



Lourdes's Sentinel (Police and Fire: Operation Alpha)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: Firefighter Lourdes Styx Boyd loves her job and saving people. But when she picks up a crazy and obsessive stalker after an arson call, her life is suddenly in jeopardy. No stranger to deranged stalkers, Styx can hold her own against the enemies who threaten her. After all, her military training and expertise comes in handy quite often.

The owner of the building that's engulfed in flames sees a familiar spark in the feisty fire fighter that he can't ignore. Wealthy businessman Jeremiah Zeon refuses to let anything happen to her for reasons he's afraid to recognize. Now, Jeremiah and Styx work together to keep her stalker at bay. But when the stalker sets his sights on Jeremiah too, they can't seem to extinguish the stalker's desire to destroy them both. Should they ignite the fire between them again while trying to stop the arsonist from burning down everyone and everything they hold dear?

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LOURDES

‘Styx’

As we take the corner hard, what I see has my heart beating faster and my breath coming in short gasps. The Zeon Financial Building has smoke pouring out of the higher windows, which have blown inward into the high-rise. They just celebrated their one-year anniversary since the building was built and opened for business. This is going to tear a hole in Jeremiah Zeon’s soul. He’s put everything into getting this building up and running, as it is at the helm of his financial businesses. Not to mention how he made the lofts/condos located on the upper floors available for tenants, which are beautiful and reasonable.

Jeremiah is one of the richest men in the United States, if not the world. Why he’s picked our town to spend most of the last two years getting his hub built here and spending time, except for when he makes his trips to New York, Europe, and Switzerland, is beyond me. Since he’s not a very open or approachable type of guy, everything is hearsay. I wish I didn’t know how much pain he’s going to be in, but I do. That’s because I let my damn guard down one night, and that’s when he managed to sneak past all of my walls and booby traps. It was me who pushed him away, and I haven’t spoken to him since. It’s been one hundred days plus or almost four months. In the beginning, he tried to reach out, then he got pissed off and, finally, he ghosted me. I should have been happy about that. But nope, not me, with my fucked head filled with so many thoughts about that weekend we spent together.

“Yo, Styx, ya with us, woman? Daydreaming again? Move that ass, need you, Crow, and Paco to take the fourteenth and fifteenth floors. Check to make sure no one is trapped up there. If anyone is up there not wanting to leave their fancy homes, drag them out by their hair if necessary. We don’t have a lot of time, so let’s get moving. Keep your eyes open, come back in one piece.”

We all thank our chief as we all go about our job. Our Engine 23 crew is more like my “found family.” We manage, somehow, to not only work together but also socialize and hang out outside of the firehouse. I grab my mask, pulling it over my face, and take in a deep breath. I look over to Crow, who nods, then Paco, who gives me thumbs-up. Making our way into the building is difficult enough between firefighters, police, and equipment, but as we get farther into the thickness of the smoke, it makes seeing anything impossible. I feel Paco before he shakes his hand at my side and touches my shoulder gently. Yeah, my house knows that touching me could go either good or bad, depending on the day, and where my head is at that moment. I hear the crackle first, then Paco’s voice comes across loud and clear in my earbuds.

“Styx, gonna go left, you and Crow go right? We meet back here as quickly as possible, just clear those rooms. We can’t leave anyone behind.”

I nod, giving him a thumbs-up so he knows I heard him and confirming I understand. When I turn, I see Crow leaning against a wall watching the two of us. Looking around first, I nod his way and he pushes off the wall and moves down the hallway opposite of where Paco is heading. I follow behind, not too closely, though within an arm’s reach. Before we open or kick in any door, we feel for heat. This place seems to be burning way too fast for a common accidental “fire.” Something has sped it up, just don’t know what accelerant was used at the moment. Crow looks my way, then touches the door before he hits it with his Halligan. Once the door opens, he enters, so I go to the next office on the other side.

I feel the door and it's cool, so I also grab the Halligan and with one swing the door flies open. Holy shit! Instead of an empty office, there is a man hanging from the beams up high. I can tell he's deceased by the way his skin has turned to an ash gray and by the puddle on the floor. His bladder released on the initial hanging, which is pretty normal. Reaching for my mic, I push the button.

“Chief, we have a casualty here in one of the offices. Going to need some assistance as the deceased is hanging from a beam, and I'm unable to reach him. Over.”

Half listening as I make my way into the room, something has the hair on the back of my neck standing up. A shiver runs up my neck and right when I go to turn around, something comes flying my way, hitting me in the side of my head. Immediately I go down to my knees. With my right hand I reach into my side pocket and pull out my roll of quarters, fisting them in my hand. Seeing movement out of my peripheral vision, I cautiously get to my feet with my side facing the attacker. With my ten plus years of martial arts training, my body is ready when whoever the idiot is moves in to attack me again. I lift up the Halligan to protect myself as I swing my hand that is fisted over the roll of quarters. When I turn, there's a person with a hoodie on and a ski mask covering their face. I can't tell if it is a male or female, all I know is they wish to do me harm. When my fist hits their nose, it immediately has the person cussing from under the mask. Then I see some blood dripping from the bottom of the mask hitting their T-shirt. Yeah, that's right, I got ya good, asswipe.

I can hear chief screaming my call name, but I need to keep my wits on what's right in front of me. When the person looks up, I see the darkest most emotionless eyes I've ever seen glaring death rays at me with such hatred, it truly scares me for a second or two. From the hallway, noise is making its way to this room as my company is on the way, rushing to aid and rescue me. The asshole pushes me then turns, running out and down the hall. I see a body take off after the person but now that it's over, my adrenaline drops and I once again hit my knees. Right before I topple over, I see two firefighters hustling into the room and, holy shit, one civilian

behind them with absolutely no gear. What the hell is that dumbass idiot doing? That's my last thought before I welcome the darkness.

Feeling cool air on my face means someone took my mask off. Not feeling the weight of all of my equipment tells me I've been out long enough for someone to remove my oxygen tank and probably also my tool belt. I fight to open my lazy eyes and the first thing I see are the most startling steel-gray eyes I've ever seen. No, wait one damn minute, I know those eyes as I've seen them in my dreams mostly every night. And those full, long lashes that cover those gorgeous eyes. Son of a bucket, it's Jeremiah Zeon, business tycoon and owner of this building. Damn, and he's leaning over me covered in soot. Then I hear the unusual timbre before I even see him, while he's bellowing in that scratchy voice of his. My chief.

“What in the ever-lovin' fuck do you think you're doing, Zeon? I told you to stay the hell outta our way and this building—but, no, not you—had to go in and be a goddamn hero. Thank the good Lord you didn't get knocked on the head by the burning beams falling all over the goddamn place. Not to mention you probably fucked your lungs up. Tell me whatcha thinkin', boy?”

I see Jeremiah roll his eyes. Yeah, he literally rolls his eyes at the Chief of Engine 23. I have to smirk because Jeremiah is anything but a “boy.” Those eyes are glued to me and for some reason my body feels safe because of it. Shit, I knew before I even did what I did, I should have never taken that walk all those months ago. Though that one weekend has been burned into my body and brain. That mouth, those fingers, and the rest of him. Holy shit. Nope, need to shut down those thoughts and memories of our time together. When I see the grin appear on Jeremiah's face, it's like he can read my mind. Shit, don't want my company to find out about this indiscretion. They'd razz me forever, for sure. Especially since he's one of the richest men around this area.

“Don't worry, Lourdes, my little brat, now that I found you again, if you want, I'll let you keep me as your little dark secret. Well, that is only if you promise to have dinner

with me. The last time we got swept up in the moment, and I'm definitely not complaining, I just..."

"Player, move your ass, we need to check our girl out. Come on, I said out of the way. Those usual lines won't work on our girl, she's too smart to go for the 'pretty rich boys' like you, bruh."

Hearing Lil Man barking at Jeremiah brings a small smirk to my face. All the guys in our crew are pretty built men but to have Lil Man, who is probably one of the largest, props me up a bit. Well, until Jeremiah refuses to let me go. Danny comes into the area and since he can read a room like no other, I know he's going to get between Lil Man and Jeremiah.

"All right, guys, this isn't the time nor place. Let's get Styx checked out. Jeremiah, right? Thanks again for what you did, though extremely fucking stupid. We owe you for pulling our girl out."

"Danny, thanks, and can you do one thing for me? Make sure Lourdes, when she's feeling up to it, agrees to have dinner with me."

"Jeremiah, brother, you know it's always up to the woman. Even as close as I am to Styx over there, I won't be the one to tell her what to do. Nope, that shit ain't happening, don't care how cool you are or how much money is in your bank accounts. She can get vicious when she's pissed at one of us, we tread lightly, dude."

"That's all right, I'll ask her myself. Thanks for the advice though, I do appreciate it."

Watching the interaction between my friend and Jeremiah tells me he can win just about anyone over to his side. I mean, he was able to charm me to the point of not only dropping my pants, but also everything else came off with just the velvet lure of his voice and that look in his eyes when he claimed me as his.

“All right, time to get you checked out. Does anything hurt?”

Looking at our newest paramedic, Skippy, I bite my tongue because what hurts and needs attention neither he nor anyone else will be able to help me with. The only one who can is the man I’m trying my damndest to ignore and stay away from because that weekend has been literally burned into repeat in my brain. And my body has been begging me to seek out Jeremiah again for another round, or maybe four, of unbelievable sex. Though knowing my heart as I do, that isn’t an option. He’s truly too nice of a guy, who really knows how to make a woman’s body purr. So I answer as honestly as possible.

“Just really sore and lungs feel raw, Skippy. Probably just need some rest and oxygen to filter some of the smoke out of my body.”

“Kay, Styx, let’s get you to the hospital so you can get checked out.”

I close my eyes, and memories of that body and mouth working me like a fine instrument are the last things I remember as I drift off.

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JEREMIAH

‘Miah’

Watching the paramedics wheel Lourdes away makes my stomach clench and my mouth taste sour. Damn, that was way too close. Didn’t think the assholes would try something here but, as usual, I’m wrong. Fuck, I’m the idiot who thought moving here to a small town would make the bastards forget about me, or better yet, act like human beings and remember to keep the innocents out of whatever their fucked-up plan is. I mean, not because this is my business building but there are a few folks who purchased a loft and made their forever homes here. That’s generally what has me feeling guilty inside. Grabbing my phone, I put a call to my right-hand and security man. He doesn’t answer at all, so I wait impatiently to leave a message.

“Dino, where the hell are you? I have you and your firm on twenty-four-seven retainer, which generally means you answer your goddamn phone when I reach out to you, as that means I require your expertise immediately. Need you to call me back as soon as possible. We have a damn situation with those bastards again that you are supposed to keep me aware of.”

Hanging up, I look around until I find the fire chief. Walking toward him, one of the firefighters stops right in front of me, blocking my way. It’s the big guy from before, who was doing his best to protect Lourdes, though they call her Styx for some goddamn reason.

“Yo, rich dick, what’s your intentions with Styx?”

I can’t help it, I chuckle, which doesn’t seem to sit very well with the guy in front of me.

“Not finding anything goddamn funny about my question. She’s like a kid sister to all of us and I ain’t lettin’ no one, especially a rich entitled son of a bitch, take advantage of her. That woman has been through hell and back, literally, dude.”

“We are starting off on the wrong foot. First off, I’m Jeremiah and I truly admire you having Lourdes’s back. Though what happened or happens between us is none of your business and never will be. If she wants to share with you that’s on her. Now, who do I have the pleasure of speaking with?”

For a minute he looks at me like I’ve lost my mind. Now I’m not a small man at all, but I am looking up at this monster of a man who’s scowling at me. Not sure if I could take him, but shit, it’d be one hell of a battle royale for sure.

“Hey, Jeremiah, I’m Lil Man, one of Styx’s fire brothers. Dude, you have no idea what shit you’re getting yourself into. I’m one of the easy ones in our firehouse, so be prepared. For now, I’ll let it go, but if this goes south then there is nothing you’ll be able to do to stop the massive inferno of firefighters looking for your ass.”

I smirk at him and he returns it, though his looks a bit demented. That kind of breaks the air and he starts talking and asking questions, while filling me in on some of the damage to my building. I see an acquaintance, one of the paramedic/ firefighters, Danny, walking toward us covered head to boot in soot. Shit, looking down, I see my suit is stained to the point it’s ruined.

“Yeah, dude, running into a burning building will do that to your clothes. Not sure I want to ask why, but gotta. Jeremiah, care to explain to me why—after you were told

not to enter a burning building—you disobeyed that order, taking the chance of getting yourself injured, or worse... killed. There's a body in there that will be coming out shortly, so now we got either a suicide or murder on top of this fire. The person was hanging off a beam in one of the offices on the east side of the building. Styx surprised someone in that room, that's why shit went down the way it did when they got in her face. You got any idea why anyone would want to burn down your building? And if it's determined not to be suicide, why that same individual would kill someone in said building?"

Before I can answer Danny, my phone starts ringing. Knowing the ringtone, I go to grab it, knowing it's Dino.

"Give me a minute, Danny, got to take this call."

He nods, then turns to Lil Man and they start discussing the fire and all the what-ifs.

"Dino, hey."

"Afternoon, Boss, what's up?"

I explain what's happened and, more importantly, what I need him to look into immediately. One main item is to go over the extensive camera videos, since the building is covered with them in very discreet places. Hopefully, the assholes didn't see the cameras and we have something with them on video. He doesn't say a word until I finish, which I expect with Dino.

"Jeremiah, you want to get involved with this shit again? Come on, brother, let the professionals handle this. Good that you got the chick out, but damn, you could have been injured, or worse, trapped or killed. And you put yourself on their radar if it's them, which I instructed you not to do."

We go back and forth for a while. Turning, I see both Danny and Lil Man are watching me, so I shift so they can't see my face before I continue talking.

“Not sure if this is those assholes or if Lourdes is having some issues. Her friend from the firehouse mentioned she's had some troubles. Need you to find out, please. And I don't care how you do it, just get it done, Dino.”

I can hear the breath Dino pulls in, and I realize he's trying to keep his cool with all of my demands. Usually, when I give an order he executes it with no thought. When I hear him take in a deeper breath then hold it for a second and let it out, I know he's ready to give me his thoughts and ideas.

“Jeremiah, you know I'll always have your back. This broad you saved—no, don't go ballistic on me—she don't know you from squat. Or does she? That's my first question. Second, is why do you think someone would be after her? And if it's you they're after, we need to get you somewhere safe, not that Podunk town you're in right now.”

Dino and I continue to go back and forth. When I turn around, I see Lil Man and Danny are making their way to me. Great, not a good time for them to try and nose into my business. Especially if my enemies or nemeses are back. I'm used to it but doubt either of them have the first clue on how all this bullshit works.

“Dino, don't know why but my gut is telling me this is something else. I have no real enemies except for them, which you have continued to keep tabs on. All of our businesses are legal and doing great. Why this particular building in this town? And who the hell is that dude hanging off our rafters? Got to get some answers, and we need to figure this out immediately, before whoever is responsible decides to start another blaze and risk another person's life. Gotta run, got people approaching me. Check those cameras first, Dino, and get back to me.”

Just as I'm pushing my phone into my pocket, Danny and Lil Man end up strolling right into my space. It's the big man who leads this conversation.

"Jeremiah, any ideas who would want to start your fancy as fuck building up in flames? From what the fire inspector just told our chief, there is no doubt that this is arson. And probably more than one person with the amount of incendiary liquid that was used throughout. My main question now is, who and why. I'm sure both the fire inspector and chief of police will want to have a word with you, so either stick around or at least provide them with some contact information on how they can reach out to you later. Thanks, brother."

Danny gives me a shove and, after a stink eye look at me, Lil Man puts his hand out to me. I take it and shake. With that he turns and walks toward one of the fire trucks. Danny watches him walk away then turns back to me.

"Any ideas who did this, Jeremiah? Chief ain't gonna let it go, now that they are certain it's arson. Even if it's just an out-there idea, share it with them so they can check it out. Don't try to solve this on your own, you'll just get in the way and make it way worse."

"Yeah, I hear you, Danny, though I got my guy working on it from the tech side. We have hidden cameras throughout the building, including offices and hallways. Once he gets back to me, I'll share with both chiefs. Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to make my way to the hospital to see how Lourdes is doing and if she needs anything."

I watch as Danny tries not to react. We've played poker together and hung out here and there as we both know Nova and his security company, Finnegan's Quest Sentries. That's how I met Danny, at one of Nova's famous poker nights. With all my daydreaming, I don't see the look on Danny's face until he speaks.

"Not my business, but gonna make it mine. How do you know Styx and why are you

so worried about her? Remember, Jeremiah, she's one of us, so basically we are all up in each other's shit. You gonna share or do I need to call Lil Man back here to shake your shit up?"

I chuckle as I try to explain without giving him what he's asking, as it's not mine to share. That's up to Lourdes and, apparently, she hasn't. So either that weekend didn't mean as much to her as it did me, or she's just tightlipped about her "hookups," though I hate that fucking word 'cause it doesn't apply to her at all in my eyes. And I don't want to be another hookup, or even think of her with anyone else.

"Let's just say we met a few months back and she left an impression. Don't press it, Danny, please, brother, not mine to give to you."

With that he lowers his head, running his hands through his hair. When he glances up, the look in his eyes startles me because I can't read it.

"Kay, Jeremiah, just so you know, that woman has had enough shit piled on her from the time she was little 'til I met her in the military. Again, not my story to tell. Be careful, but more importantly, be gentle and patient. Her bark is worse than her bite."

With that, he turns and walks away, leaving me with my mouth hanging open and a million and one questions no one is there to answer.

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JEREMIAH

‘Miah’

The moment I walked through the automatic doors, the waiting area goes dead silent, which is hard to believe with the number of firefighters and paramedics sitting and standing around. Not seeing a friendly face, I make my way through them, getting shouldered here and there. I don’t take offense, as one of their own was injured in my building.

Taking a seat in the far corner, I pull my phone out to see if Dino sent anything but, nope, nothing. Opening up emails, I start to go through them. When I feel someone sit next to me, at first, I ignore them, but when they lean into me to see what I’m doing, I look up into Lil Man’s deep set, almost black eyes.

“Whatcha doin’, Fat Cat?”

