. Alejandro. You're not alone in this."

Something shifts in her expression—gratitude mixed with something deeper.

"When did I get so lucky to find you?"

"Pretty sure I'm the lucky one," I reply, wiping tears from her cheeks.

She laughs softly, the sound watery but genuine. "We should probably stop being so sappy. I need to look composed for my godfather."

"Take your time. We've got an hour."

She nods, moving to the bathroom to fix her makeup.

I watch her rebuild her armor piece by piece—waterproof mascara, concealer to hide the redness, lipstick the color of fresh blood.

By the time she's done, you'd never know she'd been crying.

"How do I look?" she asks.

"Like a woman no one should fuck with," I answer honestly.

"Good." She checks her weapon, sliding it into the holster at her back. "That's exactly what I need to be."

An hour later, we're in one of the club's SUVs heading out of the city.

Dante drives while Amara rides shotgun, leaving Imani and me in the back.

Amara's husband is a man of few words, but the respect he shows Amara is insane.

When you have a powerful woman like her by your side, he is the man you look up to when you think about the kind of old man you want to be.

"Tell me about the meeting location," I request, always wanting to know the terrain.

"Abandoned airstrip about forty miles northeast," Dante replies, his voice gravelly. "Alejandro uses it for sensitive meetings. Easy to secure, multiple exit routes."

"How many men will he have?"

"Dozen, maybe more," Amara answers. "But this isn't that kind of meeting. We're his family—me and Imani. Real family."

I nod, but my hand still rests on my weapon.

Can't be too careful when meeting with cartel leadership, family or not.

Imani is quiet beside me, staring out the window at the desert passing by.

I want to take her hand, offer comfort, but I remember Amara's warning about not flaunting our relationship.

"Diego knows our security protocols," Imani says suddenly. "All of them. Every safe house, every contact, every route we use."

"Then we change them," Amara replies simply. "Alejandro's already working on it. By tomorrow, Diego's intel will be as worthless as him."

"He knows more than protocols," Imani continues. "He knows how my father thinks. His weaknesses. What buttons to push."

A man with that much knowledge could destroy the Torres organization from within.

The airstrip appears ahead—cracked tarmac stretching into the desert, a few abandoned buildings that might have been hangars once upon a time.

As we approach, vehicles materialize from concealed positions—black SUVs forming a perimeter.

"Stay calm," Amara advises. "Standard security."

We're directed to park near the largest building, where more armed men wait.

They're professionals—alert but not aggressive, weapons visible but not directly

threatening.

As we exit the vehicle, an older man approaches Amara with a warm smile.

" Jefa ," he greets her with obvious affection. "Your uncle is inside."

Amara embraces him briefly—clearly someone she's known for years—before we're led into the building.

The interior has been converted into a meeting space.

Expensive rugs cover the concrete floor, leather chairs arranged around a massive wooden table.

It's not something you'd ever expect—being in an abandoned setting, but that's probably the point.

And standing by the window, hands clasped behind his back, is Alejandro Ramirez.

Silver hair swept back from a face that's aged well, sharp eyes that miss nothing, wearing a simple but obviously expensive suit.

This is a man who doesn't need to posture or threaten.

His power is absolute, unquestioned.

" Mi ahijada ," he says warmly, turning from the window.

Imani crosses to him immediately, and I watch the transformation.

The controlled cartel princess becomes a god-daughter greeting a beloved uncle,

falling into his embrace naturally.

"Padrino," she murmurs against his shoulder.

They speak rapidly in Spanish for a moment—too fast for me to follow—before Alejandro pulls back to study her face.

"You look thin," he observes. "And tired."

"It's been a difficult week," she admits.

"So I understand." His eyes shift to me, and I feel the weight of his assessment. "And this is the man who's been protecting you."

It's not a question.

Imani glances back at me. "Brick, meet my godfather, Alejandro Ramirez."

I step forward, offering my hand. "Sir."

His handshake is firm, his gaze direct. "Amara speaks highly of you. Says you took three bullets protecting my goddaughter."

"Would have taken more if necessary," I reply honestly.

Something flickers in his eyes—approval, maybe.

"Sit," he commands, gesturing to the chairs. "We have much to discuss."

Once we're seated, coffee appears—strong and black, served by silent men who disappear as quickly as they came.

"Tell me everything," Alejandro says to Imani. "From the beginning."

She does, laying out the entire situation like we're actually reliving it.

The investigation into the trafficking ring, Diego's betrayal, the assassination attempts, our journey to Chihuahua.

Alejandro listens without interrupting, his expression growing darker with each detail.

When she finishes, silence fills the room.

"Diego Silva," Alejandro says finally, and the way he says the name makes it sound like a curse. "I remember when your mother first brought him in. Young, eager, desperate to prove himself."

"He proved himself," Imani says bitterly. "For twenty years."

"The long con," Alejandro agrees. "The most dangerous kind." He turns to Amara. "What have your people learned?"

"Diego's working directly with the trafficking ring," Amara reports. "Has been for at least six months, possibly longer. They promised him control of the Torres operations in exchange for Imani. Personally, I'm looking for connections between him and Sally Bernanrd, because I know they're there. Everything else lines up too perfectly."

"And Mateo?"

"Alive, but location unknown. Diego's using him as leverage to legitimize the takeover. Making it look like a sanctioned transition of power."

Alejandro's jaw tightens. "Mateo Torres is many things, but he would never hand his empire to that rata ."

"Some of the lieutenants don't know that," Imani points out. "Diego's been Papá's right hand for so long, they might believe it."

"Then we need to act quickly." Alejandro stands, pacing to the window. "This auction you're planning to infiltrate—it's connected?"

"We believe so," I speak up. "Same organization that has Lashes likely arranged Diego's deal."

"And you think Mateo's location might be discoverable through them?"

"It's possible," Amara confirms. "These groups maintain detailed records—blackmail material, leverage on their partners. If Diego's working with them..."

"They'll have information on where he's keeping Mateo," Alejandro finishes. "It's sound reasoning."

He returns to his seat, leaning back thoughtfully.

"I'll provide additional resources. Men who can be trusted absolutely. Diego may have corrupted some of the Torres soldiers, but my people remain clean."

"Padrino ," Imani starts, but he holds up a hand.

"This is not negotiable. You're my goddaughter. Mateo is... complicated, but he's still familia. And Diego?" His eyes go cold. "Diego will learn what happens to those who betray that bond."

The promise of violence in his voice is absolute.

"For now, we continue with your plan," he continues. "The auction provides opportunity. But you'll have my men as additional backup."

"Too many cooks," Dante speaks for the first time. "Could compromise the operation."

"Not inside," Alejandro clarifies. "But nearby. Insurance, if things go badly."

It's a reasonable compromise, and I can see Amara thinking about the benefits.

"Agreed," she says finally.

"Good." Alejandro's attention returns to me. "You understand what you're protecting, young man?"

The question has layers I'm still unpacking.

"Yes, sir."

"Do you?" He leans forward. "Imani is not just my goddaughter. She's the future of the Torres organization. The bridge between old ways and new. Her mother's dream made flesh."

"I understand," I reply, meeting his gaze steadily.

"I hope so." He turns to Imani. "Your father would be proud. Walking into danger to save him, just as he's done for you so many times."

"He's going to lecture me for hours when we get him back," Imani says with a weak

smile.

"Let him," Alejandro replies warmly. "It means he's alive to do so."

The meeting continues for another hour, discussing everything we need to pull this off.

By the time we're ready to leave, the sun is high overhead, baking the desert.

Alejandro embraces Imani again, whispering something in Spanish that makes her nod firmly.

Then, surprisingly, he offers me his hand.

"Keep her safe," he says simply.

"With my life," I promise.

He nods, apparently satisfied, and we make our exit.

The ride back is quieter, everyone processing what we've learned.

Diego's betrayal runs deeper than we thought, but at least now we have the full resources of the Ramirez cartel behind us.

I mean, we had them before since Amara is his blood, but even more so now. Then again, the stakes are higher, aren't they?

"You okay?" I ask Imani quietly.

"Getting there," she replies. "It helps knowing Alejandro's involved. He and my

father have had their differences, but..."

"Family is family," I finish.

"Exactly."

As we near the clubhouse, my phone buzzes with a text from Boulder:

Ceramic weapons arrived. Ruby wants to go over the medical kit, make sure you have everything you need.

The auction is five days away now.

Five days to prepare for walking into hell.

But now the stakes are even higher—not just Lashes, but Imani's father too.

"We're going to pull this off," Imani says, reading my expression.

"Yeah," I agree. "We are."

Because failure means losing everyone we're trying to save.

And that's not an option I'm willing to accept.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Imani

My phone buzzes against the nightstand, Marcus Webb's name flashing on the encrypted display.

Five days since we met with Alejandro, five days of preparing for this fucking auction, and now the art dealer who moonlights in human misery is calling with updates.