That brings a chuckle from my lips. This guy can grow on you like Southern moss, that’s for damn sure. Guess I make some of these people uncomfortable with my wealth. Oh well, not my problem. I’ve worked mighty hard to get where I’m at and now I don’t answer to anyone but myself.

“Waiting to see how Lourdes is. What are you doing, Lil Man? And how the hell did you get that name, if I can ask?”

He outright laughs, which has heads turning to see what he's cackling about. He lifts a hand, which must be firehouse language for "it's all right," because they all turn and go back to what they were doing.

"Well, Jeremiah, if I told you, then I'd have to kill ya."

That has me laughing but this time no one turns. Guess I don't matter, oh well, not the first time I've been ignored or undervalued, so I'm used to it.

"No, just sayin'. The way my momma tells it, when I was born the doctors told her they were surprised at how long I was. Yeah, there too, I'll share that secret with ya."

I give him a smirk so he goes on.

"Dude, not joking, I was like almost twenty-four inches long. My poor momma after she popped me out, the OB/GYN told her I should have been a Cesarean. That didn't make my daddy happy. So the story goes that he lifted the little doctor up and threatened him if anything went wrong, he would personally see to making the poor doctor pay dearly. Anyway, I grew into that length for sure. I mean, look at me, I'm six feet six inches tall. You must feel small next to me, huh?"

He ends his comment on a smile, so I wait a few then give it right back.

"Remember, Lil Man, it's not the size that matters it's the skill set."

We both crack up, which I think finally breaks the ice between us, so we share some shit that guys usually do. It's nice to be able to converse with someone I probably never would have met if this blaze hadn't happened. Though I'm still wondering who the hell the person was hanging from the rafters. Time goes by and still no one comes out to update on Lourdes's condition. People come and go until finally Chief and, I think his name is Paco, walk toward us. Chief gives me the stink eye but then goes

right to Lil Man.

“No news yet? Damn, they sure are taking their time. Probably because Lourdes doesn’t have any family here. I’ll go have a word with the charge nurse.”

When the chief leaves, Paco takes a seat next to his pal. Leaning in, he starts explaining to Lil Man what was found. I lean in to hear what he has to say.

“Man, that place was doused in enough accelerant to take down a block of buildings. Someone meant business, for sure. Now for the deceased, they were dead before they were strung up over that beam. Coroner isn’t sure, gotta do an autopsy but looks like a broken neck, though there are multiple bruises all over the victim’s body. On both hands all the fingers are broken too. Police are going to need to talk to you, Jeremiah, right? Anyway, they’ll probably reach out tomorrow. Your building is damaged, probably more from us than the fire, but I’d get your contractor over there sooner rather than later. Maybe call a fire restoration company, see what the next steps are. Just a suggestion and if you don’t know a company like that, just ask one of us, we know a few good ones in the area.”

As the conversation turns to just normal dude bullshit, I feel it before the doors swing open. Three doctors come out, one with her hand in front of her for the chief to shake. They speak for a bit then the chief whistles to get everyone’s attention. He nods to the female doctor, who gives him a small smile.

“All right, Chief has explained that when each of you sign on with the fire department, you are required to give your chief permission for personal HIPPA information and that it is up to them if they share. Chief here tells me it’s okay to give you all an update on Lourdes’s condition. So here we go, but let me introduce everyone to you. I’m Deidra Thompson, chief pulmonologist here at General South Hospital. Now to my right is Dr. Sumah, who shares the department with me. And Dr. Jones over there is our only resident neurologist and will be treating Lourdes.

Currently, she has first-degree burns on her left shoulder, along with bruised ribs. We had to stitch her head up and she has a mild to moderate concussion so will not be able to be left alone. She'll need to be woken up every three to four hours. She should make a full recovery, but the next few days to a week she'll be miserable, and I can say that because I know her personally. So whoever is going to be taking care of her, this is your only warning."

The doctor takes a breath while everyone else chuckles in the waiting area. Looking around, it seems to be that the only folks in here are firefighters, paramedics, and some cops. Well, besides myself. Doc clears her throat before telling us that Lourdes is going to stay overnight so they can continue running oxygen through her body to eliminate any of the smoke inhalation she's experienced. Also, she will probably need to do some breathing treatments once she's released.

When the doctors are done, the room starts to empty as firefighter after firefighter leaves, probably going home, back to their station, or to grab a beer now they know Lourdes is generally okay and will recover. Meanwhile, Chief is talking to Paco and Lil Man. Knowing they won't appreciate me intruding, that's exactly what I do, and I hear the chief trying to figure out a plan on who would be taking care of Lourdes. Well, I can fix the dilemma right now.

"Chief, no worries. I'll take Lourdes to my house when she's released. Give her a chance to rest and recover. I have plenty of room and a housekeeper and maid, who can keep an eye on her if I'm gone. I'll make sure I leave my address so anyone from the firehouse can stop by and visit."

All three men are looking at me, mouths open and eyes wide. What is their problem? I know they don't have a clue about Lourdes and my weekend together, but shit, I'm not a criminal or anything, for Christ's sake. Before I can continue, the guys from Lourdes's firehouse all start talking—no, screaming—at the same time. Well, until Danny puts his fingers in his mouth and, fuck, whistles 'til my ears start ringing.

Then before anyone else can say a word, he starts.

“Hey, guys, calm the fuck down. This is Lourdes’s decision and hers alone. For now, she’s staying overnight, so we don’t have to kill each other yet. Maybe we should just talk to her and see what she wants. Let’s sit down like adults and draw up a plan. I called Claire and she, along with our kids, is picking up some pizzas and heading over here, knowing no one is going to leave until they see and talk to Lourdes. She’s also bringing some things that she thinks will work for Lourdes since she’s staying overnight. Now, Jeremiah, what makes you think that she would want to even stay with you? Lourdes has never spoken about you to me or, from the looks and sounds of it, to anyone in the firehouse. I get you might feel guilty and would want to put her up in a hotel, but in your house? Doesn’t make sense now, does it? Besides that, something doesn’t feel right, so sit down and let’s figure it out. What’s that saying, it’s better to have multiple sets of eyes on a problem than just one set? Let’s see if that statement is correct.”

So we all push chairs together while Paco goes to the nurses’ station. I watch him pour on the charm, and before long he struts back with a huge smile on his face.

“Well, Nurse Sandy said we can use the conference room down the hall to eat and discuss our plans. Unfortunately, for the good of Lourdes, I’m gonna have to drop out of having her at my place tomorrow because Nurse Sandy gets off her shift in the morning. She’s going to come over to my place to make breakfast for the two of us. What happens next, don’t know, but pretty sure Lourdes doesn’t need to hear the kind of sounds that will definitely be coming from my bedroom. So I’m tapping out, sadly, of course.”

He turns and glares at me for a second then winks my way. What the ever-lovin’ fuck is that? Before I can say a word, Danny’s phone goes off and he answers it. After a few moments he looks around and then scream-asks what everyone wants on their pizza. And it turns into a clusterfuck, for sure. Worse than little kids. Danny whistles

again and gives them four choices. Once everyone makes their choice, then he looks my way, waiting for what I want. Figure now's the time to fuck with these men a bit, so I do.

“Danny, can I get an all cheese pizza with broccoli, mushrooms, peppers, olives, tomatoes, onions, and pineapple on a gluten free crust?”

I feel it first, but when I look around, they are all staring my way, most mouths open while the others look shell-shocked and a few look totally disgusted. I wait a few minutes then burst out laughing. Danny gets it first then Lil Man and their chief. When everyone is busting a gut, I tell Danny I'll eat anything. Then Lil Man cracks me across the back, literally knocking me off of my chair, and being unprepared—I slam down heavy onto my tailbone and then my ass. Then I hear Lil Man chuckling loudly before a huge paw is in front of my face.

“Damn, man, thought you could handle a small tap on the back. Fuck, if I really hit ya, might break you in two, for God's sake. Guess when you're rich, don't need to worry about self-preservation. Come on, grab my hand.”

Knowing it is stupid, but fuck—no one ever said I was smart—I grab his hand and on the way up, I leverage my body toward the table. When I am just about standing, I jerk my arm, rotating my shoulder hard. Lil Man loses his balance until I reach over with my other hand and grab the skin under his arm and pinch hard as I can. He lets out a high-pitched whine that has everyone covering their ears. When I release him, I can see the bruise already forming and realize I might have taken it too far. Usually, I can keep myself under control but, damn, with Lourdes and the fire, my shit is going around in circles.

“Goddamn, Lil Man, that's gonna leave a bruise. Sorry, got a bit carried away.”

The big guy lifts his arm, taking a look at the damage, then his dark midnight-blue

fucking eyes come back to me, staring intently until a slow smile appears on his face that freaks me the fuck out. The last thing I'd do if someone did that to me is smile like a lunatic.

“Just remember, Fat Cat, paybacks are a royal bitch.”

Before I can reply, he turns and heads down to what I assume are the restrooms. Everyone else is staring at me, surprise on their faces. This is when I see a woman with two little ones walking toward us. I'm assuming it's Claire and the twins because she is carrying a couple of pizzas, no wait, there is a guard behind her carrying another couple. When my eyes shift to the two little guys, each has a brown paper bag wrapped tightly in their arms, holding it to their chests. Well at least there's food to eat while we wait.

4

LOURDES

‘Styx’

Thank God I can’t feel my head or the pain yet because I just know it’s going to be throbbing like a bitch real soon. I’m trying but am unable to find a comfortable spot in this stupid hospital bed. One of the many reasons I hate staying in these places. My shoulder feels like I have road rash running up and down the entire shoulder blade. Also, I can feel the raspiness in my lungs. Damn it, I probably have a case of smoke inhalation. Great, that means at least a couple of days off from my rotation because our chief doesn’t ever play with that kind of stuff with his people.

Just when I find a spot I can tolerate and my eyes start getting heavy, it sounds like a parade of elephants are walking down the hallway, right before my door swings open with a thud. I heard the sound of skin slapping skin before a loud umph and a growly voice saying in a loud whisper, “What the fuck was that for, brother? Damn, been lifting again, haven’t you?”

Struggling, I open my eyes to see the crew with our chief and, oh God, also the one and only Jeremiah Zeon. Now, why in the hell is he here? Oh, that’s right, he’s the one who actually rescued me. I’m sure in his own head he’s a hero, but to me he’s vastly becoming a huge pain in my ass. My eyes drift to the couple last into the room. It’s Danny and Claire along with their twins, Lachlan and Roan. Well, actually, the boys are from Claire’s first husband who died serving our country. Danny is the only daddy those boys have ever known, though as a family they all try to keep the twins’

dad Shamus's memory alive for the boys which I think is beyond awesome.

Before Danny or Claire can stop either boy, they kind of run-walk toward the hospital bed. Lachlan tries to jump up onto the bed but one of the guys grabs him, tickling the kid 'til he's almost crying with laughter. Roan just leans down his head on the bed, watching me. Huh, what's this all about, usually it's Lachlan who's on the quiet side.

"Tyx, you okay? Mommy said you had accident."

Such a sweetie.

"Yeah, sweetie, got a few scrapes and some stitches, but I'm okay. How are you?"

"Tyx, really? How many, where did you get hurt?"

As Lachlan continues with one hundred questions, Roan finally makes his way to the other side of the bed, slapping his hand down on the covers.

"Tyx want pizza? We got a lot of it, right, Mommy?"

I glance at Claire, who has that soft smile on her face from watching her twins. When her eyes shift to me they lose a bit of that mom glow, but she gives me a soft smile.

"Yeah, Lourdes, let me know what you want and I'll go get it. Also have some plain pasta and breadsticks if you prefer that to pizza, I wasn't sure which you would want or how your stomach would feel."

I'm thrilled Danny found and fought for Claire, as they fit together like two peas in a pod. When I feel eyes on me, I glance around until my eyes lock on Jeremiah. No, I like to call him Miah—it fits him better—not as stuffy as his complete name. Though, right now he's Jeremiah who's trying to bully me, not the Miah who gave me

multiple orgasms over that weekend. Drilling me with those steel-gray eyes from across the room, everything goes still and quiet in my head as memory after memory floods my mind. Both of us naked and sweaty, managing to in just one weekend fuck in just about every room of his mansion. Damn, that was one of the best weekends of my life. Why did I ever ghost him? Can't remember with those knowing gray eyes watching my every move. I hear a throat clear and blink before I glance around. All of my crew have shit-eating grins on their faces, while Jeremiah puts his head down to hide his cocky-ass smile. Jerk I think, right before the twins start to crawl up on either side of the bed. I hear Danny tell them to be careful because I am hurt, but just to have them close gives me a second or two of their unconditional love, along with their kid enthusiasm.

Well, that is until a knock on the door and two detectives try to make their way into my room. Jeremiah turns and literally pushes them out, then walks out with them, while Lil Man and Paco follow behind him. That's interesting, but the boys are both talking to me so I turn to give them my attention. Claire asks what I want to eat and I tell her, if it's not too much trouble, the pasta and breadsticks. She turns to leave when Danny pulls her close, whispering in her ear. The smile that takes over her face almost makes me jealous, though those two deserve their happiness. It was earned through blood, sweat, and many tears, along with a very close scare with death.

Chief comes up to me, patting my good shoulder, telling me to rest and take as long as I need. He already informed me I was not to show my face in the firehouse for at least four days. Great, just what I don't need, time to think. I'm baffled with why someone would try to not only knock me out but then try to kill me. Don't have any enemies that I know about, since my lack of relationships leaves me pretty much on my own, besides my fire family.

It takes some time but when Jeremiah comes back in, he looks flustered. He looks around to see most everyone still there. He shrugs and also makes his way to me. Standing at the foot of the bed, he gently touches my feet, squeezing my toes.

“Hey, Lourdes, the cops are going to want to talk to you sometime soon. Gave them my address, told them that’s where they can find you for the time being.”

I’m half listening to him, well, until he tells me I’m staying with him. WHAT? Is he fucking insane besides being plain old nuts? We are in a room filled with gossiping bastards from my firehouse. These men are professionals at spreading any kind of news they can get their hands on. Got to shut this down now.

“Um, Jeremiah, there’s no need for that. Thank you again for what you did, but I’m good. I appreciate your help, but I’m sure you have more important things to do than waste your time with all of this bullshit.”

I see it immediately. His eyes narrow and he pushes his shoulders back, standing straight as a rod. I hear chuckling but ignore it, as the look in his eyes draw me in.

“Lourdes, I don’t think I stuttered but just in case, let me repeat myself. This is not an option, when you are released tomorrow, you will be coming to my home to recuperate. I have plenty of room and have already shared the address with your friends here. No one has any answers yet to why a man was hanging in that office or why a stranger attacked you. Well, unless you did, in fact, know that person. Did you?”

I hear the growl come out of my mouth right before my words spill out, forgetting who is in the room.

“What the hell does that mean? I don’t associate with assholes, Jeremiah. Are you sure it wasn’t a deal gone wrong, and I got the shitty end of it?”

Before it hits me, I hear two Mickey Mouse voices screaming, “Oh, Tyx, bad word. You need to put money in the wear jar, right, Mommy?”

“You have to put in four coinz for the wear wordz.”

Claire shushed the twins then pulls them down, giving me a squeeze on my leg.

“We’ll get out of your hair for a bit. I’ll grab you some food. Take care and let me know if you need anything. The boys and I will visit you at, um, Jeremiah’s house.”

She turns and walks out before I can even respond. Great, just what I need, everyone thinking I’m spending time at his mansion. Then Jeremiah leans down, whispering in my ear.

“Either you stay willingly or I inform all of your friends how we know each other biblically, so they don’t need to worry about us in the same house. And from the way you’re acting, I’m guessing you don’t want them to know that particular detail, right?”

I feel my face getting red and my hands are clenching into fists. All the while Jeremiah is leaning over me waiting, like he doesn’t have a care in the world. Damn bastard.

“Well, Lourdes, are we in agreement that you’ll be staying with me while you’re recovering?”

I grit my teeth and give him a nod, which brings a huge smile to his face. He then turns and loudly announces I will, indeed, be staying with him, so I can recover in peace and quiet. I watch as one by one every man I work with drops their mouth open and stares at me. Yeah, guess it’s a bit odd because they all know I’m not only a very private person and don’t usually have outside acquaintances or friends. Thank God I don’t have to explain it right now, as a nurse comes in to tell them they have no more than thirty minutes before they need to leave. As she turns to leave, Claire walks back in with a container filled with pasta and a plate with a couple of steaming breadsticks

on it. The boys are following her, one with a bottle of water, the other with a bag with a fork, knife, and napkin inside. My stomach growls at the sight and Claire smiles at me.

As she starts to put it on the bedside table, each guy comes to give me a hug or kiss on the cheek, telling me to call if I need anything. Before the first man makes it to the door, Jeremiah asks them to take his phone number so they can get a hold of him with any questions or concerns. What shocks me is they all do it without argument. Miracles do happen, I think to myself. A table appears in front of me. I grab the fork and twirl some spaghetti with red sauce onto it. Licking my lips in anticipation, I hear Jeremiah growl and I smile. My eyes find his and those gray eyes are on fire watching me. That look has me shifting my legs slightly to try to relieve the pressure between them because, damn, now is definitely not the time or place. Taking me in, the asshole gives me that know-it-all smile of his filled with pure cockiness. So I do all I can, I stick my tongue out and lick off some of the sauce while his eyes dilate. Then I concentrate on eating some food while I hear him shifting around. Good for him, I think to myself as I softly moan from the many tastes of the food. Excellent choice, I think as I dig in, not looking at anyone but feeling the intense stare of just one man from across the room.

5

LOURDES

‘Styx’

After a night with little to no sleep, the nurse comes in with an armful of things. I see a few towels and a courtesy bath kit, all in a bucket. Damn, I really don’t feel like a sponge bath. I want—no need—a shower. Before I can even ask, she gives me a huge smile.

"Good morning, Lourdes, I’m Charity. Want some good news? Can’t wait for your answer, slowpoke. If you want to, with my help, you can take a shower on a chair. Now, probably won’t be as nice as at home, but this way you can start your day off clean and happy. Then once we get everything back and Doc looks it over, fingers crossed, you’ll get released later today. So you feel up for your first adventure of the day?"

Grinning like an idiot, I nod vigorously at Charity. First, she has me drink a glass of water. Then she helps me swing my legs over the side of the bed and waits to make sure I’m not dizzy. Again, Charity helps me up, then has me put my hands on the table while she grabs the IV pole. With the pole in one hand and me on her other side assisting me, we make our way to the bathroom in the corner of the room. In the shower is a chair, which I’m beyond thankful for. Being careful, Charity helps me remove the hospital gown and sits me on the chair. Charity reaches up, grabbing the showerhead, pulling it down, and then turns the water on. Handing it to me, she asks me to test the water. After a bit of adjustment, she tells me to wet down and if I need

help to call her, as she's going to be changing the linens, or pull the emergency cord.

The warm water running down my body feels so good. I can feel my muscles starting to relax and release. I grab the puff Charity put up, hanging it from the suction cup on the shower wall. Beneath the poof on a shelf is body wash, so I squirt it on the puff and start to scrub, being careful of my stitches and burns on my shoulder. When I'm ready, I call out to Charity so she can help me wash my hair. By the time we finish rinsing the conditioner out of my hair, I'm exhausted and the steam is actually making it hard to breathe. Charity flips on the fan, which is kind of loud, but it does its job by sucking out the steam. With the bathroom door ajar, Charity helps me dry off then carefully wraps my hair in another towel, which is dry. Then with me using the chair for balance, she gets me in a clean gown. Together we make it to the side of the bed and I carefully sit on the edge.

By the time Charity lifts my legs, placing them on the bed under the covers, I'm ready for a nap. Once she combs out my hair, she places another towel under my head. I think I'm asleep the second my head hits the pillow.

I take in a breath and smell something, maybe flowers, but even as fragrant as they smell, I'm way too exhausted to open my eyes. That is until I feel someone's breath close to my face, right before lips softly touch mine, leaving butterfly kisses on my lips, which are followed with a sweet kiss on my nose. Before I can respond, or even open my eyes, whoever it is is gone. When my eyelids push open, all I am able to see are warm twinkling gray eyes watching my every move. After a few seconds he gives me an adorable smile which, for some reason, I return right back to him. Jeremiah stands up, though his hand grabs mine, squeezing lightly.

"Ready to go, Lourdes? Did they give you your walking papers yet?"

I shake my head while I try to clear my throat.

“Not yet, Jeremiah, from what I was told, the doctor is waiting to get some results in before they’ll sign my release papers. You don’t have to wait around; I’ll just go to my place. Really, nothing for you to worry about, I’m a big girl.”

“Darlin’, there is no way in hell I’m going to let you go home alone. Especially after what your friends found when Danny and Claire stopped there to get some of your things. They saw the front door busted open and your condo ransacked. So it goes without saying, until the police or my people can find out what is going on and why you’re being targeted, unfortunately, you’re stuck with me.”

For one of the first times in my recent memory, someone has been able to literally knock me on my ass. Figuratively, not actually. Watching him watch me, I ask the only question on my mind.

“Someone was in my home? Jeremiah, why would anyone go through all that damn trouble? There is nothing there. I live a very normal and boring life. Why is this happening to me? Does this have to do with you or your companies? I don’t have enemies, so this makes no sense at all.”

Before I can continue with my questions, Nurse Charity walks in, her arms filled with a folder and some papers on a clipboard.

‘Ready to bust out of this depressing place, Chickie? I would be if I was in your shoes, that’s for sure.’

She flashes a smile my way before pulling the rolling table closer to me and moving to raise the bed, so I’m sitting up. Charity gives Jeremiah a quick glance before she looks back to me, one of her eyebrows lifted up. I just nod so she gets that I’m essentially giving her an answer to her unasked question.

“All right, Lourdes, these are your release papers and the instructions on what you

need to do now that you're released. First thing is no driving or operating any machinery until twenty-four to forty-eight hours after you're released. The reason is your concussion and the pain medication you received overnight. Next, you need to have the stitches removed in fourteen days. If you get worse, come back here, otherwise, follow up with your primary care doc in say... eight to ten days. For the burn on the shoulder keep it clean and dry. Make sure you have someone put the ointment on twice daily. Any questions? Oh, where are you going to be staying once you leave?"

Great, another person to know I'll be at Jeremiah's home. When I say that out loud, Charity's eyes twinkle as she smiles with this cute look on her face. When he sees it, Jeremiah lets out the smile-laugh that instantly has me crossing my legs. As Charity and I continue to talk, Jeremiah doesn't say a thing or interrupt, just sits patiently, taking in everything my nurse is saying. After a few more minutes, Charity hands me the folder with further instructions. When I ask Charity for my clothes, Jeremiah tells me they've been taken care of, as he picks up a travel bag. Wow, that's some overnight bag—designer—if my eyes are seeing correctly. Charity asks if I need any help getting dressed and I shake my head no. Turning, I look at the bag sitting on the bed. Jeremiah is at the foot of the bed waiting, so I pull the bag closer. When my hands go in, each thing I touch is softer than the last.

First thing I pull out looks like a lounge set. Long, wide-legged bottoms with a zip-up hoodie. I unzip the hoodie to see a kind of camisole inside. The feel relaxes me because it's so very soft and lightweight. The color is so frigging cool. It changed by how much light you are in. It feels silky but it's cotton. Very expensive cotton, for sure. I'm staring at the bag when Jeremiah's voice scares the shit out of me.

"Jesus Christ, you scared me to death, dude. What did you say?"

"Lourdes, all I said was there are undergarments if you want and also some slipper socks and some slippers. I have a coat on the hook behind the door. Do you need to

go to the restroom? Then you can get dressed or, if you want, I can give you a hand also.”

My eyes have to be popping out of my head. Is he totally serious right now? Though, looking at him, he seems to be really trying, I’ll give him that. Clearing my throat, I force myself to look into those sexy as hell gray eyes of his.

“Thanks so much, Miah, but I think I can manage. Would you please carry those clothes to the bathroom for me? I’ll try to make my way there. Once done, I’ll get this stuff together and we can leave, I guess.”

He just smiles, carries the clothes to the bathroom, and then takes a seat in the chair in the corner, pulling out his phone. Slowly, I make my way into the bathroom. I take care of business, wash my hands, then sit back down on the toilet. Easiest way I can think of to get these clothes on without face-planting on the floor. Slowly, I open the door and see Jeremiah is still sitting in the corner chair, though his phone is on his thick, football-player thigh, with his head leaning back on the wall, eyes closed. I can’t tell if he’s sleeping or not, so I shuffle my way to the bed and sit on the edge. It feels good to be in normal clothes, I think to myself. I’d never be able to be hospitalized for a long period of time, they’d evict me for sure for my shining personality. NOT. That thought brings a grin to my face as I imagine the hospital administrator walking into the room I’m in, serving me with the eviction paperwork, telling me the nurses have had it and, unless I leave, they are ready to strike. Giggling softly at that thought, I shift so I’m sitting up in the bed, legs straight out. Feeling like someone is watching me, my head immediately goes to the side and I see Jeremiah staring intently at me, something in his eyes I can’t or won’t read. My eyes are captured by his as he roams them down the length of my body before making their way back to my face. When our eyes meet again, he gives me one of those puppy-dog looks, which has my heart flipping over. Going to need to proceed with caution. This man can and has done already more to my soul than any other man who’s ever been in my life. Without a word, he gets up and walks to the bathroom. The door closes

softly and I lean my head back and sigh. I'm not sure what the hell is going on, but damn, not sure I have the energy to play this kind of grown-up game. I lead a simple life now, and Jeremiah is on the opposite end of the spectrum with all that goes on in his life: jetting across the world for a meeting or two, openings of new businesses, and dating all those "high-class models" and debutants. That's why I'm not sure why he's doing what he is with me. Haven't really seen him since we hooked up that weekend, though we don't run in the same circles, thank God. That would definitely suck, though not sure since I'm on my way to his home to stay for, again, I have no idea how long.

Hearing the door, I look in time to see the man of the hour walking out bare chested, a small towel around his neck. That's when I see the same black leather bag hanging off the bathroom door. He walks toward the bed, putting the black bag on it, and starts to dig in it. After a few seconds he finds a T-shirt and pulls it on over his head, which gives me a clear view of his six —no, maybe—eight-pack. I imagine my tongue following all the grooves and I can feel the heat in my core immediately. Damn, why does it have to be someone like him that has me flustered. Don't need this complication, but seems like I have no say so.

"Lourdes, you just about ready? I'll let Charity know and we can make our way home."

My stomach lurches at his comment. Wait, it isn't my home but his, but I don't say a word, just don't feel like arguing. I glance at him as I swing my legs over the edge of the bed and nod. That's all it takes for him to grab the paperwork on the table and the bag that had clothes and personal items in it. He puts the folder and papers in the side pocket and reaches for his bag. Then he turns with a slight smile on his face.

"Okay, let me call my guy and then we can go. Oh look, your chariot arrives, madam."

His smile is huge as he goes to hold the door for the nurse's aide who's pushing the wheelchair. Well shit, I could have walked out on my own steam, but rules are rules, so I slowly drop into my form of escape and wait until everything is good to go. Wheeling down the hall is a way different feeling when it's yourself in the wheelchair. Actually, it humbles me a little bit. I'm blessed to have so many people in my corner. I can't imagine going through this all alone with no one around to worry or care if I live or die. Been there, done that, when I was a kid, and didn't like that feeling at all.

As we exit the elevator, I can hear some kind of ruckus going on toward the entrance. When we turn, at first thought it was a new circus act for the kids' department until I recognize some of the guys from my firehouse. What are these idiots doing now? Jeremiah actually growls but says nothing. We continue to make our way to the entrance when a very large man walks in, heading toward us. Before I can say anything, Jeremiah grabs the dude's arm squeezing. Oh, okay, guess they know each other.

"Boss, you okay? Let's get both of you in the vehicle, as you know there's more protection in there than out in the open. Come on, let's move."

As the four of us make our way to one of the biggest SUVs I've ever seen, I hear the siren first. When I turn my head, I can't help but let out a small, irritated giggle. Engine 23 takes the turn in the circle and moves up right next to Jeremiah's vehicle. The big guy just about loses his mind, swearing loudly, as he makes his way to our engine. I see where this is going and, for once, I'm staying out of it. At least for now. As everyone always tells me to pick my battles, I'm trying to right now. I'll let the big boys figure it out by themselves.

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6

JEREMIAH

‘Miah’

Goddamn it, thought we’d make a clean getaway before Lourdes’s fire buddies made their way back to the hospital. Not only is there an engine but also the chief’s vehicle, an ambulance, and even a few cars behind that. These fuckers are crazy. We don’t want to draw attention to Lourdes, more like keep her under whoever’s radar we need to. Well, not with this damn circus, for Christ’s sake. After I carefully get her settled in the back of our company vehicle, I walk to the chief’s vehicle, where a bunch of the guys are standing around.

“Hey, Chief, think this is a good idea? We should have probably talked last night but my thought was to try and keep Lourdes’s situation under wraps until we’ve worked through a bit more information on what happened. Now we have her place broken into and trashed, so it may be a good idea to tone it down a bit.”

Chief always looked like a pretty chill dude but, damn, not this morning. I get him pointing his finger up into my face while he growls at me.

“Look here, mister, don’t try getting all in my face and telling me what to do and not do with my crew. That ain’t never gonna happen as long as I have breath in me. This isn’t for you, it’s for her. She needs to know she has people who will take her back, no matter what. Now, instead of fluffing your feathers, why don’t you get this show on the road? And according to the police chief, there will be squads checking in at

your residence, so don't give them any of your shit either."

I can see Lil Man, Paco, and Crow grinning like fools. Danny, Lightning, Stash, and Rome are just leaning on the chief's SUV, no expressions on their faces. When I look past Danny, I'm shocked to see Nova leaning against the fire engine with, I think, two of his men. What the hell is going on? I've worked with Nova before. Currently, we are in negotiations for a new security program. He is now in partnership with the programmer, who designed the entire system. Some young dude, can't remember his name at the moment.

Nova glances up and gives me a very subtle chin lift, but his eyes are trying to tell me something I can't pick up on. I look at my man and nod, then get into the rear of my vehicle so we can finally get the hell out of here. We've drawn all kinds of attention, so time to go. As we start to move, for the love of God, the fire truck turns on its sirens, as do the ambulance and the police car with the K-9 dog sitting in the back seat. Great, why not leave a map and breadcrumbs for whoever is trying to hurt Lourdes?

I shift my head to look at her and am shocked to see tears running down her face. Immediately I reach over, pulling her close to me. Her hands burrow into my side, grabbing and holding on tight to my T-shirt. We don't say a thing, just hang on to each other for dear life, though I have no idea why she's so upset.

The drive to my property takes less than ten or so minutes. When we get to the gate, my guy reaches out and in one hand has a black jammer box, while the other hand enters the code to open the fence. He goes through though, jammer box still in his hand, while the rest of our parade makes their way in. When the last car is through, my guy pushes a button on the key chain and the gate starts to shut automatically. I finally feel like I can let a breath out.

"Jeremiah, I'm so sorry about all of this. Didn't mean to barge into your life like

this.”

“Lourdes, you can stomp all over it, if you like. We couldn’t find you, so in a way this was a blessing from the Heavens, so no worries. Now, I have a question and you don’t have to answer right away, but why do they call you Styx?”

Watching her, I feel my heart start to beat faster as she chuckles. Just when she’s about to tell me, the side door opens and Bobby offers his hand to Lourdes to help her out. I’m right behind her and once out I put an arm around her, holding on to her tightly. Not gonna happen again on my watch. Until we have more information, Lourdes is not to be left alone. But for now, I keep her close as we both watch the circus parade of fire folks, paramedics, cops, and her chief walk toward us. I can see the shock and inquiring looks going from my home to me. Yeah, I know it’s huge as shit, but why make money if you aren’t going to spend it on something you want? I’ve seen way bigger monstrosities; that’s for damn sure. This place is my home.

Once they reach us, I clear my throat.

“Come on in. Bobby phoned ahead, so I’m sure Beatrice will have some refreshments so we can have a conversation on what’s going to happen next. Follow us please.”

Hearing the mumbling from behind me, I ignore it. The last time Lourdes was here she wasn’t injured or had a psycho on her back. That weekend outshines every single other one in my entire life. Too bad I messed it up on that Sunday before she left to go back home. Should have put my cards on the table, but instead I tried to play cool. I can see how well that worked out for me. This time, I’m not letting her out of my sight while I try to win her over to my way of thinking.

Beatrice greets me at the door. She’s been with me for over twenty-something years and is part of the family now. She greets Lourdes once I introduce them, informing her that her suite is ready. When Lourdes shifts toward me, I put my hand on her

lower back, trying to steady her.

“Come on, Miss Lourdes, let me show you to your room so you can take a moment to relax. These men can wait, believe you me.”

I watch the two women walk away as I can feel the men of her firehouse making their way to me, starting to crowd me in. Turning, I look each of them in their eyes for just a second, then I move on. I walk down the foyer, through the hallway to the open floor plan in my kitchen. I know how beautiful it is, but it makes me smile to hear the gasps and aahs. I’ve worked hard on this, as it is actually one of my biggest purchases since the beginning of my business. I shift to look over my shoulder.

“Do you want the dining room or the screened porch? I think maybe the porch, as we have the entire wall of folding doors, which we can open and then those on the patio can squeeze in to hear what’s being said. Chief, do you have a preference?”

He looks around then points to the outside. Awesome, because it will give us more room to open that wall and put the heaters on the patio. There’s a bit of a chill in the air as we are getting closer to the winter months. Fall is definitely in the air.

“Holy fuck, look at that patio! Jesus, who needs a pool that large? Are you going to be in the next Olympics with the swim team? Damn, a hot tub and sauna. Living the life, Jeremiah.”

Knowing Lil Man is trying to bust my balls, I again turn, looking for his face. When our eyes meet, I do something I normally would never do. I open myself up because something about this man feels right. Can’t believe I’m thinking this but he’d make a good friend.

“Lil Man, any time you want to come over to use the pool, hot tub, or sauna just send me a text. If I’m not here, I can open the gate remotely. All I ask is don’t trash the

joint, if you know what I mean.”

Lil Man pushes his way through the people while extending his hand toward me.

“Thanks, brother, appreciate the offer. Now, we gonna get started? Some of us are on shift today, so got to get through this and get some shit done. Just tell me what shift I have in the ‘keeping an eye on the Lourdes mission.’”

Before I can even say a word, we all hear the growl. Personally, I’m not so sure if it scared or turned me on since it was Lourdes growling. I think turned me on for sure, though I couldn’t show it right at this moment.

“Lil Man, my work partner and brother from another mother and father, what makes you think I need a babysitter? Someone to watch over me, as you said. I’m a big girl, who’s been taking care of herself my entire life. What’s really going on here?”

Son of a bitch, thought we’d get a pass on this until we were alone, and I could explain what I knew so far. Danny, Lil Man, and Paco all walk toward me, standing behind me. Well, what the fuck, her crew is supporting me. Thank Christ for small miracles. I motion for everyone to go out to the screen room, as Bobby starts to push open the wall of sliding doors. That right there gives the house the inside/outside living space I desired. During the summer, those doors are usually always open.

With my mind on other shit, I forget until I hear their growls that the dogs are probably out and about. I see everyone take a step back, except Danny. If I remember correctly, he’s like the Engine 23 dog whisperer. I watch as Killer makes his way to Danny, head down, hair standing up on his neck. He’s a one hundred forty-five pound mastiff. Beside him, I have a Doberman female named Tiny, which she definitely isn’t. Next up is my harlequin Great Dane male. We call him Max. Finally, we have two pit bulls—one female, one male. They are siblings we kind of saved a few years back during a takeover. The assholes were using them in their warehouses as guard

dogs, I guess. Must have had like forty or fifty dogs, mostly pits. That's where I met Danny, as I had no idea what to do with these dogs. Some were in bad shape and that is not something I know a lot about. Danny and Claire stepped up and helped remove the animals and get them temporary housing, either at Danny's place or at some shelters or pit bull rescues. The two I brought home literally broke my heart. They were on death's door but still managed to wag their tails. I knew instantly they were mine. Now Phoenix and Nala will always have a home, siblings, and love as long as I live. A promise I've made to every dog that comes to my house.

Once I introduce the dogs to the group, everyone takes a seat. Most go outside specifically so they can pet, roughhouse, and throw balls and Frisbees for the hounds. Everyone seems content, just as Beatrice and two younger women start bringing out tray upon tray of breakfast and lunch foods. They place them on the long counter off the left side of the sunroom. Coffee and juices are next, along with bottles of Pellegrino water. Beatrice quietly walks around, telling everyone to help themselves.