I glance at Brick, still asleep beside me, his face peaceful in the early morning light.

Part of me wants to let him rest—God knows he's been pushing himself hard getting ready with this shit—but we agreed to have no secrets between us.

"Marcus," I answer quietly, slipping out of bed.

"Imani, darling," his cultured voice grates against my nerves. "I hope I'm not calling too early?"

"Not at all," I lie smoothly, pulling on one of Brick's shirts. "I assume you have information about our upcoming event?"

"Indeed. The sellers are quite excited about this particular auction. They're presenting some truly premium merchandise."

My stomach turns at his casual phrasing, but I force myself to sound interested. "Oh?"

"Yes, several new acquisitions. Young, educated, exactly the caliber your father will require." He chuckles, the sound making my skin crawl. "A few are even two-for-one specials, if you understand my meaning."

The phone nearly slips from my hand.

Two-for-one.

He's talking about pregnant women.

"How... fortunate," I manage, bile rising in my throat.

"Quite. Those particular lots always generate impressive bidding wars. Nothing quite like potential for return on investment."

I close my eyes, fighting the urge to vomit.

These monsters are selling pregnant women, talking about unborn children like they're stock options.

"I should mention," Marcus continues, oblivious to my horror, "security will be enhanced for this event. There have been some... disruptions in the market recently. Nothing to concern yourself with, but do expect additional protocols."

"Understood," I force out. "We appreciate the heads up."

"Of course. Oh, and Imani? Do tell your father that the sellers are particularly interested in establishing ongoing relationships with serious buyers. This could be the

beginning of a very profitable partnership."

"I'll be sure to pass that along."

"Excellent. Until next week then."

The line goes dead, and I lean against the wall, trying to process what I just learned.

Pregnant women.

They're selling pregnant women.

Brick's voice makes me jump. "What did he want?"

He's sitting up in bed, instantly alert despite being asleep moments ago.

"Marcus called with updates about the auction," I say carefully, not sure how to break this to him.

He's already reading my expression, knowing something's wrong. "And?"

I move back to the bed, sitting beside him. "He mentioned... he said some of the women are two-for-one specials."

For a moment, Brick just stares at me, not processing.

Then understanding hits, and his face transforms into something terrifying.

"Pregnant," he says flatly. "He's talking about pregnant women."

"Yes."

The silence stretches between us, heavy and horrible.

Then Brick explodes off the bed, his fist connecting with the wall hard enough to leave a dent in the drywall.

"Those fucking bastards!" He hits the wall again, knuckles splitting. "Selling pregnant women like they're fucking cattle!"

"Brick—"

"What if Lashes is—" He can't finish the sentence, just stands there breathing hard, blood dripping from his knuckles.

I move to him carefully, like approaching a wounded animal. "We don't know that she is."

"We don't know that she isn't," he counters, his voice raw. "Three months she's been gone. Three months they've had her."

Three months is plenty of time for horrors we don't want to imagine.

"Come here," I say softly, guiding him to sit on the bed. "Let me look at your hand."

He follows numbly, the rage draining into something worse—despair.

I retrieve the first aid kit from his bag, carefully cleaning his knuckles.

"If she's pregnant," he says quietly, "if they did that to her..."

"Then we get her out and we get her help," I say firmly. "Whatever she needs, whatever it takes to help her heal."

"What if she doesn't want to come back?" The question is barely a whisper. "What if she's so broken she doesn't even remember us?"

I frame his face with my hands, forcing him to meet my eyes. "Then we remind her who she is. We show her she's still loved, still family. We don't give up on her, we stand there by her side, no matter what she needs. It doesn't matter if she's going to scream, cry, or punch a wall like someone else I know. We'll be there for her."

He pulls me into his arms, holding me so tight it's almost painful.

I can feel him trembling, this strong man shaking with rage and fear for his friend.

"I'm going to kill them," he says against my hair. "Every last one of these sick fucks."

"We'll stop them," I promise. "We'll save Lashes and the others. All of them."

I hold him for a long time, just wanting him to know I'm here to support him.

Finally, Brick pulls back and he runs his hand over his face. "We need to tell Amara. If they're trafficking pregnant women, we need Ruby to add prenatal supplies to the medical kit."

There he is, always thinking ahead, even if he's furious.

It's one of the things I love about him—his ability to temper his emotions and get action done.

We quickly get dressed and head downstairs, finding Amara already in her office, which is surprising since it's early.

She takes one look at Brick's bandaged knuckles and raises an eyebrow. "Wall lose a

fight?"

"Marcus called," I explain. "The auction will include pregnant women. He called them two-for-one specials."

Amara's expression goes deadly still. "Pregnant."

"Yeah," Brick confirms harshly. "Those motherfuckers are selling pregnant women."

"Ruby," Amara calls out, and the other woman appears moments later. "We need to add prenatal supplies to the medical kit. Vitamins, emergency delivery supplies, anything you can think of."

Ruby's face pales, but she nods firmly. "I'll handle it right after I finish whipping up breakfast for everyone. Lyra and Leo are both in a mood this morning. Anything else you need from me?"

Amara shakes her head, "No, but thank you. Go feed those kids. The last thing we need is a mini Zorro running around pissed off. Is Rex being the only patient one?"

Ruby smirks. "Surprisingly, yes."

Amara cracks up. "God, never thought I'd see the day Axel's boy behaves better than him, but here we are."

With that, Ruby leaves and Amara turns her attention back to us. "Is there anything else new?"

"Marcus also warned about their security changing up," I add. "Said there have been disruptions in the market recently."

"Good," Amara says with a sharp smile. "Let them be paranoid. Scared people make mistakes. Thanks for the update. I have some things I need to handle, so see yourselves out."

I don't think she means to sound cold, but she is coming across that way a little bit.

Over the next couple of hours, Brick and I keep busy.

Brick throws himself into training, familiarizing himself with the ceramic knives until he can draw and strike in one fluid motion.

I watch him from across the gym, watching his technique, making mental notes for myself in case the situation arises where I need to know how to use them.

The knowledge about the pregnant women has changed something in him, turning his protective instincts into something darker.

"You two need to rein in your emotions, girl," Doom notes, appearing beside me. "Both of you. Need to lock that shit down before the auction."

He's right.

We can't afford to show emotion when we're undercover.

"Want to help?" I ask.

"That's why I'm here." He moves to the center of the mat. "Both of you. Time to practice your poker faces."

The next hour is brutal.

Doom throws scenario after scenario at us—describing horrific situations we might encounter, testing our ability to remain composed.

"You see a girl who looks fourteen on the auction block," he says calmly. "What's your expression?"

I force my face into bored interest. "Calculating profit margins."

"Better. Brick, you recognize one of the pregnant women as someone from Lashes's neighborhood. Your reaction?"

Brick's jaw tightens for just a moment before smoothing into indifference. "Mild curiosity about her background. Nothing more."

"Again," Doom orders. "Until it's perfect."

We drill responses until our faces ache from holding neutral expressions.

Until I can hear about selling children without flinching.

Until Brick can discuss pregnant women like merchandise without his hands forming fists.

It's soul-crushing to even be doing this, but necessary.

"Good," Doom finally says. "Now let's work on your cover dynamic."

He has us run through our buyer-and-bodyguard routine, critiquing everything from our body language to our speaking patterns.

"Imani, you're too soft with him. You're a cartel princess—he's the hired help. Act

like it."

"Brick, stop hovering like a worried boyfriend. You're a professional. Your protection is efficient, not emotional."

By the time we break for lunch, we're exhausted but I don't think anyone will assume we're together.

We look like we're playing the part: princess and protector.

"That was horrible," I mutter, slumping against Brick in the hallway.

"But we needed to do it. Doom did a good job throwing some crazy shit at us," he replies, though I can see the strain in his eyes.

We're heading to the kitchen to grab food when Razor comes to find us. "Conference room. One of Alejandro's men is here with intel you're both gonna wanna hear."

The conference room is crowded—Amara, Dante, Razor, Doom, and a man I don't recognize but has to work for my godfather.

"Senorita Torres," he greets me respectfully. "I am Joaquin. Your godfather sends his regards."

I don't bother with the pleasantries. "What have you learned?"

Joaquin pulls out a tablet, swiping to reveal surveillance photos. "We located Diego in Juárez yesterday. He was meeting with known associates of the trafficking ring."

My breath catches as I recognize the restaurant in the photos—one of my father's favorite spots for sensitive meetings.

The irony of Diego using it for his betrayal burns.

"This image was taken from across the street," Joaquin continues, swiping to the next photo.

My heart stops.

There, visible through the restaurant window, is my father.

He's seated at a corner table, but something's wrong.

His posture is too rigid, his expression blank in a way I've never seen.

"He's drugged," I whisper, my hands trembling as I zoom in on his face.