I make my way around until I'm at the table with Danny, Nova, Chief, Lil Man, and Paco. Knowing Lourdes would want to be close to some of her team, I take a seat. Everyone nods, so guess this is okay. Before I can say a word, I feel her presence. Damn, what she does to me. Something that's never happened before, and I know for sure when we met and spent that weekend together, Lourdes had no idea about my companies, wealth, or anything else about me. It was so refreshing to come together with a beautiful woman, knowing she was into it because of me, not my portfolio and bank accounts.

Once everyone is settled, I give Chief an eye and he gives me a small nod. The police detective in charge of the case is on the other side of Chief, so they begin to talk to each other before they both look at me. I reach over and squeeze Lourdes's hand then stand. Bobby is immediately at my side and when I give him a look, he shouts out for quiet and, damn, it worked. Could be his deep as fuck voice or his huge-ass body, don't care which as long as it works. Looking at him, you'd never know he's

finishing up his master's degree in Digital and Corporate Communications. We've had many a conversation and he doesn't want to be my driver forever. I knew he graduated at the top of his class, so I asked him if he would be interested in the communication aspect of the company and he jumped on it. Probably because he's now married with two little ones. Doesn't want to risk his life unnecessarily.

Once everyone quiets down, I take a second to search the crowd of people, trying to see if anyone has that guilty look about them. Most are in their uniforms from either their firehouse, police department, or civilians in casual clothes like Nova and his group of military people.

"All right, before we start, I want to thank everyone here willing to help keep our girl Lourdes safe. We don't have a clue who's doing this, but early this morning someone broke into her home and ransacked it. Cut up her sectional pillows and mattress. Broke all of her dishes, glasses, and whatever could be broken. Now, as a new team, we are coming together to try and get a plan in place. We all know this woman to my right, and she's not gonna sit still for long. If the doctor hadn't told her to take some time, I'm sure she'd be at the firehouse today. No, don't argue, woman, you know I'm right. Now, let's break this down, first, with Chief, then we'll have the police detective speak. After that, it's whatever comes up. I've said it already, but with this new information, Lourdes will be staying here indefinitely. As each of you can see, the house and grounds are secure. What you don't see or know is that each of these dogs is professionally trained to take down an intruder. Drones fly above on a rotation and I have guards, which I'll be adding more once I have a word with Nova. So without any delay, here's our firehouse chief."

Once I'm seated, surprising the fuck out of me, Lourdes shifts so she's closer to me. I put my arm on the back of her chair, my fingers on her good shoulder. She's already spent her energy just getting out of the hospital. This is way too much but she has to be involved. If I could put her to bed, I would, but she'd probably try to take an eye out or something. So with her leaning into my side, we listen to each person

speaking—giving and demanding certain requirements to keep her safe. I can feel when she truly relaxes and I hear a soft kind of snore. So fucking cute. I don't move much, just pull her closer to me with my arm holding her tight. Looking up, I feel like someone is watching me. That's when I see Lil Man, Danny, Till, Paco, Stash, and the two newer guys staring at me, confusion in their eyes. From their reaction, I'm guessing Lourdes didn't share our weekend with anyone. That makes me feel good and shitty at the same time. Good because it was ours, but shitty because maybe she was embarrassed by me or our weekend. That will go in the back of my mind, as we have way more important things to worry about at the moment. That's my last thought as I hear women's voices screaming for help. Lourdes's head pops up and I just lean her back into her chair, jumping up, screaming for Bobby to watch over her. When he reaches behind his body and pulls out a gun, I see Lourdes's face pale. Unfortunately, don't have time to explain because one of the screams is Beatrice and that in itself is shocking. That woman, over the years, has seen it all and has never once flinched. Time to find out what the fuck is going on.

7

LOURDES

‘Styx’

Bobby takes a seat next to me, his gun on the table. He pulls me close and to my utter surprise gives me a hug. Totally unexpected but, somehow, he knew I needed it.

“Lourdes, girl, you’re beyond safe. Jeremiah won’t let anything happen to you, so don’t panic. Do you want to stay out here or go up to your room ’til they figure out what all the noise is about. I’ve got your back, woman, don’t worry.”

I look up into his face and see the honesty in his eyes. He would risk his life for me. Don’t know how I know, but I do, and that makes me feel a little better. Not that I want anything to happen to him, but knowing I’m being protected from what and who the hell knows gives me a small peace of mind.

I move to the outside and sit on one of the recliners. Instantly, I’m surrounded by most of the dogs, though a few are on what looks to be patrol. I’m under a pergola when a noise catches my attention. I look up to see a fabric of some kind going in between the pergola boards, still allowing the sunlight in, but I get the feeling it won’t let anyone see down on us.

“Bobby, is that material special or something?”

“Yeah, you can still see out, but anyone looking can’t see through it. Gives ya the

best of both worlds, which I'm guessing you need at the moment. If you decide to go in the pool or spas, this can be put over that section too. And the pool is heated so no worries about getting hypothermia."

He grins at me and I smile back. Not sure what's going on out there but for now I'm chilling, letting my aching body relax in the sunshine. Someone starts sniffing my hair and when I turn, I'm face-to-face with one of the largest dogs I've ever seen. The mastiff is gorgeous, but he's drooling all over. Not sure how much protection he can provide besides sitting on someone. I raise my hand to pet him and he immediately drops his head on my shoulder. Awe, what a good boy. Not sure for how long but I decide to take turns petting all the dogs surrounding me. When people start coming back out, all the dogs except the mastiff and pit bulls are knocked out on the patio. Well, the sentinels are walking the back wall, but the three with me all managed to get on the extra-large lounge, and now I'm practically under each of them. They are making sure, if something happens, they get hit first, which is freaking me out because I definitely don't want anything to happen to these beauties.

"I see you are getting the full treatment from the three droolers. With those three specifically protecting you, I can honestly say, no one will be able to even get close to you."

I raise an eyebrow and he chuckles. Everyone is watching our interaction. Not sure why, but I felt the need to give Jeremiah a little nudge. Again, even though I know he's probably excellent at everything from sex to training his dogs, I have to push.

"So what you're telling me is I can go back to my place and bring these three dogs along and I'd be safe. Okay, that's awesome, let's do that then."

Jeremiah runs his hands through that thick hair of his, as most of my crew starts to chuckle or outright laugh. Then I push his button unknowingly.

“Or are you unsure that they could do the job?”

Jeremiah swings my way with a wicked laugh. Then he looks at the group from the firehouse.

“Are two of you brave enough and trust me to help with a demonstration for Lourdes?”

Danny is first and Stash is second. Jeremiah walks to them while Bobby is pulling out what looks to be cushions of some kind. When I see both Danny and Stash putting that stuff on, I finally get what’s about to happen. Oh no, shit, no. Me and my big mouth.

“Hey, forget it, I trust you and the dogs, seriously. They both need to work later, so can’t have them getting hurt and ending up in the emergency room. Chief will have my ass since I’m off rotation too. Can’t have three of us down, Jeremiah.”

He walks my way smirking.

“Oh, so now you believe me because your friends are in the line of fire, so to speak. Come on, where’s your adventure? They both are educated with the care of dogs. I’ve been to Danny’s place, and I’ve seen Stash there with his two beasts that he says are dogs. All’s good. Okay, everyone, stay back. Bobby and I will give commands. Danny, Stash, do your best to get to Lourdes, who will be lounging on her chair by the pool. Let’s do this.”

He walks to Danny and Stash, talking to them both as he swings his arms all over the place. Then he heads down to where Bobby is. Everything is still until I see both Danny and Stash trying to sneak up the side of the hill in the back of the property. Seems like they are going to be able to crash our party. Well, until Jeremiah says something in what I think is German. All three dogs’ heads lift and their noses start

sniffing immediately. They all get up, making their way to the back property. When almost there, they all split up. Next thing I hear is, I believe it's Stash, screaming to get him off. He manages to get to level ground while he has the huge mastiff hanging off his shoulders on his back. It looks like that dog could actually open his mouth and bite off half of Stash's head. My friend falls to the ground again and before I can say a word, Danny comes running up, grabbing the dog by its back legs, up close to the joint where the leg and body come together. He starts pulling the beast off until we hear growling. Oh shit, both pits are approaching Danny from different angles. Danny reaches behind him, pulling out a gun. All the dogs stop immediately, freaking me out. Again, before I can come up with a thought, the mastiff turns around and literally jumps up, somehow, with his back legs kind of trapped by Danny. With his mouth he grabs the gun, jerking his head back and forth until the weapon falls to the ground. When Danny leans down to pick it up, the dog literally opens his jaws and puts his mouth against Danny's neck. Everything stands still for a quick minute. When Jeremiah says another word in German, the three dogs sit down, tongues hanging out. None of us can believe what we just saw. These dogs are better than some of the men and women on hostage forces. Eventually, everyone starts to clap as Danny and Stash move toward Jeremiah, hands out, smiles on their faces.

“Dude, need to tell me who you used to train them. Damn, would have never guessed such big dogs could be trained to that level. I only say that because protection dogs aren't usually mastiffs or pit bulls.”

Slowly, I walk toward the group of them, the three dogs surrounding me, walking with me to Jeremiah. When we get there, he reaches in his pocket, then gives each of them a Milk-Bone, which they gladly take and gobble up. Feeling extremely tired all of a sudden, I go to take a seat when I realize the noise giving me a headache is someone, not sure who, screaming from inside. Since I don't know what all the screaming is about, I ask the question generally.

“What was the screaming about?”

They all look everywhere except at me. Jeremiah is the one who finally shares.

“We had a situation at the gate, but everything is okay. One of my men had to carry a stray dog in because he was hit by a car and injured. The amount of blood freaked Beatrice and the girls out. Contrary to what you all believe, generally, we don’t have guns, bloody dogs, or other crazy-ass shit happening here. This is all new to all of us too. But we’ll get through this. Now, Lourdes, do you want to lie down for a bit?”

Thank God. I nod and before I can even stand, Jeremiah reaches down, picking me up. I put my arms around his neck as his arm is under my knees. Everyone says goodbye as he walks me out. Taking the stairs like I weigh nothing, which is a total lie, he moves like a huge cat. We pass a couple of doors before he opens one and my mouth drops open, even though I’ve been in it before when Beatrice showed it to me. The room is stunning and beyond huge. He walks me directly to what I’m assuming is a California king bed. Once I’m lying down, he removes my shoes and picks a throw, placing it on top of me. He leans down and places a gentle kiss on my forehead.

“Get some sleep, Lourdes. If you need anything, pick up the phone and hit one. That will take you to Beatrice. No, don’t worry about anything. Between all of us, we got you. Sleep now. You need rest so you can heal.”

Another kiss on the forehead before he adjusts my blanket, then he turns and walks toward the door. Right before he leaves, he turns and winks at me. Son of a bitch, I’m in some serious trouble. One of the main reasons I didn’t reach out to him again is because of the way he makes me feel. Can’t trust it, or him, because when you put all of your faith in one person, they are destined to let you down. I’ve learned that the hard way, time and time again, from family and friends.

Before my eyes close, I shift in this awesome bed and curl up. The throw is extremely soft and the fan is going around, moving the air. Last thing I think of was when we

were together, I don't remember coming in this room. Then my mind goes blank as sleep takes over.

Sounds like something is hitting the windows. I shift before it hits me, I'm not in my own bed and that noise is definitely getting louder. Slowly and carefully, I turn and slide quietly off the bed. I reach for the phone, dialing number one.

"Yeah, Lourdes, can I get you anything?"

"Beatrice, it sounds like someone is throwing rocks or pebbles at the windows. Can you get Jeremiah up here, please?"

"Yeah, ma'am. Do me a favor. Crawl to the bathroom, then shut and lock the door. Go to the walk-in closet and in the corner, open that cabinet door. Lean in and pull the hook off to the left. The back wall will open, step in, and close the door behind you. The room is pretty large and it has everything you will need until one of the men can come and get you. Go on now, let me reach out to Jeremiah. You got this, Lourdes."

What the fuck am I involved with? Guard dogs ready to kill, secret rooms in closets, and men who would die to protect me. What universe am I in? Then I hear something larger hit the window, and I start crawling to the bathroom. Once there, I close and lock the door then follow Beatrice's instructions to a T. When I close the wall behind me and turn on the light, I'm shocked. It's like a smaller version of a great room. Seating, television, and even a bathroom way in back. Off to the other side is a kitchenette, and I'm thinking at least one bedroom. Who the hell is Jeremiah Zeon and what or who is he involved with? is my first thought. And my second thought is, if these people are after Jeremiah, why are they focusing on me?

8

JEREMIAH

‘Miah’

I grab my vibrating phone to see Beatrice’s text about something hitting Lourdes’s window. My housekeeper then explained how she walked Lourdes through how to enter the safe room. Well, damn, one thing off my brain. Thanks, Beatrice I think to myself. Maybe she deserves a raise for always thinking outside of the box.

What in the actual fuck is going on, and how does it involve both Lourdes and me? Yeah, we had a weekend of drinking and sex, but we didn’t really talk about anything, didn’t have any time. When we were exhausted, we slept then started up again. It was a wicked weekend in bed, which I thoroughly enjoyed, as did Lourdes by the number of times she orgasmed , I think to myself. It hits me that I’ve not heard from Dino. What the fuck is up with him lately? My eyes move to the phone in my hands and I open our active text.

“What the fuck, Dino? Haven’t you found anything yet tying the two of us together? Quit fucking around because whoever it is, they are moving up their game fast. Need some guidance here and that’s what I got you here for. Reach back, will ya?”

I push my phone into my pocket then give a loud “Yo,” which has all eyes turning to me.

“Something is going on upstairs. Beatrice texted me to tell me something is hitting

the windows in the room Lourdes is staying in. Can we split up and do teams? One to search the front of the house and down the driveway, another to search both sides of the house, and I need about five or six of you to come with me.”

Of course, the ones who come with me are Lourdes’s firehouse family, though I get it. One of their own is in trouble, so that means all-hands-on-deck. Taking the stairs two at a time, I quickly make my way to the second master suite on this floor. Not seeing anyone, I give up a hand signal to slow down the maniac fire crew behind me. Grabbing the door, I tentatively start to turn the knob so I can open it. After an immediate glance, I don’t see a thing. Then from the corner of my eyes...what the ever-lovin’ fuck? Beatrice is standing off to the side of the closed bathroom door, holding an AR-15 close to her chest.

Before I can even call out to her the assault rifle is now in her hands and she’s pointing it toward us. And by the looks of it, she somehow seems to know how to use it.

“Beatrice, for Christ’s sake, put that down before you hurt yourself or someone else.”

She glances around, then slowly bends over, placing the weapon on the floor beside her feet. I move toward her, pulling her close as she starts to shake.

“I’m so sorry, Jeremiah. Someone was trying desperately to get up the balcony so I had Lourdes go into the safe room. Being that you put me in charge, I went into the weapons room and grabbed the first one I could. And before you ask, yes, I know how to shoot it. Moose showed all of the house staff how to use a few different kinds of weapons. He actually has a small gun safe in the butler pantry off the kitchen, and one hidden in the floor under the long runner in the great room. Think there’s one gun safe downstairs in the game room too.”

Listening to Beatrice my mind is blown. I’ll need to have a word with Moose but,

fuck, I'm glad he took the initiative to work with the staff so we aren't totally unprepared if something happens. Well, like today. I give Beatrice another hug, then carefully hand her off to Danny. Opening the bathroom door slowly, I move quickly to the hidden door to the safe room. Knowing there isn't a way to warn Lourdes that I am coming in, all I can do is pray she's not carrying, or else I might need one of these first responders for me.

The door slides open effortlessly. It's dark wherever my eyes can look, though there is a small bit of light coming from off to the left. Clearing my throat, I call out, "LOURDES! Hey, it's Jeremiah. You're safe, come on out. Seriously, Violet, it's okay, swear to Christ."

Nothing for about five minutes, then it sounds like a herd of horses off to the far corner by the storage area. I hear boxes and shit falling over when Lil Man comes up behind me.

"Think she was hiding back there. Give her a minute, she's probably still sore from the incident at the fire."

Over his head, I see Lourdes slowly making her way to the main room. Her head is down and I can physically see her trembling. I hear someone from her firehouse telling everyone to get out and give Styx a minute to compose herself. Thank God for whoever that was because the closer she gets to me, the more it shows how much this has turned her world upside down yet again. Just for that, I want to kill the idiot who's terrorizing her. She walks directly into my arms, hanging on tightly.

"Jeremiah, I was thinking if I was here and you didn't have this hideaway room, they would have probably killed me and I still don't know why."

I wrap her up in my arms and we stay like that until her tremors slowly stop. She lifts her head to look up at me, and I can't help myself as my head tilts down and my lips

ever so softly touch hers. This isn't a kiss of passion or desire; it's a kiss between a woman and a man who need to feel comforted and secure. When Lourdes relaxes against me, after a few seconds, that's what tells me how truly upset she is. This woman is a true badass with a heart of gold. For something to shake her center, that tells me more than enough. Fighting with myself, I pull away and bend down to pick her up. Turning, I walk out of the safe room through the closet to a room packed with intimidating men, all either fire, rescue, or cops. I look to Lil Man, who immediately walks to me, bending to give Lourdes a kiss on the forehead, which unexpectedly has me growling. His head jerks up, those piercing eyes locked on mine. When he leans down and whispers in Lourdes's ear, she giggles a bit while tilting her head to look up at me. So that's the game, huh?

I bend and crush my mouth to hers. Swear you can hear a pin drop. I don't give two shits; this woman owns me, even though she doesn't have a clue. Not wanting to take it too far with the crowd in her bedroom, I pull back and up but keep my eyes on her. She's breathtaking, I think to myself as I hear a ruckus making its way up the stairs. When I hear his voice, it makes my skin crawl and I don't know why. Well, except he's been MIA since the fire, when I asked him to do his job and get the information back to me as soon as he could. Not sure what crawled up Dino's ass, but I'm about to find out as he is bellowing as he pounds up the stairs. I look down to see Lourdes's eyebrows crunching together. Yeah, this is not going to be a normal occurrence with him, otherwise he can find other employment.

"Okay, can you move already? Where the fuck is Jeremiah and who the hell are all of you? Jesus Christ, I'm not around for a quick minute and suddenly my friend has all these new buddies. Not on my watch, assholes. I said move."

First, I hear an "oof" then I'm almost positive the next sound is Dino's with a muffled, "Oh fuck." Well, good for him. He's beyond being a total dick and big fucking mouth. When he makes it through the crowd into the room, I watch his eyebrows almost lift to the middle of his forehead when he sees Lourdes in my arms.

But what really bothers me is the look of something in his eyes I've never seen before. When his eyes turn toward me that look is gone. Not sure why, but Dino does not like Lourdes, though they've never met. He makes his way to us. His eyes are neutral at the moment, no emotion in them at all. I don't give him a second to even find the words.

"Dino, where the fuck have you been? It's been well over twenty-four hours and not a word, text, or even carrier pigeon with a note came my way. Someone or ones tried to breach the house just now, aiming toward Lourdes's room."

Coughing loudly, I watch as Dino processes what I just revealed. Usually, this home only has me in it, along with the staff. If, and I mean if, because it's been a while, I'm spending time with a woman, it's generally at their home or a hotel kind of place. They must sign a nondisclosure agreement also. Yeah, kind of takes away the romance and connection side of it, even if it's just a hookup. That's why, lately, I've been just coming home and hanging out with Beatrice and the staff.

"So, Jeremiah, this woman is now staying here? Has she told you anything about herself? Well, if she hasn't, I can because I looked into her background and past. What do you want to know?"

When Dino mentions a background check, Lourdes goes totally still in my arms. Well, she actually tensed up though she didn't say a word.

I look around the room and all I can see is pissed-off firefighters and cops. Yeah, Dino has an effect on everyone around him. Generally though, it doesn't turn into a shitshow immediately. He's gonna get a piece of my mind, just not in front of this company of people. Lourdes starts to squirm in my arms, so I gently place her on her feet. Before I think she's stable, she's in Dino's face, her finger is pointed directly in it.

“Not sure who the fuck you are, dude, but stay out of my business, you hear me, asshole?”

Dino grins and I realize he’s been playing Lourdes. This is exactly what he wanted for her to do, lose her mind so he can once again have diarrhea of the mouth. Before he can even start spouting out his nastiness, I cut him off at the knees.

“Dino, now isn’t the time or place. No, don’t argue with me. No one needs to hear your bullshit, just tell me if you found anything on who started the fire or attacked Lourdes and trashed her home.”

He stares at me for a long minute, then very coolly he starts to relay all that he’s found out, which isn’t much. As he speaks, I can see some of the guys are getting restless so I interrupt him, telling everyone if they need to leave, go right ahead. Danny approaches me with a piece of paper in his hands.

“Jeremiah, here’s a schedule from our house of when we can be around for whatever you need. She’s our family, so regardless if you tell us you have her, we will still be here, so just accept and use the help. All of our numbers are on here, though I think most of us already exchanged digits with you. Got to get going. Later.”

Watching them go, it dawns on me that once they are gone—well, besides the few sticking around for what they are calling day watch—I’ll be almost alone with Lourdes. That thought has me feeling elated and panicked. Nothing can happen to her or anyone else. Dino is watching me weirdly. I’ve already had enough of him, though I wait until everyone is gone. The two guys still here I instruct to make themselves at home. They asked if they could take a look around, so I ask Beatrice to give them a tour knowing it will help to calm her down helping someone out, which she agrees to wholeheartedly.

“What the hell is your problem, Dino? Why are you doing background checks

without me telling you to? And where the hell have you been? MIA is not part of your job description.”

“Aren’t you curious why this woman is hanging around?”

“That’s where you are wrong. Lourdes and I have history, but she’s not once reached out to me—so again—what’s your goddamn problem?”

Lourdes is watching the two of us like she’s watching a tennis match. She’s tense and every time she glances at Dino, I swear to Christ, she’s either ready to cry or beat his ass. Whatever her past holds, she doesn’t want anyone to know. Leave it to Dino to drop the bomb without any finesse.

“Well, Jeremiah, your girl, Lourdes here, has a pretty heavy past. She grew up in the system moving from family to family. Her record shows all of her foster parents state she was more than a handful. She’s got a juvenile record that was sealed, but all it hides is that she took one of her foster parents to court.”

I turn and look down at Lourdes, who is holding her head in her hands. Leaning down, I rub her back, which she leans into.

“All right, Dino, we’ll go over this later. Email me all the information you’ve gathered up until now. And don’t be surprised when you come back that your usual code won’t work on the main gate. I’m trying to make sure the place is secure for Lourdes. Just let me know and either I, or someone else, will buzz you in. Thanks.”

“So now you have some whore living here and my code won’t work anymore? Nice, Jeremiah, real nice. So much for loyalty. Shit, when you and Angie were living together and then got engaged, my code worked on your house. Kind of fucked up, don’t you think?”

Before he can finish, I rush him, grabbing him by the throat.

“Don’t ever use that word when talking about Lourdes. Do you understand me?”

I feel hands on the backs of my arms and before I can shove them off, I hear Lourdes’s soft voice behind me.

“Let him go, Jeremiah. I’ve been called worse.”

Not wanting to, I lower my hands from Dino’s neck as he gasps for air. Not sure where it comes from, but I swing my arm back and when it comes forward my fist hits his jaw, which knocks him back and on his ass.

“You will apologize then get the fuck out of my house. I’ll call you when I need you.”

Dino’s face pales as his mouth drops open. His eyes go from mine to, I’m guessing, Lourdes’s. He drops his head for a second, then lifts it and very quietly apologizes to Lourdes. Then he looks at me before he gets up and leaves. The feeling in my gut tells me this isn’t the end of whatever is going on with us. Need to seriously think about this for a bit, but going to need to reach out to Nova for help. Dino has access to just about everything, and that’s not going to be all right going forward. Not with the attitude he’s walking around with. More importantly is his apparent anger toward Lourdes that I will not tolerate.

9

JEREMIAH

‘Miah’

Damn, I’m beyond exhausted but still need to make this phone call because something is telling me to do it sooner rather than later. Looking toward the bed, I can barely see Lourdes with all the covers on the bed, not to mention that she’s curled up into herself.

I turn back around, picking up my phone, looking for Nova’s number then push dial. As I wait, my mind is trying to figure out how to bring the subject up. Right before he answers, I think to myself, Fuck, just gonna tell him the truth.

“Hey, Jeremiah.”

“Hi, Nova, got a minute?”

“Sure, give me a second.”

I hear whispering but can’t hear or even make out what is been said, or who’s even speaking, Then I hear shoes on what sounds like hardwood floors.

“Sorry about that, you caught me in the middle of something. So tell me what’s up, I’m all ears.”

So that's exactly what I do. I give him everything and he never interrupts me at all. When I finish, the only way I know he's still on the line is I can hear him breathing. I've known Nova long enough to know that once he processes everything then, and only then, will he give an idea if he can help you and how.

"So are you looking for somewhere to stash Lourdes, help with your internal problem—including the security of your entire life and portfolio—or you just want to move on, away from all the drama?"

That makes me smile. Fuck, this guy is good. Right now it's everything, so I just throw that out there. The information doesn't seem to shock Nova. I think I even heard him let out a chuckle. He starts to ask me all kinds of questions and I try to answer each and every one. When I'm done, he asks if I'm going to be up for a while and I tell him, "Fuck yeah, got to get through the emails at least." Nova tells me he'll call me back in like thirty minutes and hangs up.

Turning, I see Lourdes hasn't moved an inch, so I know that exhaustion has finally caught up with her. Leaving the door open, I walk down the hall to my office and place my hand on the screen. Once it reads my palm, it asks for verification of my voice. When I do that, I hear the locks opening and as I walk in, the lights automatically turn on. Going directly to my table/desk, I engage my computers immediately. I go into my security application and disconnect external connections which, as far as I know, the only one is to Dino's company. Something isn't sitting right, so until I can figure out what that means, hopefully with Nova's help, I can protect not only my company but my employees and myself also. As I start to go through emails and make notes on shit I need to review tomorrow, I get so involved that when I hear my name in a raspy voice, I jump up, reaching for the gun under the desk. When I look up, gun held in both hands, I see Lourdes literally drop to the ground, hands on her head. Holy fuck, what is wrong with me? I just freaked the shit out of this woman after I warned everyone to be careful around her. Bending down, I replace the automatic in the holster under the desk, then quickly make my way to

Lourdes, who is still on the floor covering her head. The closer I get; I can see she's literally shaking. Son of a bitch. Slowly, I kneel next to her but don't put a hand on her.

"Lourdes. Hey, come on, it's just me, Jeremiah. Swear to Christ, Violet, I'm not used to there being someone other than me in the house, so I panicked when you spoke. I would never hurt you, swear. Can you please sit up? Please."

She doesn't move at first, but she slowly starts to unfold herself until she is sitting back up, facing me this time. Her eyes are moving back and forth erratically, so I reach over and grab her hands, squeezing them, trying to give her some reassurance.

"I'm sorry, Jeremiah, didn't mean to scare you. I woke up alone and didn't want to be, so I came looking for you. I'll just go back to bed and leave you to whatever you were doing. Good night, and again, I didn't mean to freak you out."

She goes to stand up and I pull her back down, right next to me, so I can get my ass down first. Then I gently bring her to my lap. I can still feel tremors going through her body. I feel like a total asshole, though it's true, I normally don't have guests unless it's family. We stay like this for some time until my cell starts to ring. Lourdes jumps up and as I go to push myself up, she almost jogs to my desk, grabs my phone, and hands it to me. I grin at her then answer without looking. It's Nova already.

"Okay, Jeremiah, this is what I've been able to do. First, I called a friend in New Mexico, who along with his partners, run a PTSD facility called 'The Refuge.' It helps folks from the military and other life situations deal and recognize their weaknesses and strengths. I reached out because Drake's woman was almost taken and sold into human trafficking. He's gonna send me some information for Lourdes so if things keep getting hot, she could go there. He said she's welcome to come stay at The Refuge at any time because they always have Cabin Thirteen open, not to mention the lodge that's up there. Secondly, I put a call into Tex. I'm sure you've

heard about him from when Danny and Claire had their thing. We talked a little and he told me he's already gone through your hard drive to check for any bugs, spyware, and whatever else shit could fuck you up. We both agreed you need to contact Malachi Dagon. That's the kid we were talking to. He owns Dagon Security Systems (DSS). We spoke with Dino and if you remember your guy, Dino, put the kibosh on having him look at your systems. That struck me as odd, so when Tex and I were talking and he was going through what he could, he noticed sections of your system he couldn't get into. Now let me say, Jeremiah, there generally is nowhere Tex can't get into. He's been in the computer systems of our government, every branch of the service, and Home Land Security, CIA, FBI, and whatever else you can think of. Not to mention how many countries and offshore banks he's hacked. So something is up with that. Tex also said, if necessary, he'd work with Malachi, though his time is sparse right now as he's on some secret special project at the moment. So next I've put a call out to Malachi to keep some time open for us. We will speak with him in the morning to get his input. Personally, I'm working on partnering up with this kid, and gotta say, Jeremiah, he's such an asset. His mind is brilliant, swear to Christ. Anyway, let's say between ten and noon tomorrow. If you need anything else, let me know. My men and women are on the rotation to make sure you and Styx are safe. Try and get some rest, brother."

Nova disconnects and I put the phone on the charger. I look up to see Lourdes is curled up on the leather love seat, so I walk toward her, lean down, and pick up her slight body. Then I walk down to the bedroom she's staying in. I gently lay her on the bed, then try to straighten the covers so I can place them over her. It feels cold so when I go to check the windows, one is slightly cracked, which I close. Will talk to Beatrice in the morning. No open windows for a while. I turn to walk out of the bedroom when Lourdes starts to toss and turn, moaning also. I approach the bed, sitting on the edge. As soon as my hand cups her face, she starts to settle. That is right before her eyes pop open.

"Please don't leave me tonight, Miah. I don't want to be alone. Hate to admit it but

I'm kinda freaking out. Not sure why someone is after me. I'm just a nobody firefighter, for Christ's sake. Got no money or anything really worth any kind of value."

Again I stand, lean down, and pick her up, then manage to make my way to my bedroom. Putting her down on the floor, I turn toward my walk-in closet, open a drawer, and pull out one of my sweatshirts and gym shorts. I hand them to her, telling her to take the bathroom first to get ready for bed. Then I go to check the house. Everything is locked up tight, but when I go into the kitchen to make sure all is good, I almost scream like a bitch when I see both of Nova's guys, Mayhem and Coma, lounging close to the house with a small tabletop fire going and the heaters under the patio. I walk over, unlock the door, and step out.

"Jesus Christ, guys, I don't want ya to freeze to death watching the house. There's a pool house and a garden shed out there, both have heat and running water."

They both look at me and I can't tell which one looks crazier. It's Mayhem who replies back to me.

"Yeah, thanks, Jeremiah, we know. Styx's friends are in there, so we figured we'd stay close to the house. Between those heaters back here and the tabletop firepit, it's pretty cozy. Not to mention we have our kits, so we'll be fine."

"Well, to be sure hang on."

I go to the what Beatrice calls the junk drawer, which I call the drop-shit-in drawer, and shove shit around until I find what I'm looking for. I walk back outside and tell them this key will open the door. Then I remember something, open my phone, and find the code. I explain to them that if they don't have time to get the key out, to hit the panel next to the door and put this code in. Not only will the door open but an all-house alarm will go off and notify the police. We talk for a few minutes, then I go

back in as they both come in to make a coffee and grab some food. Thank God for Nova and his guys. I know Lourdes's friends want to help, but those two men of Nova's probably are comparable to Lourdes's entire firehouse. At least we know it's highly improbable that someone will be able to get in the house with so many folks watching.

Slowly, I climb the stairs as my exhaustion hits me. Fuck, what a long-ass day, I think to myself. As I enter my bedroom, Lourdes is once again curled up on my bed, under what looks like every blanket in the room. Oh well, I think as I grab clean boxer briefs and a T-shirt and make my way to the bathroom. Quickly I drop my clothes, throwing them in the laundry basket, and step in the shower for a quick rinse down. Don't spend more than a couple of minutes, then grab a heated towel off the rack to dry myself. Finally, I brush my teeth, pull my clothes on, and make my way back to the bedroom. I walk through the walk-in closet to what I call the bedroom butler's pantry. It houses a marble counter with a Keurig and a wine fridge below that I keep water, juice, creamer, and milk in. There are some snacks also stashed. Reaching down, I grab two waters and first drop one off on Lourdes's side of the bed, then make my way around to my side, placing the bottled water on a coaster. If I don't, Beatrice will be giving me the business in the morning. Sometimes I wonder whose house this is. More importantly, who's the boss.

Crawling into bed, I let out a sigh before I try to get comfortable. Not used to someone spending the night here, so don't want to overstep or whatever and upset the woman next to me.

"Quit overthinking it, Miah. Just go to sleep. It's not like we haven't—well, you know—seen every inch of each other. We're both exhausted, so don't worry, won't be jumping your bones tonight. Sleep good and thanks again for making me feel safe."

She turns away from me and curls up in the tiniest of balls, like she's trying to hide

from the world. I turn toward her and just the smell of her has me getting hard as a rock. Fuck, can't have this, I think to myself as I turn around, putting my back to hers, just for a small amount of protection and manners. At first, I can't sleep, so try counting sheep, then go over my plans for the trip for my family to come out, though I will call in the morning and share that maybe we push it out a few weeks 'til we get a handle on what's actually going on.

As I continue to plan and think, my head gets foggy, and I can feel my eyes getting heavy. Before I fall into a deep as fuck sleep, I hear Lourdes muttering in her sleep like she's afraid, so I pull her back toward my front and spoon her. She instantly settles down and I fade fast into the never ever land of sleep.

10

LOURDES

‘Styx’

Not sure how, but feel like I’m on fire. Something heavy is around my hips and it feels like someone or something is blowing into my ear. I try to shift, but whatever is holding my waist won’t let go. Before I can say a word, one of those hands shifts downward over my ass cheeks and squeezes two times before that appendage covers my cheek. As my head clears, it dawns on me I’m in bed with Jeremiah yet again.

I continue to shift so I can get off the bed and go to the bathroom as my bladder is singing, and not softly. When I manage to get off the bed, I stand carefully and immediately take off for the restroom. When finished, I use the toothbrush on the counter and then again grab the big comb to try and calm down my hair that looks like a tumbleweed. When I look into the mirror my eyes are swollen and have bags under them. My mouth turns up because Miah is using that same nickname he used before when we were together. He told me because of the color of my eyes, since they are a purplish color, that’s why he calls me “Violet.” I throw cold water on my eyes to try and help with the swelling. Usually, if I was home, I’d grab my eye mask out of the freezer and wear it while getting my coffee ready. I look around and then open one of the built-in cabinets and find some washcloths, so I grab one and put it under cold water. Then I put it on my eyes, even though it’s freezing. Once the cloth starts to warm, I put it back under the water and once cold again, put it on my eyes. After a few times I hang the washcloth on the hook in the wet area of the bathroom, which has an awesome standalone tub and huge-ass shower. Probably could fit at

least four or so people in there. Well, guess my face looks a little better, but who am I trying to kid? I'm a total damn wreck.

Making my way to the kitchen, I stop for a second to try to get familiar with Jeremiah's hub of his house. It's spotless, so I wonder if anyone even cooks in this masterpiece. It's beige and wood, so very warm and inviting. Top cabinets are a warm beige while the bottom and island are some kind of wood. Together it's stunning. His counters are just gorgeous. He has a lighter color on the cabinets while the island is made of partial stone and the other half is butcher block. He must have had a designer put this all together. I don't see a coffeepot or Keurig so I continue to walk. When I go to what I think is a hallway, it turns out to be a butler's pantry and all of his small appliances are in here on a huge, long counter. So I make my way toward the end and look at three different types of coffee makers. Figuring he's going to want coffee also; I do my best to get a pot started. Hearing noise coming my way, I turn just in time to see a woman who's quite a bit older than me, arms full, walking toward me, head down.

"Hi."

After my greeting her head pops up and she lets out a scream, while dropping everything in her arms. Shit, didn't mean to startle or scare her. Before I can approach her, she has a phone in her hands and eyes to me.