"Most likely," Joaquin confirms grimly. "See how his handler keeps touching his shoulder? Probably reminding him to play along."

"Handler," Brick growls. "You mean Diego."

"No." Joaquin swipes to another image. "Diego runs the operation, but he has men managing your father directly. Keeps his hands clean, maintains deniability."

I stare at the photo of my father—the man who built an empire, who taught me to be strong, who survived countless attempts on his life—reduced to a drugged puppet.

"Can we extract him?" Amara asks.

"Not without risking his life," Joaquin replies. "They're keeping him in a compound outside Juárez. Heavily fortified, constant guard rotation. Any rescue attempt would likely result in his immediate execution."

"So we stick to the plan," I say, though it kills me to leave my father in their hands even one day longer. "We get what we need from the auction."

"The timeline concerns me," Dante speaks up. "Two days until the auction. If Diego suspects anything..."

"He won't," I say firmly. "We've been careful. As far as he knows, I'm still running scared."

But even as I say it, doubt creeps in.

Diego knows me too well, just as he knows my father.

What if he sees through our plan?

The meeting continues with how we're going to pull this whole thing off—using my godfather's planes to get to and from Riohacha, Colombia where the auction is taking place.

"I'd like to leave early so we can get an idea of the area," Doom reports. "Get eyes on the property, map escape routes, familiarize ourselves with the city."

"Carefully," Amara warns. "If they spot any surveillance..."

"We know our jobs," Brick assures her.

As the meeting breaks up, Joaquin approaches me privately. "Your godfather wanted me to give you this."

He hands me a small velvet box.

Inside is a medallion—St. Christopher, almost identical to the one Diego corrupted with a tracker.

"He said you would understand," Joaquin explains.

Tears prick my eyes as I lift the medallion.

It's not the same as my mother's, could never be, but the gesture means everything.

Alejandro is reminding me that family isn't about blood—it's about who is there for you in a time of need.

"Thank him for me," I manage.

Joaquin nods and takes his leave.

I'm still staring at the medallion when Brick finds me in the hallway.

"You okay?"

"No," I admit. "But I will be. After we end this."

He takes the medallion from my hands, studying it carefully. "No modifications on this one. I checked."

Of course he did.

Even in a gesture of kindness, he's protecting me.

"Help me put it on?"

He fastens the chain around my neck, his fingers lingering against my skin. "It suits you."

"My mother would have hated all of this," I say quietly. "The violence, the bullshit that being associated with the cartel brings. She wanted our family to be legitimate, to leave this world behind."

"Maybe that's what you're doing," Brick suggests. "Taking down these traffickers, saving innocent women. Maybe this is how you honor her dream—by destroying the worst parts of this life."

I turn to face him. "When did you become so wise?"

"Must be your influence," he echoes his words from days ago, but there's no humor now. "We're going to get through this, Imani. Save everyone we can."

"I know." I lean into him, knowing this isn't going to be easy. "Just two more days."

Two more days of preparing for this undercover op.

Two more days of pretending to be monsters.

Two more days until we walk into hell itself.

We split up for a while and end up having some time to ourselves.

I can't stop thinking about my father, about Diego turning his back against him... and I'm furious.

But I can't let my emotions rule my judgement right now.

I have to keep moving forward. I have to get through this auction run and deal with my father's situation after the fact.

After a while, I go to bed, only to wake up in the middle of the night and I can't find Brick.

I walk around the clubhouse and look for him, searching every area, unable to find him in his usual spots.

I end up finding him on the roof of the clubhouse, staring out at the city lights.

"Room for one more?" I ask.

He pulls me down beside him, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. "Can't sleep?"

"Too much in my head." I rest against his warmth. "Keep thinking about those women. What they're going through right now while we're safe here."

"We can't save them tonight," he reminds me gently. "But in a couple of days things will be different."

"In two days we burn it all to the fucking ground," I finish.

"Babe, you've got blood on your mind," Brick says eventually, "It'll take a lot longer than one time to tear down that part of the organization, but this is the first step."

I nod, understanding where he's coming from.

I tuck up closer against him and he speaks lowly out of nowhere. "These past weeks with you... they've been the best of my life. Even with all the running, getting shot, and not knowing what tomorrow will bring. You've made me believe in something,

believe in love."

"Brick—"

"Let me finish," he interrupts gently. "If things go bad at the auction?—"

"They won't."

"But if they do," he persists, "I need you to run. Don't try to save me, don't look back. Just get safe, because we know what those people are capable of, and I can't imagine you being in the same sort of position that Lashes is."

I pull away to glare at him. "Like hell."

"Imani—"

"No," I say firmly. "You're my ol' man.. We go in together, we come out together. That's non-negotiable."

He searches my face in the dim light. "Stubborn woman."

"You love it," I counter.

"Yeah," he admits with a small smile. "I do."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Brick

The private jet's engines hum beneath us as we cut through the early morning sky toward Colombia.

I stare out the window at endless clouds, trying to prepare myself for what's coming.

In a few hours, I'll see Lashes again, hopefully.

She could be at one of a million of these auctions, but I'm praying she's here.

Fuck, I need her to be here.

I need to strike gold, to have her back.

My best friend, the woman who's been missing for three months, will be paraded in front of buyers like livestock.

And I'll have to stand there and watch, pretending not to care.

Doom's gravelly voice cuts through my thoughts. "You good?"

He's sitting across from me, those dark eyes that miss nothing studying my face.

Even relaxed in the plush leather seat, he looks like what he is—a weapon waiting to

be deployed.

"Just thinking about shit," I reply.

"Dangerous habit," he says, but there's understanding in his tone. "First time seeing someone you care about on the other side of this shit?"

I nod, not trusting my voice.

"I've been there," Doom continues, surprising me with the admission. "Before the club. Had to watch my sister sold at one of these things, but not as high-scale."

My head snaps up. "What?"

He's never talked about his past, about what brought him to the Reapers Rejects.

Most of us don't—some wounds are too deep to talk about, so we let them heal and never talk about them again.

"Ten years ago, when I was barely eighteen," he says, voice flat. "I was working as muscle for a cartel guy who decided my sister would make a nice gift for his 'business associates'."

"Jesus."

"I was told if I intervened, he'd kill me but before that he'd rape her." His jaw tightens. "He told me he'd keep doing it, over and over, and they'd kill her eventually, but if I didn't do anything to fuck with him, he'd make sure she wasn't harmed."

Harmed... right.

I'm certain 'harmed' has a different meaning to everyone.

"Did you ever?—"

"Got her back six months later," he confirms. "I burned down the fucker's drug houses and killed eleven men to do it. She's in therapy now, living under a new name in Canada. Doesn't talk to me anymore—I remind her of what happened. If I wasn't involved with bad people, it never would've happened. That's what she says at least."

"Why are you telling me this?"

Doom leans forward. "Because I see that same look in your eyes I had in mine. The one that says you'll burn the whole world down to save her. And I'm telling you—that rage will get you killed if you don't control it."

"I can control it."

"Can you?" He gestures toward Imani, who's reviewing something with Boulder two rows back. "When you see your friend up there, chained, possibly pregnant, you going to stay ice cold? When your woman wants to save every girl in that room, you going to be the voice of reason?"

The questions hit too close to home.

"I'll do what needs to be done," I say firmly.

"Good." Doom settles back. "Because I've got your six out of there, brother. But I need to know you've got your head straight. We all come home, or none of us do."

It's the most I've ever heard him speak at once, and his words oddly steady me.

"I've got it," I assure him. "And Doom? Thanks for sharing."

He nods once.

We're interrupted by one of Alejandro's men—Miguel, I think—approaching with a tablet.

"Thirty minutes to landing," he reports. "Local contact confirmed the venue is active. Multiple vehicles arriving throughout the morning."

Imani comes over and joins us. "What's security look like?"

"Standard pattern. Rooftop surveillance, roving patrols, checkpoint at the main gate." Miguel pulls up satellite images. "The estate is fifteen thousand square feet, oceanfront, single access road. Helicopter pad on the south lawn."

Boulder questions. "What sort of extraction routes are we looking at?"

"Limited. The road is the obvious choice, but they'll lock it down if things go bad. Beach access is possible but exposed. Dense jungle to the east—difficult but doable."

I study the images, memorizing every detail.

The place is a fortress designed to keep people in as much as out.

"There's an underground level," Miguel continues. "That's where the... viewing happens. Reinforced concrete, limited access points."

My stomach turns at the casual way he says "viewing," but I try to keep a straight face.

This is the reality we're walking into—a place where horror has been normalized into something as normal as selling a Big Mac at fucking McDonald's.

The plane begins its descent, and I catch Imani's hand. "You ready for this?"

"No," she admits quietly. "But I'll play my part."

Twenty minutes later, we're on the ground at a private airstrip outside Riohacha.