"Don't move, miss, I'm calling 9-1-1. Don't know how you got past Mr. Zeon's security, but the police will be able to figure it out. Please stay right there, don't make me pull out my Taser."

Hearing what she said, I can't help but smile a little. She reminds me of someone's grandma or auntie, and the thought of her having a Taser just makes me want to laugh out loud. Until I hear her on the phone with 9-1-1.

“Yes, miss, we have a situation at the Zeon home. Yes, that’s right, Jeremiah Zeon. What? I have no idea who Lourdes is, I have a problem with a break-in. The woman is in the coffee room making herself a pot of coffee from the looks of it. No, I don’t know her name, why would I ask a criminal for their name?”

I hear the footsteps before the woman does. So when Jeremiah comes into view, I see his eyes looking around until he walks farther into the kitchen and catches a glimpse of me before he hears what the woman is saying.

“Goddamn it, Lucille, hang up. No, tell them you made a mistake then hang up.”

She looks from Jeremiah to me and back. A huge sigh comes from her when she apologizes for any inconvenience and that her boss just informed her the woman did not break into his home.

“Lucille, didn’t you get the text I sent early this morning? I wanted to give you a heads-up about Lourdes being here. Guess better late than never. Sorry, Lourdes, meet the woman who runs this home with Beatrice. Lucille was my nanny and now she keeps my home looking beautiful.”

I raise my hand while slowly approaching Lucille. She’s a tiny thing but has strength in her hand as she shakes mine. I see her checking me out, which I totally understand. She’s known Jeremiah forever and probably makes sure nothing can hurt him.

“Miss Lourdes, I’m so sorry for assuming the worst. I know that it would be difficult for someone to get into this home.”

I hear Jeremiah clear his throat.

“Well, Lucille, now I doubt anyone will be able to get in. There’s a reason why Lourdes is here. My God, is that coffee I smell? Damn, not sure which one of you

started it, but I could use a cup or gallon of that to get my day started.”

“Jeremiah, why don’t you take Miss Lourdes out to the patio. I’ll get the coffee to you both then start on some breakfast. How do you like your coffee, miss?”

I look to Jeremiah first then back at Lucille, smiling slightly.

“First, please call me just Lourdes. Second, I like it extra Boston, or lots of cream a little coffee.”

For the first time since she walked in, Lucille smiles at me, right before Jeremiah grabs my elbow, leading me out to the massive patio off the kitchen.

“Sorry about that. I did text her but Lucille is more old-school. Should have thought about that. Probably an email or voicemail would have worked better. So how did you sleep? I reached out for you in bed but your side was empty. How did you get away from me?”

“Well, you didn’t make it easy, Jeremiah. Those tree-trunk arms and legs of yours felt like raising a ton each time while I fought off your advances. Honestly, I almost woke you up because I thought my bladder was going to burst but, somehow, I managed to shift and shimmy my way off the bed and away from your octopus arms.”

JEREMIAH

‘Miah’

Watching her laugh has me chuckling right alongside of her. Out of my peripheral, I see Lucille’s eyes open wide, watching us. I get it, as I’m not the most demonstrative person out there. That makes me remember the times I had given Lucille a hug and there are many. Oh well, whatever.

Just as I get comfortable, both my cell and the front gate alert. Jesus, what the hell is going on? Lucille goes for the front gate so I grab my cell, answering it without looking at it.

“Hello, you have Jeremiah Zeon, how may I help you?”

“Well, you nosy fucker, you can let my girl go before I have to go to extremes to get her back. She’s mine not yours, you prick.”

Realizing this is the crazy asshole messing with Lourdes, I try to think of anything to keep this dick’s interest, though the way he’s going on, I might only need to grunt here and there.

I hear footsteps and turn around while Lucille leads in Nova and Mayhem. My cleaning lady looks beyond flustered and that’s when I notice the blushed cheeks. I look over her head to see Nova pointing a finger at Mayhem, who’s trying really fuckin’ hard not to burst out in laughter. Great, guess the big man is feeling good today. I raise a finger, pointing to the phone then at Lourdes, who has been watching with huge, alarmed eyes. My ears are bleeding listening to this moron, but need to get a baseline on why he’s doing what he’s doing. Then I hear him say something that has the hair on the back of my neck standing up.

“The great Jeremiah Zeon, who did our town a big favor building his skyscraper here. Well, for some reason that damn eyesore didn’t burn the way it was supposed to. That asshole who was supposed to help me turned into a pain in my ass, whining about getting caught and shit. Don’t think he spread the accelerant correctly, so that’s why the building didn’t burn to the ground. I believe your muscle has the gift I sent to Lourdes. She seems like a smart bitch, hopefully, she’ll see you for who and what you are and dump your ass. Then she’ll see me, a real man, and the rest will be history.”

I'm watching as Nova motions for Mayhem to put a box on the island. After hearing this jagoff, when I glance at the box, my brain tells me it's something that's going to fuck with her.

"Tell me, why are you doing all of this? For a crush on a firefighter who has no interest? Or because a man made something of himself and you want what he worked for, even though you've not raised a hand? Whichever it is, I hope you realize how fucking ridiculous and crazy you are."

Nothing for a bit, just his hard breathing. Lourdes has stepped closer so I raise an arm for her to step under it. Mayhem and Nova have moved toward the table, as Lucille places a carafe of what I hope to Christ is coffee, and all of the stuff you can put into your Joe already on the table. Then I get a feeling coming off the cell before he starts up again.

"Did you call me ridiculous? Well, we are going to see who's better than the other. Hey, Jeremiah, ask Nova how he's doing without the wifey. I still get hard when I think of her screaming. Do me a favor, make sure to tell him that then move fast, so he don't take you down. We'll talk again real soon. Tell Lourdes hi and give her a nice wet kiss from me."

The cell disconnects and instantly my eyes go to Nova, whose head is down. He must have told someone to cut into my phone so he could hear the conversation. Now I know he lost his wife and mother of their children a few years ago. The story goes, it was a case that went horribly wrong. That's all I know, but the look on his face says there's way more to the story. Mayhem squeezes Nova's shoulder then makes his way to both of us, giving his friend and boss some time.

"Hey, did either of you recognize the voice? Jeremiah, seems like his attention is mainly on you and his interest in Lourdes is because of you, though I might be wrong. As we all know, I'm not a psychologist or psychiatrist."

The three of us chuckle at that thought. Nova finally joins us, even though you can see how much what he heard on that call bothers him. I look to Lourdes and barely shake my head, but she gets what I'm trying to let her know. Don't question Nova about his wife.

"It seems our perpetrator knows something about all of us, so he's done his homework. Unfortunately, we can't because we don't know who the bastard is. Shit, Lourdes, this box was delivered to your home. Mayhem intercepted it. We took it to my office to make sure there was nothing to hurt you in it. So here, put on these gloves, and if you don't mind opening it. Mayhem will record you."

He goes and grabs the box and brings it to Lourdes at the table. Everyone is sitting so I stand beside her and look at the long rectangle box. I look at it, not recognizing the handwriting. Kind of messy and looks like it was rushed. No return address, though stamped in town. Slowly, Lourdes tries to rip it open but way too much tape. That pops a memory in my head, though it's fleeting, and is gone before I can ever catch it. Nova hands me a pocketknife, which I use to cut through the tape for her. She pulls on the sides to open the box. Reaching in, Lourdes takes out something like a basket. I watch, the more she pulls out the more it looks like a wire basket. Inside are what looks to be a ton of pictures. Grabbing a handful, I instantly get hot then cold. They're photos of everyone at the firehouse. Chief, Lil Man, Paco, Danny, Lourdes, Rome, and Till. A few of unknown this asshole caught too. The next handful are all of me. Some of me alone, at home, in my office here and away. Then more photos of, holy shit, I drop that handful so fast it's like they are on fire before I realize what they are, so I drop to my knees to pick them up as someone knocks on the door. Lucille walks that way and in the next few seconds I hear some of Lourdes's firehouse brothers walking in. When Lil Man sees me on my knees, he instantly comes over to help. That's when I lose it.

"No, don't fucking touch them, Lil Man. I'll get them."

“What the hell, Fat Cat, they’re just some pictures. Here look at ...”

His eyes pop open and I can see as he starts to comprehend what he’s looking at. His face seems to get red, but he quickly starts gathering the pictures on the floor. When the rest of the guys get closer Lil Man snarls, which has them giving him a look. Well, until he picks up a photo turns it over, and I watch his mouth fall open. Seeing his reaction, he must figure out that the two of us are as shocked as he is. Then without the others in the room having any idea what photos we are retrieving, the three of us quickly gather and pick them up, putting them in a brown bag that Lucille hands to me.

I put my ass on my calves, hands on my thighs, and try to figure out how someone got those kinds of photos of Lourdes and me from that weekend a few months back. When it hits me, I fucking see red. I point to Lil Man.

“Hey, can you give me a hand with something? Need to do a thorough search of my bedroom for any devices.”

Lil Man nods then looks at me with big eyes. I stare back, not showing anything because if the roles were reversed and we found Lil Man and someone in those photos, I would never even think to go down the road he’s trying to. I mouth “none of your business” just as Lourdes whispers in my ear.

“You just gave him what he wanted. Never reveal your hand to anyone.”

Lil Man is chuckling as he follows me up the stairs. I try to maintain my cool and stay kind of stuck in my head confused, and not having any idea what is going to come next, which with the way my days have been going is starting to make this crazy- ass shit feel normal. That in itself has me worrying the worst is yet to come.

JEREMIAH

‘Miah’

Watching Lourdes sleeping in my bed fills me with so much comfort and relief. It’s been a long three days since that first box came. Each day Mayhem waits at Lourdes’s place to intercept a box addressed to her. Generally, it’s filled with photos of me in intimate stages of having sex. Thank God I’m not a playboy or a man who fucks to fuck. These boxes are starting to take their toll on our entire team. The psychological game this fucker is playing is driving me insane. Lil Man and I found three cameras in my master bedroom and one in the master bath. Also, each bedroom had one camera. This had me calling each home I own to be checked. And every single one had cameras hiding there. The police and FBI were called in. Nova even had a meeting here with Lourdes’s fire family, local police, and his people too.

Now we are in the rotation of playing this game his way instead of ours. It’s getting harder and harder to keep my hands off of Lourdes. Goddamn, she takes my breath away constantly and is so brave. We still are unsure which one of us this asshole is after. I’m starting to think it’s the both of us, even though we don’t know why. Sleeping with her wrapped around me is the reason I’m walking around constantly hard. Yesterday, when Danny and Till arrived, I was in the kitchen trying to adjust my dick in my pants. Danny laughed, telling me welcome to the club, while Till just stared before telling me that Lourdes is their little sister and I’d better watch my horny as fuck ass. Then to make things worse, he asked me what my intentions with Lourdes are. Danny actually walked away laughing into his phone as he called Claire

to share, I guess, the joke that is me. And I know my innocent Violet can see how much pain I'm constantly in because at times when I catch her glance, her eyes are pinned to my crotch. I'm praying this situation can move forward so we can pick up where we left off that weekend in the past. Last night, I pushed my luck. Lourdes came into my office to tell me she was going to bed because she'd had enough. Not sure what had me get up and walk to her, placing my hands on either side of her face, slowly and gently placing my lips on her, giving her a kiss filled with all my feelings. It was a sweet, tentative kiss and for once it felt perfect. She kissed me back and when I pulled up and away, she followed me like she didn't want me to stop. When I finally went to bed later that night, she was curled up like usual in all the covers. After I got into bed, she uncurled and brought her body to leech on to me and my body heat. When I let a sigh out, I felt her laughter.

“Good night, Miah. Now you get to experience the needy feeling running through your body. I know I certainly did after that kiss earlier.”

“Touché, Lourdes. Touché. Good night, Violet.”

Gently I removed her from me and turned to my side, trying to put some distance between us. Well, until she plastered herself to my back. Jesus Christ, what did I do to have to put up with this type of torture? Her nipples were like hard beads against my back as she tried to push her legs between mine, so she was even closer to me. These were my last thoughts before I dropped off to sleep.

Even with the blinds closed, somehow, a ray of light has hit me in the face, waking me up. I reach my hands over my head to stretch my body. Looking down, I see Lourdes in her usual sleeping pattern, rolled up in a tiny circle, though her ass is shoved up against my cock, which is as hard as steel. When she starts moving that heart-shaped ass even closer to me, I groan. That's when I hear her giggling under the covers. Little brat, I think right before I grab her sides and tickle her, which has her screaming like a banshee. When she finally screams “Uncle” I let her loose and she

immediately jumps off the bed, landing on her feet in a fight pose. How is this my life right now, I think to myself? I've smiled more in the last four-ish days than ever. Lourdes is pushing her hair out of her face, a huge smile appearing as she watches me. Slowly I throw the covers off and act like I'm getting up. Before she can figure it out, I roll to her side of the bed using my arms to fling me to the end of the mattress, where my feet roll and hit the ground. I have my arms outstretched before Lourdes can even move. When I grab her and fling us both back onto the bed, her eyes are huge and her mouth is wide open in an 'O' shape.

Not sure if I've freaked her out, I take a second to assess. She seems okay, though shocked, which is expected. I slowly bend toward her, wanting to give her a second to pull back if she wants, but instead she moves even closer, while shifting up toward my mouth, reaching up to me as I make my way down to her. Our lips brush against each other once, twice, and on the third time my tongue licks the seam in her lips and, holy hell, it's like we burst into flames. Instantly and together.

Her arms are wrapped around my neck, which brings her beyond close to my body. My hands each have a handful of that phenomenal heart-shaped ass. Not sure which one of us has control and I don't care, as long as we keep moving forward. I've been walking around with a hard cock for almost four days. Can't remember how many times I've gone in the bathroom to take care of "the very hard situation." What's worse is, I think her whole firehouse knows my pain and are relishing in it. Every time one of them comes for their, as they call it, Styx watch, I'm getting all kinds of hand cream, men's magazines, and of course Nova and Mayhem have to put their two cents in. So when Mayhem handed me a box wrapped in a paper bag, didn't think twice. Until I opened a male adult toy which, after the two idiots laughed like two crazed clowns, Mayhem explained to me what it was and how it works. Even Nova gave him a look, which all the big man said was, "Don't knock it 'til ya try it. And it won't bitch, complain, or ask for money." He ended it on a huge smile, which had both Nova and I cracking up.

So lost in that thought it doesn't dawn on me that we are at a standstill until Lourdes flips me on my forehead.

“Um, Miah, what's so important that my tongue is in your mouth and you are somewhere else in your head? Doesn't exactly make this woman in your arms feel wanted, just saying. Want to get back in the moment?”

She tries to pull away, but that's not happening. Once I settle her against me, I then explain, including the “toy,” which has her laughing so hard she's holding her sides. When I start to nibble on her ear and kiss across her jaw the laughter stops and her moaning starts, which has me beyond excited. As we reacquaint ourselves, the sexual feelings I have for this slip of a woman amazes me. Not my general type but I remember my granddad always saying, “When you find the right one, you'll know, so don't be quick to settle.” Damn, I miss that man and his wisdom.

Her hands are moving up and down my sides, fingers running over each ridge of muscle across my stomach. At this precise moment, all the daily workouts are worth it to feel her hands on me. I gasp in a deep breath when those tiny hands make their way to my boxer briefs, pushing down on the sides. The material gets stuck on my weeping cock, which again has Lourdes giggling as she reaches to free the beast. Being released from the tight space of my briefs has my length reacting by kind of spasming as the remainder of my cock fills out. Lourdes's eyes never move from her observation. When I'm at full-mast I get a very muted, “Wow.”

Her hand grabs me tightly then, with the liquid on my tip, she starts to shift her hand up and then down. Not sure how she knows, but on the push down she tightens her grip, which has me gritting my teeth because it feels oh so good. I can tell she likes to play, but I'm beyond that. Grabbing her, I position us so she's on her back and I'm lying directly beside her. She gives me a pout until I take two fingers and separate her, feeling how wet she is for me. She moves her hips and separates her legs, giving me room. Her face is flushed but still I want to make sure she's ready for me. By the

noises coming out of her mouth and the motions of her body, she tells me she's more than ready. I lean toward the nightstand, opening the drawer and reaching in for a foil package. She takes it from me, opens it with her teeth, then slowly rolls it over me. By the time she's done I'm panting, trying not to embarrass myself totally before I even get in her. I gently push her down and her legs open, giving me a place to rest between them. My heart is beating like crazy and before I can power my way in, Lourdes grabs me and in one upward thrust I'm inside. Between her tightness and heat, I know I'm not going to last long, so I start to work her bundle of nerves. I can feel the warmth in my spine as the sparks go off up and down my back. Feeling my orgasm rushing toward the end way to soon, I take my fingers and pinch Lourdes's clit, which has her screaming my name as she floods my cock. As she relishes in her release, I chase mine. After maybe four thrusts, the pressure is so intense in my balls that when I drop down into the cradle of her hips, my body trembles with each rope of my release. I've not felt this deeply since the last time we were together. And since I've not been with anyone these last couple of months, I'm feeling completely drained. Realizing after a few seconds that I have my entire body resting on hers, I go to move but her hands tighten around my waist.

"Don't move yet, Miah. I like the feel of your weight and entire body, all of it on me. God, I hope we didn't just make a humongous mistake. I'm not trying to be a bitch, just with everything else going on, did we really need the added stress of whatever this is."

I brush the hair out of her face and gently kiss her lips until I feel her relax under me. Then I slowly pull out and roll off to the side, my hands still running the length of her body. For some reason I'm compelled to keep touching her. After a few more minutes, I feel it's time to get rid of this condom and bring a washcloth to clean her up. After a few butterfly kisses on her shoulder and neck, I get up, turning to make sure she's covered, then head to the master bathroom to take care of business. When I return with a cloth to clean her, she turns a beautiful shade of pink.

“Oh, um, Jeremiah, you don’t have to do that. Here, give that to me.”

“No, and when we are in bed like this, I’m Miah to you, Lourdes. Understand? And this is the least I can do after all of that. Lie back, Violet, let me do this for you. Please, I need to.”

That does it and she lies back, separating her legs. Seeing her glistening has my mouth watering. I use the washcloth to clean her up, which with a condom isn’t much. Once I’m done, I throw the cloth toward the bathroom as I swoop down and use my mouth to hear Lourdes’s screams once again. Damn, this is the way to start my day off , I think to myself as I feel her walls starting to contract. Yeah, I could get used to this for sure.