The humid Colombian air hits like a wall as we exit the plane, carrying the scent of ocean and jungle.

Two SUVs wait on the tarmac, drivers standing at attention.

"These are Alejandro's people," Miguel confirms. "They'll take us to the safe house."

The ride through the city is tense.

I've been to Colombia before on runs, but never like this.

Never wearing a ten-thousand-dollar suit, playing bodyguard to a cartel princess heading to buy human fucking beings.

The safe house is a villa in the hills overlooking the ocean—beautiful views, high walls, perfect sight lines.

Alejandro doesn't do anything half-assed.

"Two hours until we need to leave," Boulder announces once we're settled.
"Equipment check in thirty."

I find myself on the terrace, staring out at the water.

Somewhere close, Lashes is being held.

I don't know it for certain, but I can feel it in my bones. I know she's here. She has to be.

After a little over three and a half months of searching, she's within reach.

"Hey." Imani appears beside me, now dressed for her role.

The designer dress probably costs more than most people make in a year.

Diamonds glitter at her throat and wrists—real ones, because she has to show off, has to show everyone how much money she has and is willing to spend.

She looks every inch the cartel princess, beautiful and untouchable.

"You look the part," I tell her.

"I hate it," she admits. "Every piece of this costume represents blood money. But if it helps us save them..."

"It will," I assure her, though I'm trying to convince myself as much as her.

We check all of our equipment, sure to be as thorough as possible.

We know ceramic knives won't trigger metal detectors, but we have to be careful.

We have micro communication devices, so small that you can barely see them.

"Remember," Boulder says, securing a knife in my ankle holster, "these are last resort only. We go in clean, come out clean. Extraction team will be positioned two miles out, ready to move on signal."

"And if things go sideways?" I ask.

"Then we improvise," Doom answers. "Wouldn't be the first time."

The drive to the estate takes forty minutes through winding coastal roads.

With each mile, the tension in the vehicle grows thicker.

Imani sits beside me in perfect cartel princess posture—spine straight, expression bored, like she's heading to a business meeting rather than a slave auction.

I force myself into character too.

Professional bodyguard.

Efficient, alert, emotionally disconnected from everything except her safety.

The estate appears through the trees, and it's even more impressive than the satellite images suggested.

White walls gleaming in the afternoon sun, manicured grounds that probably require a small army to maintain.

Beautiful architecture hiding unimaginable evil.

The checkpoint is thorough but professional.

Guards with automatic weapons check our credentials, verify our invitation codes, search the vehicle looking for anything out of place.

They're not cartel thugs—these are trained professionals, the *crem de la crem*.

"Welcome, Ms. Torres," the lead guard says respectfully. "Mr. Salazar is expecting you. Please follow the valet to the reception area."

We're directed to park among dozens of other luxury vehicles—Bentleys, Ferraris, armored Mercedes.

The wealth on display is staggering.

Every car represents someone who profits from human suffering.

Inside, the opulence continues.

Marble floors, crystal chandeliers, artwork that belongs in museums.

A grotesque display of wealth built on the backs of victims like Lashes.

"Imani Torres," a cultured voice calls out. "What an unexpected pleasure."

We turn to find a distinguished man in his sixties approaching—silver hair, expensive suit, predator's smile.

"Don Carlos," Imani greets him coolly. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"Business is business," he replies, his eyes doing a quick assessment of her—and me. "Your father finally expanding into new markets?"

"Testing the waters," she confirms. "He believes in diversification."

"Smart man. The margins in this particular trade are... exceptional." He leans closer conspiratorially. "I hear today's selection is particularly impressive. Some unique lots."

My hands itch to wrap around his throat, but I remain statue-still, playing my role.

"I look forward to seeing them," Imani says with just the right amount of aristocratic boredom.

We mingle for another hour, and each conversation is worse than the last.

These people discuss buying human beings like they're talking about real estate investments.

Casual mentions of "breaking in new purchases" and "training techniques" that make my blood boil.

Imani plays her part flawlessly, expressing just enough interest to seem legitimate while deflecting attempts to dig deeper into her family's intentions.

I shadow her every move, using my position to memorize faces, escape routes, security positions.

Finally, a melodic chime signals the main event.

"Ladies and gentlemen," a hostess announces, "the auction will begin momentarily. Please proceed to the viewing chamber."

We follow the crowd through reinforced doors and down a wide staircase.

The temperature drops as we descend underground, and the festive atmosphere becomes somehow more sinister.

The viewing chamber is like a twisted theater—rows of plush seats facing a raised platform.

Stage lights illuminate the space where women will be displayed.

Sorry, sold.

"Welcome, esteemed guests," a man in an expensive tuxedo addresses the room from the platform. "Today we present an exceptional selection of merchandise. As always, all lots come with health certificates and documentation. Delivery can be arranged to any location globally."

Bile rises in my throat.

"Bidding will be conducted in US dollars," he continues. "Payment is expected within twenty-four hours of purchase. And now, let us begin."

The first woman brought out is in her early twenties, trembling despite the drugs clearly in her system.

The auctioneer describes her like a car—age, measurements, "special skills."

The bidding is brisk, businesslike.

She's sold for three hundred thousand to a man who looks like someone's grandfather.

The second is younger, maybe sixteen.

I feel Imani's hand clench in her lap, but her face remains impassive.

This girl fights despite her restraints, earning appreciative murmurs from the audience.

"Spirited," the auctioneer notes. "Perfect for those who enjoy... training."

She sells for half a million.

The third woman is in her thirties, described as "experienced domestic staff."

The mundane evil of it—reducing a human being to her utility—makes it somehow worse.

Then they bring out the children.

Two girls, neither older than thirteen, clutching each other on the platform.

Sisters, the auctioneer notes, available as a set or separately.

"No," Imani breathes beside me, so quiet only I can hear.

Then louder, with perfect cartel princess authority: "Five hundred thousand for both."

Heads turn our way.

The auctioneer smiles. "We have five hundred thousand. Do I hear six?"

"Six hundred," someone counters.

"Seven," Imani says immediately.

"Eight hundred," another bidder jumps in.

"One million," Imani states flatly. "For both. Together."

The room goes quiet.

It's an aggressive bid, high enough to warn off casual interest.

"One million going once... twice... sold to Ms. Torres."

The girls are led away, and I see tears in the younger one's eyes.

Imani's just committed a million dollars of cartel money to save two children she's never met.

"Getting ambitious early," Don Carlos comments from behind us. "Saving your funds might be wise. I hear the special lots are exceptional today."

The next several women blur together—a parade of human misery.

Imani bids on two more, spending another million total.

Then the auctioneer's voice takes on a special tone.

"And now, esteemed guests, we present our first premium special. A two-for-one opportunity."

My entire body goes rigid.

"This particular lot comes with unique qualities. Twenty-six years old, speaks fluent Vietnamese, Chinese, Spanish and English, and has a few other tricks up her sleeve.

Currently three months pregnant. Previous experience in... entertainment venues."

The door opens, and they bring her out.

Lashes.

Even drugged, even pregnant, even after three months of captivity, I'd know her anywhere.

The bright eyes that used to laugh at my jokes are dulled but defiant.

Her wrists are shackled, but she holds her head high.

The slight swell of her belly visible beneath the thin cream colored dress they've put her in.

Everything in me screams to move, to kill everyone between us, to get her out now .

But I can't.

I have to stand here and watch them auction my best friend like a piece of property.

"Bidding opens at one million," the auctioneer announces.

"One million," someone calls immediately.

"One-five," another voice.

"Two million," Imani says calmly.

I want to look at her, to thank her, but I can't break character.

"Two-five," Don Carlos counters, sounding amused.

"Three," Imani responds.

The bidding war escalates quickly.

These monsters can sense something special about Lashes, even drugged and chained.

Her spirit hasn't been completely broken.

"Four million," a new bidder enters.

"Five," Imani says without hesitation.

Murmurs ripple through the room.

The Torres princess is serious about her shopping.

"Six million," Don Carlos pushes.

"Seven," Imani counters immediately.

"That's quite an investment," Carlos notes. "Your father must have given you quite the budget."

"Eight million," she says, ignoring his probe.

The room goes silent.

Eight million dollars for one woman—even a pregnant one—is extraordinary.

"Eight million going once..." the auctioneer draws it out, sensing drama. "Going twice..."

I hold my breath.

"Sold! To Ms. Torres for eight million dollars."

Relief floods through me so hard my knees almost buckle.

We have her, but we didn't have that much in resources. I know Imani can get the rest of the funds, but fuck.

After three months, we have Lashes.

Now we just have to get her—and the five others Imani purchased—out of here alive.

As they lead Lashes away, her eyes sweep the crowd one last time.

For just a moment, they lock with mine.

Recognition flares—she knows me, even through the drugs and trauma.

Her lips move slightly. Just one word I can read:

"Brick."

Then she's gone, and I have to stand here playing bodyguard while my heart shatters into pieces.

The auction continues, but I barely process it.

All I can think about is Lashes, pregnant and chained, being led back to a cell to await "delivery."

Finally, mercifully, it ends.

"Congratulations on your purchases," the auctioneer addresses Imani directly. "Quite an impressive first showing. Delivery arrangements?"

"We'll take possession immediately," she says with imperial command. "I have transportation waiting."

"Of course. If you'll follow our staff to the processing area."

We're led through a series of corridors to what looks like a loading dock.

Other buyers are arranging their own transfers, casual as picking up dry cleaning.

"Ms. Torres," a man with a tablet approaches. "Five lots totaling twelve million dollars. Payment confirmation?"

Imani provides the banking codes without hesitation.

Alejandro's money, funding this rescue disguised as a purchase.

"Excellent. Your merchandise will be prepared for transfer. Approximately thirty minutes."

Thirty minutes.

I force myself to remain still, professional, while inside I'm screaming.

The thirty minutes while we wait crawls by.

Finally, our "purchases" are brought out.

The two teenage sisters cling to each other, terrified.

The two women Imani bought are in their twenties, drugged but mobile.

And Lashes.

Up close, I can see what three and a half months have done to her.

She's thinner even though she's pregnant, bruises in various stages visible on her arms.

But her eyes—those fighter's eyes—still have spark in them.

Imani commands coldly, still playing the part. "Load them up."

Our vehicles pull up—large SUVs with Alejandro's drivers.

The women are herded in like cargo, handlers ensuring they're "secure" for transport.

I want to say something to Lashes, anything, but I can't.

Not here, not with guards watching.

"Pleasure doing business," the loading supervisor says. "Enjoy your purchases."

I've never wanted to kill someone more in my life.

We get in our vehicles, Imani and I in the lead SUV with the two girls and one of the women.

Lashes is in the second vehicle with Doom—he'll keep her safe.

"Drive," Imani orders once the doors close. "Now."

The convoy pulls away from the estate, moving at a steady pace that won't attract attention.

Every instinct screams at me to floor it, to get as far from that hellhole as possible.

But we maintain the illusion—just another buyer leaving with their merchandise.

"How long until we're clear?" I ask the driver—one of Alejandro's men.

"Ten minutes to the intercept point," he replies. "Extraction team is ready."

Ten minutes.

After three months, we're ten minutes from getting Lashes truly safe.

"You did really good even though you went way over budget," I tell Imani quietly.

"Spending that money on the others."

"I couldn't leave them," she says, and now that we're away from the auction, tears stream down her face. "Those little girls... I couldn't leave children in that place. And honestly, if I only made one purchase it would've looked fishy."

"I know." I take her hand, squeezing gently. "We saved five lives today."

"Out of how many?" she asks bitterly. "How many women were sold today that we couldn't help?"

I don't have an answer for that.

The radio crackles. "Lead vehicle, this is Boulder. Intersection coming up in thirty seconds. Be ready to move."

This is it.

The switch from buyers to rescuers.

"Copy that," I respond.

The intersection appears ahead—a crossroads where one path leads to the safe house, another to the airport.

Our vehicles slow, then suddenly accelerate in different directions as the extraction team's vehicles merge into formation.

Any surveillance will show confusion, vehicles scattering, making tracking difficult.

"Status on package?" I radio to Doom.

"Secure and stable," he confirms. "She's asking for you."

My throat tightens. "Tell her soon. Very soon."

The airport comes into view—not the main terminal but a private section where Alejandro's plane waits.

We screech to a halt beside the aircraft, doors flying open.

Boulder shouts, wanting everyone to get their asses on the plane as quickly as possible. "Move, move, move!"

I help the teenage sisters out first, speaking softly in Spanish, trying to reassure them they're safe now.

They're terrified, confused, but they follow.

The other women are helped aboard, medical team ready to assess and treat.

Then I see her.

Doom is helping Lashes from the vehicle, supporting her weight as the drugs make her unsteady.

I'm at her side in three strides.

"Lashes."

Her head turns toward my voice, those familiar eyes focusing right on me. "Brick?" Her voice is hoarse, uncertain. "Is this... are you really...?"

"It's me," I assure her, taking her weight from Doom. "I'm real. You're safe. We're taking you home."

"Home," she repeats, like she can't quite believe it. Then her hand goes to her belly. "They... I'm..."

"I know," I say gently. "We'll take care of you. Both of you. Whatever you need."

She starts crying then, collapsing against me, and I carry her up the plane's steps.

Over three months of searching, of failure, of guilt—and finally, finally, I'm bringing her home.

"The others?" she asks as I settle her into a seat, the medical team moving in to check her vitals.

"Safe," I assure her. "We got six of you out."

"The Torres princess," Lashes says, surprising me. "They talked about her bidding. Said she spent a fortune."

"That's Imani," I confirm. "My... she's with me. She made this possible."

I don't think now is the right time to tell my best friend that someone made an honest man out of me, that I have an ol' lady.

Lashes manages a weak smile. "You'll have to tell me that story. When I can... when my head's clearer."

The medical team takes over, starting IVs, checking the baby, but this is just the beginning.

I step back, letting them work, and find Imani watching from across the cabin.

"We did it," she says softly.

"Yeah," I agree, pulling her into my arms. "We did."

As the plane lifts off, carrying us away from Colombia, I look around the cabin.

Six women are saved.

Six lives pulled back from the clutches of hell.

It's not everyone—not even close—but it's something.

And Lashes is alive.

Damaged, traumatized, pregnant by her captors, but alive.

Everything else we can figure out.

"Thank you," I tell Imani. "For the money, for taking the risk, for everything."

"We're partners," she reminds me. "Your fights are my fights."

I kiss her then, not caring who sees, pouring over three months of fear and frustration and relief into the contact.

When we break apart, our reality settles over me—my best friend is safe, and one battle is dealt with, for now.

We still need to deal with Diego, still need to rescue Imani's father, and still have an entire trafficking network to burn down.

But today, we have a small win.

Today we brought one of our people home.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Imani

The private jet touches down at the airstrip outside Chihuahua just as the sun begins to set, painting the sky in shades of amber and red

Through the window, I can see vehicles waiting—medical vans, SUVs with blacked-out windows, a whole team ready to receive six traumatized women who've just been pulled from hell.

I glance across the cabin at our rescued women.

The sisters—Xiomara and Itzel—haven't let go of each other since we loaded them onto the plane.

Xiomara's arms wrap protectively around her younger sister, whispering constantly in Spanish even though Itzel hasn't responded with a single word.

Mei sits rigidly upright, switching between Mandarin, English, and Spanish in a stressed stream of consciousness that no one can fully follow.

Valeria clutches her stomach, rocking slightly, lost in some private grief I can't begin to understand.

And Lashes—she stares at Brick across the cabin like he might disappear if she looks away for even a second.

"Let's move," Brick announces as the plane comes to a complete stop. "Medical team boards first, then we transfer to the vehicles."

The next twenty minutes are chaotic as all hell.

Ruby comes onto the plane with other people, immediately triaging the women.

When they try to examine Itzel, she clings tighter to Xiomara, a terrified whimper escaping—the first sound we've heard from her.

"No separate," Xiomara says firmly in broken English, her young voice carrying surprising authority. "We stay together. Always together."

Ruby nods, adapting immediately. "Of course, sweetheart. You can stay with your sister for everything. We'll examine you both together, okay?"

The tenderness in Ruby's voice shows how delicate she's going to be with these kids.

Even she's affected by it.

I help guide Mei toward the exit, but she grabs my arm with surprising strength.

"My family," she says in English, then switches to Mandarin before landing on Spanish. "Necesito ... I need to call them. They think I'm dead. My mother... she must be..."

Her voice breaks, and I see tears streaming down her face.

"Soon," I promise gently, squeezing her hand. "We need to make sure you're safe first. Make sure no one can track the call. But I promise, within the hour, you'll hear your mother's voice."

She nods, but I can see the desperation in her eyes.

For two months her family has likely believed she was dead.

And I'll help her navigate those feelings.

The ride to the clubhouse is intense.

I'm in the lead vehicle with Brick, Xiomara, and Itzel.

The little girl hasn't released her death grip on her sister, but her dark eyes track everything—every turn, every sound, every movement.

"It's okay," Xiomara whispers to her in Spanish. "These are good people. They saved us. Remember? The pretty lady who bought us? She saved us from the bad men."

Itzel's eyes flick to me, and I try to give her a reassuring smile.

"You're safe now," I tell her in Spanish. "Both of you. No one will separate you again."

When we pull through the clubhouse gates, I'm surprised to see what looks like half the charter waiting in the courtyard.

Word travels fast with the club, and the ol' ladies have banded together to make sure everyone is taken care of.

"Jesus," Brick mutters. "Looks like the whole family turned out."