12

LOURDES

‘Styx’

Damn is this ridiculous. I’ve been at Jeremiah’s house now for over two weeks. I’m back at work and between my bodyguards, personal driver, and everything else he’s done, I feel like I don’t have a single minute to myself to breathe. I’ve gone from a very private woman to one who never has to make a decision at all. And since most of my bodyguards are from my firehouse, whoever has Styx duty is also working my shifts. The gifts are still arriving at the condo, though I never see them because I’m not home. That is one item Jeremiah, Nova, Chief or my guys: Lil Man, Danny, Paco, Till, or Romeo will not let up on. Some of the gifts are a bit strange like the burnt flower bouquets or the poems that make no sense at all. Though the last box was beyond gross. There were pictures of me that had me almost vomiting. They were men I’ve gotten together with in my past. Yeah, maybe a one-night stand or a short relationship. This goes to show everyone this freak has been behind the scenes for years. When Nova and Mayhem started looking into those men from my past, something very eerie was brought to our attention. And no one thinks it’s coincidence that half of the men I’ve been intimate with have either died in an accident or were murdered, and all the cases have gone cold. Now, there aren’t that many but the few Nova found, all five have met their death very suspiciously.

So with that thought I’m still at Jeremiah’s and now that includes sharing his bed. I’m not complaining, though Dino is furious. The only time he’s allowed in the house is if there is any kind of meeting. All of the security systems of the house and buildings

are now being managed by Malachi Dagon, owner of DSS and partner of Nova's. And damn is that kid sharp. He personally came out with some of his people to inspect and make any necessary changes. There were some areas seriously lacking that Malachi explained to Jeremiah and Nova. When brought to Dino's attention, he went down the road of Malachi just wanting to pad the bill. He argued with Jeremiah that he would never do anything to put Jeremiah in any danger, though what Malachi has uncovered kind of leans toward Dino being a dick and a liar.

Nova has his team looking into Dino's company because something isn't adding up. Since his clearance has been revoked, Jeremiah's system has been attacked a lot. The problem for the idiots trying to get in is that Malachi is probably one of the best, if not the top dog, in the security industry, per Nova. And his systems are beyond phenomenal and, so far, not one hacker has been able to break down the walls Malachi has set up. To make Jeremiah feel better, Malachi has one of his top guys working closely with the team here. Frankie makes a trip out here at least once every two weeks unless something doesn't seem right, then he jumps on Malachi's private plane and comes on out. And he's a riot. Between Nova's guys and the folks from the firehouse, Frankie fits right in. There is no doubt in my mind that we can trust him because he's honest to a fault and doesn't try to hide anything. And more importantly, if he doesn't know or understand something he either calls Malachi or Nova for guidance. Unlike Dino, who acts like he knows everything. Though after his meeting with Malachi and Frankie, it became apparent he's way below their intelligence level. And he knew it so he was a total dick to both men.

I'm on my way to the firehouse since I'm finally released to go back to work. What a goddamn fight that was. Not one person in my life thought I should go back, but it was time. I was ready to bang my head against the walls. I'd had my fill of movies, television series, and romance books. So when I finally pushed, after the doctor gave me a clean bill of health, my chief told me I could come back but would have a shadow at all times. He also shared the reason they didn't want me back at the house was because there were "gifts" showing up there too. These were scary gifts that led

Nova to believe somehow this guy either was connected to the firefighters' world or he was just a crazy fire freak and was going to continue to follow everything I did. Each gift came every time I went out on a call. The box would have photos of the fire itself and, weirdly, pictures of me working the fire. The police are baffled and we've watched videos of the fires afterward to see if we notice one person standing out, maybe taking photos. No one has seen anything out of the ordinary or any person of interest yet.

As I approach the turnoff to the firehouse, I see Coma behind me. Jeremiah hired Nova's entire team to protect me. I like them all, but Coma at times scares me. When I mentioned it to Jeremiah, he explained Coma has had a very hard life and he's not made the best decisions, but is really trying to change his direction in life. One thing I know for certain is that he would jump in front of me if it was needed, without giving it a single thought. Not that I want anyone to get hurt, but the first time he was on duty he told me point-blank I was to do whatever he told me in a situation without thinking. He explained it wasn't my decision and everyone on their team knew the risks.

Once in the parking lot by our firehouse, I pull into a spot with Coma right next to me. When I get out, he's already there grabbing my overnight bag for me. I am on for the next twenty-four to thirty-six hours, and that means Coma is my shadow. Chief is good with this so even on a call, Coma comes with. When he explained to my chief his experience when he was in the service, our chief told him he's good to go. I don't know exactly what he did in his branch of service to convince my boss, but it must have been something pretty dangerous. I know Danny was a medic when he served, that's why he's a firefighter/paramedic.

Walking in, I can smell something that has my stomach growling. I hear Coma try to cough to hide his laughter but fails.

"What's so funny, dude?"

“Not sure how you eat like you do and still look like that, woman.”

“So should I tell Jeremiah that you’re checking me out? Not sure he’d find that cute.”

Coma gives me that freaky as fuck grin and wiggles his eyebrows.

“Go ahead, Styx, tell him and see what he does. First, he knows I don’t fuck with a brother’s woman, and second, sorry to bust your bubble but, darlin’, you ain’t my type.”

That has me thinking for a second. What exactly is his type? So with my sick sense of humor, I follow my gut.

“Well, so sorry, Coma, I don’t strip for a living or believe in altering what God gave me.”

That brings a huge smile to his face, though his eyes still remain cold.

“Think you know everything, huh, little girl? Here’s a clue. I like my woman quiet and submissive and willing to be shared.”

My head tilts for a quick second because I’m lost. Then he shocks the shit out of me.

“So, little Lourdes, would you share your bed with two men? Because that, little girl, is what I like, and I highly doubt that’s in your bag of tricks.”

My mouth falls open because there isn’t any way in hell I’d ever do that. I don’t care what other people do, it’s just not me.

“You’re right, Coma, not for me but more power to you. Truce?”

He looks at my outstretched hand and thinks for a second, then reaches out with his hand and shakes.

“What, don’t believe in the blood family commitment? I could slash our hands and we can become blood siblings. No, I’m just kidding, no worries. Now let’s get settled, going to be a long twenty-four hours. At least there’s something heavenly cooking by that smell. Hey, Lourdes, yeah, we’re good. Truce, woman.”

My God, I can’t remember the last time we’ve been called out so much. I can see we are all starting to feel the effects of no sleep. The last call was weird though. It was at one of the primary schools and the building wasn’t on fire, just a huge dumpster out back. There is no doubt it was arson because the gas cans were left behind in plain sight. Leads me to believe it was an amateur, or worse, someone wanting to get caught.

As I make my way up to the women’s side of the showers, I hear the door open and close, which is weird. I don’t think there’s another female firefighter on right now. Maybe a paramedic or EMT, who knows, though something doesn’t seem right. I grab the tire thumper Jeremiah insisted I keep in my lockers so I have one in here and one in the bunk room. All I’ve taken off is my turnout gear, so I’m in a Firehouse #23 T-shirt and a pair of Dockers in my socks, no shoes. As I make my way around, I see a shadow ahead of me so quietly I move forward. As I go to make the turn, the tire thumper is above my one shoulder, in case I have to swing out with it. After the turn, as I walk toward the entrance I feel something, before seeing anything. When I turn around all I see is a huge person, so I swing. I catch a “motherfucker” before I slam into someone’s shoulder area. Then all hell breaks loose as the person, a man, is cussing up a storm and the door to the women’s shower busts open. Not sure where to look, I glance at Till, Paco, and Danny busting in and as we all look to who’s on the ground, I’m shocked to see Coma. He’s trying to stand up. Lil Man goes around me and, to my surprise, gently helps Coma to his feet. Once up, Coma glares at me like he’s ready to kill me. Man, I fucked up.

“What the ever-lovin fuck, Styx? I told you that no matter where you go, I’ll follow you. Thought while you’re taking a shower I’d sit on one of the benches, but no, you got to go all Lara Croft on my ass. Well, good job, think you dislocated my shoulder.”

My hands go to my mouth as I hear more people coming in. Chief walks right up to Coma, telling him to sit his ass down. Once Coma does, our chief starts feeling and rotating the shoulder. The poor big guy looks ready to punch someone. When our chief tells Danny to hold Coma down, Paco stands behind Coma as Chief grabs his arm straight out. Without looking at the injured man, he glances at both Danny and Paco then jerks and pulls until I think I actually hear a pop. Coma is sweating bullets by now but hasn’t said a word. As things start to calm down, I walk over to Coma and put my hand on his leg.

“God, I am so sorry, dude. Didn’t mean to hurt you, I didn’t remember that you were going to follow me everywhere. How bad does it hurt? Can I get you anything?”

He raises his eyes and eyebrows up, and that kind of tells me everything. I sit next to him for a while until I think he’s gotten himself under control. Danny brought a sling in and got Coma situated with it, though it was a fight because he said he didn’t need a sling. Danny overruled him and Chief took Danny’s side, so Coma is now pouting with a sling on his arm. With Coma and Danny sitting in the women’s shower room, I was allowed to take a quick shower. Once dried and clothed, I step out just as I hear Coma tell Danny he didn’t think I had it in me. Danny just laughs and says, “You have no idea what our Styx is capable of. Don’t underestimate her.” Coma just nods.

I wait a few minutes so they don’t know I was listening. The three of us walk down to the kitchen to get a bite to eat. Rome is cooking and the smells in the kitchen are making each of our stomachs growl out loud. Danny laughs first, followed by Coma. We make our way to the island and see that Rome has made a smorgasbord of food. There is meatloaf, looks like chicken cacciatore, homemade mashed potatoes, and his

famous minestrone soup, a ton of sides and a huge salad too.

“Figured y’all needed some sustenance with all the calls coming in. Take a plate and fill up. Come on. Fuck, Coma, what happened to you, dude?”

Coma looks at Rome then glances at me behind him.

“Hurricane Styx came about. Almost took my head off with a tire thumper. Not sure why I’m here guarding her, seems like she can take care of herself.”

I grin up at him because that’s exactly what I’ve been saying. Oh well, we all move down the island filling our plates up. At the table no one waits for anything, just starts piling in the food. My God, it’s so frigging good. I’m so into my food, I don’t feel the change that occurs around me. When I look up, all the guys are watching me with different levels of grins and smiles. With my mouth slightly full of food, I ask, “What?”

Danny starts laughing then wipes his face with a napkin, looking at me.

“Damn, Styx. Most women eat a piece of celery through an entire meal. You’ve scarfed down a plateful of food like it was nothing. I mean, it’s awesome to see a woman eat a meal that she’s enjoying instead of starving herself.”

The other guys agree or grunt in agreement. I just nod and go back to my plate. Well, that’s until the alarm goes off, letting us know we have another call. I look to Coma but he shakes his head and stands on his feet. Well, shit, now I feel twice as bad that he has to work with a messed-up shoulder. Then Chief’s yell for us to move our asses has me almost running to my equipment before jumping on the truck. Fingers crossed it won’t be a devastating call.

LOURDES

‘Styx’

What the hell is wrong with people today? This last call has all of us feeling useless. The call was to a rather large property on the outskirts of town. As soon as we drove down the bumpy long-ass driveway, we could see this was going to be a battle. A beautiful house with outbuildings surrounded by dead trees and branches. Not to mention all the leaves on the ground from fall are in piles all over this land. Then once we get off of our trucks, we hear the sounds of God knows how many dogs barking, howling, and crying. I looked to Danny, who is already taking off to the back buildings. Grabbing a Halligan bar and fire axe, I go after him to have his back. Well, until I almost plow into Coma, who’s standing right in front of me.

“Move your ass now. Danny needs backup so either come with or get out of the way, we don’t have time for one of your ‘conversations,’ Coma. Come on, dude, move now.”

For a quick minute didn’t think he’d listen but then he slightly shifts and I take off, hearing him behind me. When we pass the house and see what Danny’s battling, my heart almost stops. Paco’s handling a hose to try and fight the flames down around the buildings. Danny runs up to the both of us.

“Buildings are full of animals, not sure what kind. Get the doors and windows open and, if possible, free the animals. Don’t show fear because they are all highly agitated

already. I let Chief know we need him to send more people to help. Let's go before those fires around the buildings catch and we have a major disaster. Only good thing we have on our side is these buildings are pole barns so made outta metal. Though it's gonna get hotter than hell quickly."

Danny turns and runs right up to the largest building and touches it to feel for heat. Then he grabs bolt cutters and fights to get the padlock off. Once it's gone, right before I make my way past that building, I hear so many animals moving to get out of the building. Till and one of the paramedics are trying to keep it tight, so once the animals are away from the fire they can be herded to a safer paddock. Keeping my eyes on the smaller gray building, when I get there I feel the door, it's cool. When I reach for the bolt cutters one of the guys handed to me, someone beats me to them and pulls them out of my pocket. I know who it is before I turn around, but I do it anyway to see the huge smirk on Coma's face. What a total asshole, I think to myself.

Surprisingly, he gently shifts me to the side then cuts the two locks off. He slowly opens the door and to our utter surprise this building has dogs, goats, and holy mother of God, three little kids covered in either human or animal feces stumble out of the building. Immediately I call it in, requesting EMT assistance. Coma has one kid under each arm so I go to pick up the last one, though when I put my hands on the child's shoulders it actually sounds like it growls or hisses at me. Its tiny bony body jerks away from me and turns around. My breath catches in my chest as I look down into the battered and bruised face of a little girl. The terror on her face breaks my heart but, unfortunately, we don't have time so I get down and kneel on the ground in front of her.

"Sweetie, I didn't mean to scare you but we need to get you somewhere safe. Can you walk? Or do you want me to pick you up?"

The odor coming off this poor child tells me these children have lived in this filth for quite a while and have been severely abused and starved by how skeletal they all

look. She's looking at me then back at the building. Finally, she wipes her face with her dirty little arm.

"I can't leave, have to get them out."

My head jerks to the building but don't see anything human or animal through the smoke.

"Who, sweetie?"

Suddenly, I hear Rome's whistle, which tells me we got some major issues going on in that smaller building. Just then the EMTs arrive and take over the little girl, who as soon as she sees them runs toward me, grabbing on to my legs. Julie and Mike, the two EMTs, give me a look and I hold up a finger.

"Sweetie, what's your name? I'm Lourdes or you can call me Styx."

Her little eyebrows shoot up.

"Styx, like what falls off a tree?"

"One day I'll tell you the story but for now, your name."

"They call me the Little Crazy Bitch. But before here, when we lived at home, my name was Ellie, though if they find out I told you, I'm going to get the switch."

My eyes meet Julie and she shakes her head, eyes watering up. Leaning down, I gently touch Ellie's shoulders, my eyes never leaving hers.

"Well, Ellie, meet Julie and Mike. They will take care of you and I'll be back. What else do I need to get out of that building?"

“My two younger sisters. And the fourteen puppies that Squeaky had and the six barn cats. Oh, and our three baby pigs and two, no, three baby goats.”

Her eyes are huge, with so much in them I can't stand it. I lean down and kiss her forehead, praying I don't get anything, and then turn and head into the dark building. I yell for Rome, who calls me farther into the building. It's bigger than I thought and from the smells hitting me, even after using my Vicks nasal inhaler, it's beyond horrible. I can't grasp what it is until, holy shit! Rome is in a guess you'd call it a pen or stall, and in the far corner are two younger girls hanging on to each other for dear life. And all around them are puppies, pigs, a ragged cat with kittens, and three baby goats. What a fucking zoo, I think to myself as I reach for my radio.

“Chief, going to need the Humane Society out here. This building alone has more than I'd say twenty to twenty-five animals in deplorable conditions. Also need more EMTs, found two tender-age females. They need to be checked out.”

“Copy, Styx, on it. Will you stay with the girls or continue checking the other buildings?”

I look to Rome, who is having a real hard time with the girls. Well shit, I know he has nieces and nephews so this could be hitting close to home, not sure why he's reacting like he is.

“Yeah, Chief, I'll hang around until the backup shows. Then I'll catch up to the rest of our company. Just a warning, Chief, it's bad and I mean really bad. Might want to contact some children's advocates and counselors. From the little I just heard from Ellie; this isn't her home. They were brought here, all the kids, and I think she might have seen whoever was running this place kill her parents. They've been here a while.”

“Thank, Styx, I'll get the probie to make those calls. Reach out if you need anything.

Chief out.”

Before I can reply he is gone. I’d hate to have his job today. What a fucking clusterfuck. I give Rome a chin lift which he returns, mouthing to me “Thanks, Styx.” He turns to the girls and tells them that Auntie Styx will stay with them so he can go find the rest of the kids. My eyes pop open widely. What does he mean, the rest of the kids? I ask him that exact question when he walks by. He puts his head toward my ear to try and whisper.

“They told me that there are more children in the farther buildings. Those ‘houses’ are for the kids who misbehave, so I’ll go take a look. Styx, who the fuck does this to children? I mean, I know how Danny gets when it’s the animals, but for Christ’s sake, these are human beings. I don’t think either of those girls have had a good cleaning in only God knows how long. Okay, let me get my ass moving. Be careful, keep your eyes peeled. I don’t need that mega-millionaire of yours chewing my ass out today.”

Again, before I can say a word, he’s gone. So I walk slowly to the girls then plop my ass down. Immediately, I have puppies galore walking, running, and pissing all over me. One of the little girls crawls my way and gets on my lap. There’s nothing to her.

“Are you going to be our new mommy? Grammy said they’d had enough of us and our new Mommy and Daddy would come and get us, so we have to be good. She said if we did exactly what she told us to do today, later she’d set up the doggy pool and let us have a bubble bath. Sounds fun, don’t it?”

My heart is not only heavy but slowly breaking. Who in their right mind not only steals children but then, I’m just assuming, sells them to people who either want children and they don’t want to go through the legal adoption process, or fuck, don’t want to go down the other path, but sick motherfuckers who buy kids for their own evil intentions. My mind is flipping through so many scenarios that when the other little one climbs onto my lap, I just open my arms wider. I ask them their names and

I'm told their names here are Stinky Bitch and Cry Baby Bitch. Then just like Ellie, they give me what I'm guessing are their given names: Wren and Lottie. Little Lottie tells me they have an older sister, Ellie, and two brothers, but haven't seen the two boys in a while.