Tables have been set up with food, water, and basic supplies.

Kelsey stands with a stack of blankets, Astra beside her with what looks like bags of clothes.

Even some of the kids are there, held back by their parents but watching with curious eyes.

"Let's get them inside," Ruby instructs, but her voice is gentle. "They need medical examinations first, then we can worry about everything else. Kelsey, can you bring some of those blankets? The plane's air conditioning had them all freezing."

But as we help the women from the vehicles, Valeria suddenly doubles over with a cry of pain.

Ruby's at her side immediately, her experienced hands checking for obvious injuries. "What's wrong? Where does it hurt?"

Valeria's response is barely audible, but I catch it: " El bebé... perdí el bebé hace semanas. Duele ... it hurts."

The baby. She lost the baby weeks ago.

Ruby's expression shifts to one of profound sadness as she and another medic carefully guide Valeria inside. "We'll take care of you, honey. We'll make the pain stop."

A miscarriage—another layer of trauma these monsters inflicted.

And she's been carrying that pain, that loss, without any medical care for weeks.

Everyone gets inside and they're all seen by the medics, and even a doctor Alejandro arranged to be here waiting at the clubhouse.

It feels like the medical examinations take hours.

I pace the common room, getting updates as they come while trying to coordinate with Amara on any immediate needs.

Boulder's wife, Kelsey, has taken charge of organizing the clothes and toiletries, while Astra cooks some food that won't overwhelm their stomachs.

"The young one still hasn't spoken?" Astra asks quietly, joining me by the window.

"Not a word. Her sister says she hasn't talked since..."

"Since she watched her parents die," Astra finishes. "God. Those poor babies."

Through the window, I can see more club members arriving.

This is what they do—circle the wagons when family is threatened.

And somehow, these five strangers have already become family.

Ruby emerges with more updates about everyone.

Xiomara has bruises consistent with restraint, malnutrition, dehydration, but no serious physical injuries.

Itzel is the same, though her continued silence worries everyone.

Mei has defensive wounds on her arms, signs of fighting back repeatedly.

Valeria's miscarriage appears to have happened three weeks ago, untreated and causing ongoing complications that will require surgery, and a load of antibiotics.

And Lashes—beyond the pregnancy and expected injuries, she's asking for Brick constantly.

I know she's his best friend, but it does make me feel a little bit weird.

Then again, she's been through some major trauma. If there had been something going on between the two of them, I think I would know by now.

"Go," I tell him when Ruby passes along the message for the third time. "She needs to see you."

He hesitates, conflict clear in his eyes. "You sure? I should stay with you?—"

"She's your best friend," I remind him. "She's been through hell and she needs her family. Go."

After he leaves, I focus on what I can control—logistics.

These women need documentation, safe housing, therapy, medical care, and in some cases, entire new lives.

"The sisters," Kelsey says, approaching with a gentle expression and two cups of tea. "Ruby says they have no family to contact?"

I accept the tea gratefully. "Their parents were killed six weeks ago. They watched it happen. They have no one—no grandparents, no aunts or uncles."

"They have us now," she says firmly, without even a moment's hesitation. "The club has plenty of spare rooms. We have one set up with two twin beds. They could stay in that one until we can find a more permanent accommodation, if anyone here adopts them, stuff like that. Those girls can stay with us until... well, until forever if needed.

Maybe Boulder would be open to it."

This is what the club does—takes in strays, protects the vulnerable, becomes family for those who have none.

"That's... Kelsey, that's a huge commitment."

"So?" She shrugs. "We've been talking about kids anyway. Maybe this is how our family is meant to grow. Besides, you think anyone in this club would let those girls go into the system? Not a chance. It's shit in America, so I can only imagine how it is here."

An hour later, Brick emerges from the medical room looking shaken.

His face is pale, jaw clenched tight with emotion.

He finds me immediately, pulling me into a quiet corner away from the bustling activity.

"How is she?" I ask.

"Broken," he says simply, his voice rough. "But fighting. She... God, Imani. The things they did to her. And she's pregnant from it."

"Does she want to...?"

"Keep it?" He runs a hand over his head. "She doesn't know. Says she can't think about it yet. But she asked about Sally Bernard, wanted to know if we'd dealt with her yet."

Sally Bernard—the woman who orchestrated Lashes's kidnapping, who sold her to

these monsters.

"What did you tell her?"

"The truth. That Sally's been handled but the organization she sold Lashes to is still operational." His jaw tightens. "She wants to help take them down. Said she memorized faces, names, details that might help. She made it her mission while she was in there—if she survived, she'd destroy them."

"She's barely been rescued twelve hours?—"

"I know," he interrupts. "But that's Lashes. She processes trauma by fighting back. Always has."

Before I can respond, Amara appears in the doorway. "Meeting. My office. Five minutes. Bring whoever needs to be there."

The office is crowded—Amara, Dante, Boulder, Doom, Brick, and myself.

Maps cover every surface, laptops open with reports.

The weight of what needs to be decided hangs heavy in the air.

"First things first," Amara begins, her president voice in full effect. "The women. What do they need immediately?"

I pull out the tablet where I've been making notes. "Xiomara and Itzel have no family. They'll need placement, therapy, and eventual documentation to stay in Mexico. They're Guatemalan citizens, but going back there is a death sentence. They'll just end up in a similar situation."

"Kelsey and I will take them," Boulder says immediately. "Already cleared it with her. We've got the room here in the club, and Kelsey's got experience with traumatized kids given how she grew up. We'll look at the house across the street that's for sale, see how big it is."

"Mei wants to continue her education," I continue, scrolling through my notes. "She was studying at UNAM in Mexico City, but she's afraid to go back there. She asked about transferring to the university here in Chihuahua. She's determined not to let them take her future too."

"We can arrange protection," Doom offers, his gravelly voice thoughtful. "Set her up in a secure apartment near campus, have some of us check on her regularly. Make sure she can finish what she started."

"She'll need therapy too," I add. "She's holding it together, but barely."

"They all will," Amara notes. "I'll reach out to the trauma specialist we've used before."

"Valeria needs immediate medical treatment for complications from her miscarriage, then safe passage to Texas. Her husband is in Houston, working construction. She hasn't seen him in five months."

"I know people who can help with that," Dante speaks up. "Clean papers, safe crossing, the works. We can have her in Houston within the week."

"And Lashes?" Amara asks, turning to Brick.

"Medical care for the pregnancy, trauma therapy, and time," Brick answers, each word coming out slower than the last. "She's... processing. But she wants to help take down the trafficking ring. Says she won't rest until every person involved is dead or

in prison."

"Of course she does," Amara mutters. "What about security? These women are witnesses. The ring won't just let them disappear."

"About that." Miguel enters without knocking, his expression grim. "Just got word from our contacts. The trafficking ring has put out bounties. They know Lashes was part of the club and you went in to save her. Your bounty is half-a million dollars, fifty thousand for any of the rescued merchandise returned."

"Merchandise," I spit, rage flooding through me. "They're still calling them that."

"To them, that's all they ever were," Miguel replies matter-of-factly. "The point is, none of you are safe. They're mobilizing resources to get their 'property' back. And they're pissed about the money they lost."

Brick growls, danger radiating from every line of his body. "Let them try."

"They will," Amara says flatly. "Which is why we need to be smart. These women need new identities, especially Mei and Valeria if they're leaving our direct protection."

"I can handle that," I offer. "I know people who specialize in making people disappear. Good people, not connected to any cartel business."

"Do it," Amara approves. "What else?"

The meeting continues for another hour, hammering out details.

Safe house options, or if they should stay here in the club.

We talk about how we'll handle security, backup plans if anything doesn't go according to plan, contingency arrangements.

Every detail matters when lives hang in the balance.

Finally, Amara dismisses us with orders to get some rest.

But I can't sleep, not yet.

There's too much to do, too many lives depending on us getting this right.

I make my way through the clubhouse, checking on each woman.

Mei is in one of the spare rooms, talking rapidly on a secure phone—finally able to tell her family she's alive.

I pause outside her door, listening to the mix of Mandarin and sobbing.

The joy and grief in her voice as she speaks to her mother breaks my heart.

Two months of believing their daughter was dead, gone without a trace.

"She wants to fly here," Mei tells me when she finally hangs up, her face streaked with tears. "My mother wants to come immediately."

"That might not be safe?—"

"I know," she interrupts. "I told her to wait. But hearing her voice..." Fresh tears fall. "I thought I'd never hear her voice again."

I sit beside her, letting her cry against my shoulder.

This young woman who fought her captors, who stayed strong through months of hell, is finally able to release the grief she's been carrying.

Valeria is with Ruby, getting the medical treatment she should have received weeks ago.

Through the partially open door, I can see her on an IV drip, antibiotics and pain medication finally flowing through her system.

The doctor my godfather sent is nearby, explaining in Spanish what the procedure is going to entail and that he normally wouldn't do it in a setting like this, but she's gone through enough trauma already.

She's crying, but it seems cathartic—finally able to grieve her loss properly with medical support.

"She'll need surgery." Ruby comes over to me, slipping into the hallway. "The miscarriage was incomplete. She's been in agony for weeks."

"When?"

"Tomorrow morning. He wants to give her the night to rest and some time for the antibiotics to get into her system."

Lashes is sleeping, sedated according to the nurse watching over her.

Even in sleep, her hand rests protectively over her belly.

The bruises on her face are already yellowing, but I know the internal wounds will take much longer to heal.

But it's the sisters I find myself drawn to last.

Kelsey has set them up in what will be their room—twin beds with colorful quilts, soft lighting, a closet already filling with donated clothes from club families.

Someone has even put up posters of butterflies and flowers, trying to make it feel less institutional.

To my surprise, Xiomara is sitting on the floor with Itzel, and between them is a small pile of yarn that someone—probably Astra—must have provided.

Xiomara's fingers move with ease, showing Itzel how to loop and twist the bright threads.

"Our mama taught us," Xiomara says softly when she notices me watching from the doorway. "She said weaving connects us to our ancestors, to our strength. That every thread is a prayer, a memory, a hope."

Itzel doesn't speak, but her fingers follow her sister's movements, creating a simple braid of red and gold.

"Your parents would be proud," I tell them, entering the room slowly so as not to startle them. "You survived. You protected each other."

"They died because they wouldn't pay the bad men," Xiomara says matter-of-factly, her young voice carrying weight beyond her years. "Papa said paying them would be wrong. That it would make us part of the evil. Mama agreed. She said standing for what's right is worth any price."

"Your parents were brave," I say, my throat tight. "And so are you. Both of you."

For the first time, Itzel looks directly at me.

She doesn't speak, but she holds up the small braid she's created—an offer, a gift.

The gesture is so small, so huge.

I take it carefully, this small token of trust from a child who has every reason never to trust again.

"Thank you," I whisper. "It's beautiful. I'll treasure it."

Xiomara translates my words into K'iche', their indigenous language, and I see something shift in Itzel's eyes.

Not quite hope, but maybe the possibility of it.

I find Brick on the roof—his favorite thinking spot.

He's staring out at the city lights, shoulders tense with the weight of everything.

"How are they?" he asks without turning.

"Surviving," I reply, settling beside him. "Xiomara's teaching Itzel to weave. Mei finally got to call her family. Valeria's getting proper medical care. Surgery tomorrow."

"And we saved five," he says quietly. "Out of how many that were sold today?"

It's the same question that's been haunting me.

"We saved five," I repeat firmly. "And tomorrow we'll work on saving more. That's

all we can do. One life at a time. One operation at a time."

He pulls me against his side, and I breathe in his manly scent.

"Alejandro's people sent word," he says after a moment. "Diego's moved your father. New location, better fortified."

My stomach drops. "Where?"

"They're working on it. But..." He hesitates.

"What?"

"You know the trafficking ring put those bounties out. "

"Yeah, I heard. I'm flattered they think I'm worth so much."

He doesn't laugh at my weak joke. "This is serious, Imani. They want you dead or returned to them for auction."

"Then we'd better take them down first," I say simply.

"It's not that simple?—"

"Yes, it is." I turn to face him fully. "We saved five women today. Six. And there are hundreds, maybe thousands more out there. Women like Lashes, like those little girls who watched their parents die. You think I can just walk away knowing that?"

"I know, but?—"

"No buts," I interrupt. "We have names now. Faces. Lashes said she memorized

details. Mei heard conversations. We have intel. We'd be fools not to use it."

He's quiet for a long moment. "You're not going to let this go, are you?"

"Could you? If it were you?"

"No," he admits. "But that doesn't mean I have to like you putting yourself at risk."

"I'm already at risk," I remind him. "We all are. At least this way, we're taking the fight to them instead of waiting for them to come for us."

He sighs, pulling me closer. "When did you become the warrior and I become the worrier?"

"When you fell in love with me," I say simply.

"Yeah," he agrees. "That'll do it."

We sit in silence, the weight of the day settling over us.

Five women have been saved, but there's so much more work to do.

My father is still captive, Diego is still out there, and an entire trafficking network still operational.

But tonight, Xiomara and Itzel are safe in a warm bed.

Mei got to hear her mother's voice.

Valeria is getting medical care.

Lashes is home.

It's not everything, but it's something.

"We should get some sleep," Brick says eventually. "Tomorrow's going to be complicated."

"When isn't it?" I ask, but I let him pull me to my feet.

As we head inside, my phone buzzes with a message from one of Alejandro's contacts:

Diego making moves. Consolidating power. Your father is still alive but drugged constantly. I will let you know more when I can.

I show Brick the message, watching his expression grow harder.

"Soon," he promises. "We'll get him back soon."

"I know," I say, though patience has never been my strong suit.

We pass by the room where Xiomara and Itzel are staying one more time.

Through the cracked door, I can see them curled together in one bed despite having two—safety found only in each other's arms.

The yarn they were weaving lies on the nightstand, a small splash of color in their new life.

"They'll be okay," Brick says softly. "Kids are resilient."

"They shouldn't have to be," I reply.

"No," he agrees. "They shouldn't."

But they are, and we'll make sure they never have to be that strong again.

Tomorrow we'll deal with bounties, threats, and planning our next move against the trafficking ring.

Tomorrow we'll work on getting my father back and making Diego pay for everything he's done.

Tomorrow Valeria will have her surgery and begin healing, Mei will start the process of transferring schools, refusing to let her captors steal her dreams, Xiomara and Itzel will wake up in a home where they're wanted, protected, loved.

But tonight, five women sleep safely under the protection of the Reapers Rejects MC.

As we finally make our way to bed, exhausted as all hell, I touch the St. Christopher medallion at my throat—Alejandro's replacement for the one Diego corrupted.

My mother wanted our family to be legitimate, to leave the violence behind.

Maybe this is how I honor that dream—by using our resources to save others, to destroy the worst parts of this life.

"What are you thinking?" Brick asks, reading my expression.

"That my mother would have been proud of what we did today," I admit.

"She would have been proud of you every day," he corrects. "But yeah, especially

today."

I kiss him softly, grateful for this man who sees me not as the cartel princess, or the Harvard graduate, or the target with a bounty on her head, but just as Imani.

Tomorrow the war continues.

But tonight, we've won a battle.

In this life, you take your victories where you can find them.

EPILOGUE

Brick

One Month Later ...

I wake to sunlight streaming through the window and Imani's braids across my chest like silk.

She ended up going to the same woman who does Oakleigh's, the two women developing a friendship.

For a moment, I just lie there, breathing in her scent, marveling that this is my life now.

A month ago, we were running for our lives.

Now, she's wearing my ring—not just my ol' lady, but my fiancée.

She murmurs against my skin. "You're thinking too loud."

I run my fingers through her braids. "Just appreciating the view."

She lifts her head, those dark eyes still heavy with sleep. "Smooth talker."

"Only for you, baby."

A knock on the door interrupts whatever she was about to say.

"Brick?" Lashes's voice comes through. "You awake? I need to talk to you."

"Give us five minutes," I call back.

Imani's already moving, pulling on one of my shirts and a pair of shorts. "I'll go downstairs and make coffee. You see what she needs."

I find Lashes in the hallway, one hand resting on her growing belly.

At four months now, the pregnancy is unmistakable.

She looks healthier than she has since we brought her home—regular meals and medical care working their magic.

"Morning," I greet her. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, just..." She hesitates. "I felt the baby move last night. For the first time."

The wonder in her voice makes my chest tight. "That's amazing, Lash."

"I know I should hate it," she says quietly. "This baby is... it's from them. From what they did. But when I felt it move..."

"Hey," I interrupt gently. "You don't have to justify anything to anyone. This is your choice, your baby now."

She nods, blinking back tears. "I've been thinking about names. If it's a girl... Hope. Because that's what she represents now."

"It's perfect," I tell her, meaning it.

We head to the kitchen where Imani's got coffee brewing and is pulling out ingredients for breakfast.

The domestic scene still catches me off guard sometimes—the cartel princess who used to wear designer everything is now comfortable in my old t-shirt, making eggs in the club kitchen.

"Morning, Lashes," Imani greets warmly. "Hungry?"

"Starving," Lashes admits. "This kid is going to eat me out of house and home."

As the women chat about pregnancy symptoms and doctor appointments, I let my mind drift to all that's changed in a month.

Valeria made it safely to Texas, reunited with her husband.

She sent a letter last week—a photo of them together, her smile radiant even though she's going through so much.

They're starting over in Waco, where he's got steady construction work and she's found a job at a tailor shop.

The sisters are thriving with Boulder and Kelsey.

Just yesterday, the adoption papers came through, making it official.

Itzel still doesn't speak much, but last week she called Kelsey "Mama" for the first time.

Boulder actually teared up when he told us.

And Mei—she's thrown herself into university life with a vengeance, determined not

to let her captors steal her future.

She comes by the club on weekends for self-defense training, learning to protect herself.

"Earth to Brick," Imani says, waving a spatula at me. "You want eggs or not?"

"Sorry, just thinking about everything."

"Speaking of everything," Lashes says, "when does Roxy's daughter arrive?"

"Today," I confirm. "Nova's flying in this afternoon, starts her semester next week at nursing school."

Imani plates up some eggs and toast. "And she's rooming with Mei?"

"That's the plan. Safer for both of them to have roommates, and the apartment's big enough."

"Smart," Lashes approves. "Mei needs friends her own age. People who aren't connected to... everything that happened."

We eat breakfast together, a strange little family.

Afterward, I head out to the garage where I find Doom working on his bike.

"Nova's flight gets in at three," I tell him. "You still good to help her get settled?"

He grunts, which I take as a yes.

Doom's not much for words, but he's been different lately—quieter than usual, if that's possible.

"It's been a while since I've seen Nova," he mentions, not looking up from his bike.

"Yeah, you know her? Heard she's Roxy's kid. Smart as hell. Decided she wanted to be a nurse after everything that went down over the years."

"Yeah, I started prospecting up in Montana. Crazy how time flies. How old is she now?"

"Twenty-four, I think. Why?"

"No reason," he says, but there's something in his tone that makes me look closer.

Before I can push, Rooster appears. "Brick. Got a minute?"

I follow him to a quiet corner of the garage.

"What's up?"

"Got intel on Diego," he says quietly. "Fresh, from one of Alejandro's guys."

My entire body goes still. "Where?"

"Compound near Ciudad Juárez. Heavily guarded, but not impossible. Your father-in-law is definitely there—they've got recent photos."

"Show me."

We head to the meeting room where Rooster pulls up satellite images on his laptop.

The compound is a fortress—high walls, guard towers, single access road.

But I've breached worse.

"When do we move?" I ask.

"That's the thing," Rooster says. "Amara wants to wait, gather more intel. But..."

"But Imani's losing her mind with worry," I finish. "And every day we wait, Diego gets more power."

"Exactly."

We're interrupted by Doom joining us, closing the door behind him. "If you're planning what I think you're planning, I want in."

I study him. "This isn't something Amara's given the green light to. If we do this, it's just us."

"I know," he says simply. "But that girl in there? Imani? She reminds me of my sister. The not knowing is killing her slowly. I've been there."

Rooster nods. "So we do this quietly.."

"When?" I ask.

"Give it a week," Doom suggests. "Let Amara think we're being good little prospects, following orders, then we go get him. We can deal with our angry mama bird when we get back, with Imani's dad safe and sound."

We spend the next hour going over the satellite images, planning routes, discussing what sort of equipment to bring.

It feels good to be taking action instead of waiting for permission.

By the time we break up, we have the bones of a plan.

I'm heading back to find Imani when my phone buzzes—reminder that it's time to pick up Nova from the airport.

I find Doom and we take one of the club SUVs.

"You ever meet her before?" Doom asks as I drive.

"Nova? Once, briefly. I don't know her, but I know Roxy's good people, so I'm sure her daughter is too."

"Hmm."

I glance at him. "You okay, brother? You've been off lately."

"Just thinking about shit," he says, which for Doom is practically a full confession.

The airport is busy, but we spot Nova easily—she looks like a younger version of her mother, with long dark hair and eyes that miss nothing.

She's pulling two suitcases and has a backpack that looks like it weighs as much as she does.

"Nova?" I call out.

She turns, breaking into a smile. "Hey, Brick. Mom described you perfectly—'big and looks like he could bench press a motorcycle.'"

I laugh. "That's me. This is Doom."

She turns to look at him, and I swear the air crackles between them.

Doom actually stands up straighter, and Nova's cheeks flush slightly.

"Hey, it's been a while," she says softly.

"Hey. Yeah, it has." he replies, and for Doom, the single word sounds like poetry.

Interesting.

Doom reaches for her suitcases with odd gentleness. "Let me get those."

"I can manage?—"

"I know you can," he interrupts. "But let me anyway."

She studies him for a moment, then nods. "Okay."

The ride back is filled with Nova asking questions about the city, the university, the club.

But I notice she directs most of them to Doom, who answers with more words than I've heard him string together in months.

"Mom said Mei's been through a lot," Nova says carefully. "Without giving details, is there anything I should know? To be a good roommate?"

"She has nightmares sometimes," I tell her. "And she doesn't like sudden noises or people coming up behind her. But she's tough, working through it."

"I can work with that," Nova says firmly. "I'm glad she'll have someone to room with. Mom worries about me being alone in a new city anyways."

"You won't be alone," Doom says quietly. "The club takes care of its own."

Back at the clubhouse, Mei is waiting.

We had told her the other day Nova would be moving in with her, and she was happy not to be in her apartment by herself anymore.

An apartment the club is providing for her, I might add.

"You must be Nova! I'm Mei. I'm so happy you're here!"

The two young women hit it off immediately, chattering about classes and schedules as we load Nova's stuff to take to their apartment.

"It's perfect," Nova says when she sees the place. "And so close to campus!"

"The club made sure it was secure," I explain, showing her the reinforced locks and security system. "And there's always someone nearby if you need anything."

"I'll check on them regularly," Doom volunteers, then looks like he wants to take the words back.

Nova smiles at him. "That would make me feel safer. Thank you."

As we're leaving, I catch Doom's arm. "You good?"

"Yeah," he says, but his eyes drift back to where Nova is unpacking. "She's... not what I expected."

"Funny how that happens," I say, thinking of Imani.

Back at the clubhouse, the ladies are preparing for dinner.

It's become a tradition—Sunday dinners with the whole family.

Xiomara is in the kitchen with Kelsey, learning to cook while Itzel sits at the counter

drawing.

"Brick!" Xiomara calls out. "Look what Itzel made for you!"

The little girl shyly hands me a drawing—stick figures but clearly recognizable as our club family.

I'm there (identifiable because I'm huge), along with Imani, Lashes, and others.

In the corner, she's drawn two angel figures that must be her parents.

"This is beautiful," I tell her. "Can I keep it?"

She nods, a tiny smile crossing her face.

"Use your words, baby," Kelsey encourages gently.

"Yes," Itzel whispers. "For you."

It's only the fifth or sixth time she's spoken since we rescued her, and each word feels like a victory.

Dinner is chaotic in the best way possible.

The long table is packed—club members, their families, our rescued women who've become family.

Mei and Nova sit together, already talking like old friends.

I notice Doom positioned where he can see Nova, though he's trying to be subtle about it.

"So, what's the deal with the trafficking ring?" Lashes asks during a lull in conversation. "They've been quiet for a month. That can't be good."

Amara nods. "Too quiet. Our intel suggests they're regrouping, possibly bringing in new leadership to replace what we disrupted."

"They'll come for us eventually and I mean in a way that's more than just putting a bounty on my head," Imani says matter-of-factly. "We cost them money and reputation."

"Let them come," Boulder says. "We'll be ready."

But I can see the worry in her eyes.

It's not the trafficking ring that keeps her up at night—it's her father, still captive, still being drugged by Diego.

Life has been really heavy lately, but we're surviving, getting through it one day at a time.

After dinner, I find myself on the roof again, but this time I'm not alone.

I've brought one of the letters from my father—still sealed after fifteen years.

Imani takes a seat beside me. "You sure about this?"

"Seeing those girls with Boulder and Kelsey, watching them heal... it made me think about family. About forgiveness."

She takes my hand. "Whatever it says, I'm here."

I open the envelope carefully, unfolding paper that's yellowed with age.

Son,

I know you hate me. You have every right to. I failed you and your mother in the worst way. I chose crime over getting honest work, chose easy money over integrity, and you both paid the price.

I'm not writing for forgiveness. I know I don't deserve that. I'm writing so someday, maybe, you'll understand. We were being evicted. You were hungry. Your mother was sick. I saw no other way.

I was wrong. There's always another way. I see that now.

I pray every night that you're okay, that you found a better path than mine. That you became the man I couldn't be.

All my love, Dad

I have to stop reading, emotion choking me.

"He's taking responsibility," Imani says softly. "That's more than a lot of parents do."

"Fifteen years," I manage. "Fifteen years I carried anger at him, and he's been carrying guilt."

"Maybe it's time to let both go," she suggests.

I nod, folding the letter carefully. There are dozens more to read, but this is enough for tonight.

Tomorrow, I'll write him a letter and get it on the fastest shipping to his prison.

I'm just happy I took one step toward forgiveness, toward healing.