I'm not sure how long we sit on the feces-covered stall with little to no hay. I learn they have been sleeping out there with the baby animals. Wren, embarrassed as hell, answers my question on how they go potty. The two girls had dug a hole all the way in the back and each time they had to potty, they go to the hole and put a light dusting of dirt on top. They ran out of the, I guess, Wet Ones Grammy gave them and they didn't know how long they'd been in the building. Once or twice a day, if the old bat remembers, she brings them clean water, bread, cheese, and one piece of fruit for each of them. There have been times when she didn't show and they would share some of the leftover kitten kibble. What a fucking shitshow. One thing I know for sure is, if Grammy shows up, I'm going to kill her with my bare hands.

By the time the EMTs make their way back here, the girls are clinging to me. Slowly I tell them they are safe and I'll see them soon. Holding hands and tearing my heart out they cautiously walk out of the building, shielding their eyes from the sun. I didn't realize inside how pale they truly are. Once they are being assessed by the EMTs, I walk to the rest of the buildings. Each one already has either a firefighter or police officer there, along with paramedics and other medical staff. I'm thinking Chief called in the troops by the mass of folks here to help. As I'm walking toward the back of the property, I hear a familiar voice, which shocks me. Lil Man and, holy shit, Jeremiah walk out of a side building both filthy, almost as bad as the girls. When they see me, they share a look that has the hair on the back of my neck standing up but move toward me. Jeremiah comes to hug me, but I put both hands up.

"No, you don't want to do that. I've just spent I don't know how long sitting my ass in human and animal shit. I feel beyond grubby. What are you doing here anyway? Who called you? I told you, I don't need a babysitter, Jeremiah."

Pulling me close like I didn't say a word, his arms wrap around me and just hold me. Nope, he's actually hanging on to me like something freaked him out. It takes me a few seconds to feel the tremors going through his body.

"My God, Lourdes, who does this kind of shit? And to kids? Motherfuckers, I'll bury them. They need to feel how these kids have felt. Oh shit, Lil Man and I found a shallow grave behind that rusty as fuck building. No idea but there were the remains of two adults in there."

As the three of us continue to hash out all this shit, my mind is swinging back and forth. How could no one know what was going on? With the way society has been lately, everyone is either afraid or just doesn't give a damn about anyone but themselves anymore. There's going to be some deep digging going on with this one. Once all the outbuildings have been gone through, Jeremiah, Danny, Lil Man, and I head toward the area around the house, just as we see headlights from an old truck trying to get through. When they can't go any farther, two women jump out; one older, one about my age. It's like they don't see the massive number of first responders on their property because I'm assuming the old one is "Grammy." It takes everything in me not to jump the ugly, old, wrinkled bitch. And those thoughts shock me because that's not me, but I've just had to try and calm down three girls who were freaking out. As soon as I can, going to make my way to the hospital to check on Ellie, Wren, and Lottie. They begged me and that was the only way to get them in the ambulance. The younger girl with Grammy started to chase the ambulance, screaming that we can't take the girls, they are spoken for. That has everyone standing around, heads jerking to that comment. Yeah, this is some shady-ass shit and it sounds like some form of human trafficking. Damn, this is truly going to fuck with my head. Like I need more stuff up there.

JEREMIAH

‘Miah’

Watching Lourdes with the three girls is breathtaking. A few hours and those three females are totally in love with my woman. Wait, did I say my woman? Where the hell did that come from? My world is slowly falling apart and I’m not that worried. Not sure if it’s because Lourdes is around, or that I am beginning to trust Nova and Malachi so much more than Dino. When Malachi, Frankie, and Vito made the trip out here, I got an upfront and close view of Malachi at work. The man is brilliant and is training his two best friends, as they both work with him now. I think Vito just jumped on that boat but from what I understand, Frankie has been with the company for a while now.

Something catches my attention and when I look up I see Lourdes, Ellie, Wren, and Lottie—all in scrubs—because one of the first things the nurses did was get the girls to clean up in the showers. Lourdes went with to make sure they were okay. Once they came back to me, she pulled me to the side, explaining Wren lost it, sobbing while in the shower. Lottie was upset too but tried to keep it inside. Ellie, being the oldest, is more like a mother than a sister to the younger girls. Lourdes said it took at least five or ten minutes to calm Wren down. When Lourdes said she asked Wren why she was upset, the girl looked her straight in the eyes and said in a soft voice.

“We’re finally free, Styx. No more eating bread with worms or dirty water with cat kibble. And I almost forgot what toilet paper felt like. I brushed my teeth for like ten

minutes straight. It felt awesome. When I ran my tongue over my teeth, they felt so clean. Then I started feeling guilty because we don't know where our brothers are and those people killed our parents and I honestly thought we were going to die in that building with those animals."

Then she fell into Lourdes's arms and bawled until there was nothing left. Poor kid is in emotional overload. Shaking my head so I can try to figure out and see what the four of them want. Leave it to Lourdes to say it like it is.

"Jeremiah, we have a situation. Child Protective Services wants to split the girls up and put them in foster homes. That isn't happening as long as I'm around. I hate to ask you, but I need another huge favor from you. Can we take them to your house until something is figured out? I know it's an enormous ask, but I can't with a good conscience let them get split up and sent to different homes. They won't have anyone to have their backs and in those places you definitely need that."

Without saying it, Lourdes has just given me a sneak peek into her past, and I'm not liking what I just heard. Fuck, I know nothing about kids, well, a little with the nieces and nephews, but with them the good thing is they eventually go home. Then I look into little Wren's bloodshot eyes and, in that moment, I feel just like Lourdes about these three girls.

"Absolutely, Lourdes. The house is huge and has plenty of room. If they want to go home with us, that's perfectly fine with me."

She comes at me and at the last minute jumps, which prompts me to grab her under the arms, pulling her close. Both of our hearts are beating wildly, which gives me a little solace that I'm not the only one panicking. I grab her ass cheeks as she puts her hands on either side of my face, leaning down and kissing me like her life depends on it. We are so involved with each other that until the girls start giggling, we just keep at each other. Gently, I put Lourdes down and the girls run to her, jumping up and

down. Guess they do want to come home with us. This should be interesting are my thoughts as I take my phone out to dial Beatrice. She needs to know not only about the guests but everything that has been going on. Another long night with limited amounts of sleep. And these kids were going to need stuff and I have no clue what that is. Beatrice being one of the best moms and grandmas, she should know what to do. I told her to call all of my contacts if we need a store to help or whatever. She laughed hysterically, telling me the girls are young enough and since they have nothing, she'll run out to Walmart. Since Malachi and his boys are still working around the house, she'll hook one or all of them to go with.

Jesus Christ, I created a bunch of crazy as fuck shoppers. I had no idea when I called Beatrice that the girls might need a few things. She went on to start a phone chain and by the time we got home, not only did the girls have new clothes that—from the looks of it—they'll fit into because of the photos I sent to Beatrice. Claire and Lucille were waiting on us with Beatrice. As soon as we got out of the car, the girls were staring with their mouths open and the three women were waiting right at the door, big smiles on their faces. If someone would have told me that everyone would come together to help look after these three little girls, the gratitude I'm feeling is humbling in every way. Because these three princess deserve everything. And I guess Walmart has just about everything. When the girls walked up the stairs to the house, each lady kind of took one of the girls under their wing. I could see the excitement and fear in each of them. Beatrice pulled me aside to let me know the suite my nieces use has been turned into a temporary room for the girls, which I'm totally fine with. Lourdes is just as shocked as I am, especially when she sees that Claire is a part of the welcoming party. I know from what Lourdes told me Claire, not too long ago, was not only kidnapped but also terrorized by someone from Danny's past when he was in the military. Fuck, that reminds me, I need to reach out to Nova tomorrow.

“All right, girls, why don't we show you the room we have ready for you?”

Everyone, and I mean just that, follows Beatrice up the stairs and down the left

hallway to the end double doors. The girls are hanging on to each other, not sure what to expect. Now, I thought I knew what was coming until the door opened and I heard three girls shriek in such a high-pitched sound, thought my ears were bleeding. I had a trundle bed in the room for my nieces. On the other side of the room was what looks like a full bed. The room has bookshelves with books, puzzles, and a few games. Along the wall next to the entrance is a big flat screen up on the wall. Claire steps up to the girls and motions for them to follow her to the closet. Each girl has all new clothes hanging up and personal items in the drawers. Along the back wall are shoe racks with a few pairs for each of them, including slippers. Ellie is the first to literally fall to the closet floor, busting out in tears. Wren and Lottie run to their big sister and fall next to her, hugging on her. I look around and see every adult, even the guys, with tears in their eyes. Then Lourdes makes her way to the girls also falling to the floor, hugging on all of them. When Ellie wipes her tears away, she looks around, then her eyes land on Lourdes first then me.

“Why would you help us out? Do all of this for three girls you don’t even know? What do you want in return we have nothing to give back to you?”

That last question has my head jerking as I look to Lourdes. She lets the two little ones go and grabs Ellie’s face in her hands.

“Sweetie, we don’t want anything from you. We want to help all of you, and Jeremiah was nice enough to let me bring you three here.”

“Is he your boyfriend?”

I hear the three idiots next to me cackling. When I glance at Lourdes, my eyebrow is raised, waiting on her answer. She smirks my way before answering,

“Ellie, honestly, still trying to figure that out. Now, are you all okay?”

All three girls nod and get off the floor, hugging on Lourdes. Then I'm shocked to hell and back when the girls walk around hugging and thanking everyone for everything. I'm so taken aback by how these girls managed to come out of that horrible place with such kind hearts.

"Time to get y'all ready for bed. Say you're goodnights then grab some pajamas and let's get moving. I'm thinking it's been a long day for you three cuties."

Listening to Beatrice as the girls say goodnight and then walk back into the closet, I look around and say the first thing that comes to mind.

"Thank you all so very much. After seeing with my own eyes where they were being held, these girls deserve everything their little heart's desire. From the bottom of my soul, I thank God I have each and every one of you. Guys, let's go downstairs, I'm going to need some help figuring out what those pieces of shits' endgame is. Beatrice and Lucille, you pick the place you want to go on vacation and I will send you there. Again, my thanks to both of you for all you managed to get done with the little notice I provided."

Malachi, Vito, and Freddie look to each other then back at me. Malachi grins first then looks directly in my eyes.

"Might not feel that way once you look in that lonely garage you have off to the side of the building. Freddie and Vito went a little nuts, so each girl has a bicycle and electric type vehicle. One Jeep, one Barbie vehicle, and the last is a princess one. Not to mention the chalk, jump ropes, and trampoline that should be here by end of the day tomorrow. I'm thinking those two need to settle down and have some rugrats of their own."

My mouth literally drops open as I hear the gasp from Lourdes. Fuck, after all those kids have been through, how did they get so lucky? When I look to Lourdes, her eyes

are glossy but there's a sadness around her that I can't read. She must feel my eyes because she looks up as she's wiping the tears off her cheeks and gives me a weak smile. There's a story I'm dying to hear, though I will not put any pressure on her to share. I'm learning she eventually will on her timeframe not mine.

I motion for everyone to follow me, knowing both Beatrice and Lucille won't leave the girls until they've been read stories and have fallen asleep. Once in the kitchen, I pop the sliding glass doors open to the patio and backyard, as I need some fresh air. When I turn, Malachi is pulling out sub sandwiches and a ton of sides to go with them. That's when I realize as my stomach growls, I'm starving. Lourdes has already grabbed a paper plate, which tells me she feels the exact same way. At the hospital, they gave the girls some chicken soup and crackers, Jell-O, juice, and finally little cups of ice cream. Neither Lourdes nor I were able to eat at that time.

After everyone has grabbed a sandwich, we sit either inside the eat-in kitchen or at the patio table with the heaters on. I wait 'til everyone has had a chance to grab a bite or two, then I put it out in the Universe.

"We came upon something that never in my lifetime did I think would happen. Only thing that comes to mind is that was some kind of human trafficking site. No, mainly it was kid trafficking. Besides the three upstairs, I think the police captain told me they brought out seventeen children, ranging in age. What is worse is the bodies that were found along the property. I know the FBI and CIA were called in from what Nova shared. Malachi, if you don't want to be involved, I get it. If you do, I need everything you can find on those adults who were there, from the basics to employment records and banking information. Don't know why, but I think somehow this is connected to the shit going on with us."

As we sit eating and talking, my mind goes back to what Lourdes said about foster care. I have no idea what she's been through and if things were different, I'd wait 'til she was ready. But don't have that kind of time, between my businesses being

harassed, her life being in danger, and now this other problem with the trafficking location and kids found on that property. I glance up, clearing my throat.

“I’m going to contact my business manager. No, Lourdes, not anyone Dino can get to, and inform them that all needs for the children saved from tonight, I will be fronting all of their expenses. Also, that second building we’ve been working on is supposed to have a boutique hotel, but for now we will use it to house those other children. I’ll talk to the detectives on the case in the morning, as most of those kids are either still in the hospital or are being housed at the police station and firehouse, since CPS doesn’t have anywhere to put them. Foster parents have no availability, which gives me cause to think that’s how some of these kids are being taken. But for now, let’s eat and try to relax. Tomorrow is another day for us to fight the demons in our world.”

15

LOURDES

‘Styx’

Damn it, I knew I slipped when in conversation with Jeremiah I mentioned how bad foster care is. For all the years I’ve been with Engine 23 and Truck 315, I’ve kept my past close to the chest. Danny and Lil Man know the most and that’s because of serving together back in the day. There were a few times when alcohol was involved and we all started revealing our demons. Then Danny and Claire went through hell together and now are on the road to redemption. It showed me that the past can come back to haunt you or, if you’re lucky, you can send said demons straight back to hell where they belong.

After everyone ate and visited, one by one they started to either leave or go to bed. Jeremiah had left an open-door invitation to Malachi, Vito, and Freddie, which two of the three took him up on it. Malachi headed out to go stay with Nova and his kids. Malachi, in not so many words, let it be known that he’s worried about the very private man, who is not only his partner but also his friend. And since Vito and Freddie don’t know Nova like Malachi does, they decided to stay here in their own suite downstairs.

After Beatrice and Lucille made their way down and started telling everything they were able to get out of the girls’ room, I go up to Jeremiah’s room and walk right into the bathroom. Ripping off the scrubs, I turn the shower on hot and step in. All the emotions I’ve pushed down since that last call come out has me gasping and choking

on my own tears. I slide down to the shower floor, bend my knees, and wrap my arms around my legs, rocking back and forth. It all comes barreling at one time and instantly gives me a headache. So involved in my past and thoughts, I jump and let out a scream when Jeremiah slides down next to me in his clothes.

“Why do you have clothes on in the shower?”

“Because, Violet, you need me now, not after I take time to rip my clothes off. So tell me what has you on the shower floor in a trance?”

I knew eventually this conversation would have to be had. I take a few breaths in and then look up at Jeremiah.

“Well, today just brought up a bunch of shit from my past. And as you know I’m not one to share, if you can’t tell. I’ve not told this story to many people in my life, they just assume they know what I’m about. As you know, I grew up in foster care. Both of my folks were drug addicts. CPS finally took me away when my mom was trying to sell me to a pimp by offering me to blow him for either cash or drugs. Unfortunately for her, it was an undercover cop. My dad was charged also because he was waiting down the alley for her to get the money so they could go buy their next hit. Jeremiah, I was in really bad shape, and no, before you ask, I wasn’t sexually abused. There were many late nights when I actually wished I was, that would give me an excuse as to why I feel the way I have my entire life. I feel that I was more than just abandoned. Do you know how bad it feels to have parents who not only don’t love you, but don’t even want you? Wish I had the guts to just ask them, but I refuse to ever talk to them. I was a kid, they should have protected me, not do what they did. So as I grew up, I learned what foster care wasn’t. My real parents didn’t sexually abuse me, but my one foster father and brother did. And to top it off, it was his wife and the boy’s mother who turned them in. I never told her because they threatened me. I stayed with Gloria until I turned eighteen and enlisted. She’s still alive and I’ve been able to help her now as she gets older. So yeah, I’ve had shit in

my life but also have had beyond good. Gloria taught me how to be a good human being, sharing my demons. So are you getting ready to run now?"

Jeremiah keeps his eyes on me, but doesn't say a word. But when he does I almost lose it.

"Violet, why would I run? What you just told me makes me want to pick you up and find an island that I can buy and live there with you until we die. Since we can't do that, there are a few things I want, no, need. Give me both assholes' names and what prison they were sentenced to. If by chance they got out, we then need to let Nova know. Also need Gloria's full name and where she lives. I know you've been able to help her, but remember, I have a few small guesthouses all around this property. If you want, we can bring her closer and try to give her the best we can. Finally, we need to have a serious conversation about where we are going because we just added three little girls to this equation, who we need to take into consideration. From the little Malachi has been able to find out, no missing persons' notices were ever filed for the girls or their parents. I'm assuming either their folks didn't have any family or disconnected from them years ago. So if that is true, these girls are going to need stability. You know what I just realized, I have no idea how old Ellie, Wren, and Lottie are. Do you have any idea, Violet?"

My eyes look up to see the intensity in his. That was one of the first questions I asked the kids.

"Jeremiah, Ellie is ten, almost eleven, years old. Wren is seven, almost eight, and Lottie is pushing close to six. And I agree with you, they deserve the very best, but with me on duty for days at a time, staying at the firehouse, I'm at a loss. But after meeting these girls, not sure why, but don't want them to leave, though don't have an idea of if a single woman with a dangerous job could foster, let alone adopt, three little girls. I mean, for Christ's sake, I live in a condo. As far as Gloria, yeah, I'd love her closer, no doubt, but we do need to have a conversation first. Why make all kinds

of changes if whatever this is between us is a passing thing? Let's face it, Jeremiah, you have homes all over the world, why would you want to stay in Nowhere, USA with a damaged woman, who at times is fucked in the head?"

"Lourdes, I have just one question for you. Well, it's one with a few side questions. What do you want to happen between us? Do you have any feelings toward me, and are they for me or my money? And what would be the ultimate dream of yours going forward in your life?"

With each question my heart pounds even more. What the hell is even going on? One or both of us has a maniac after us, and now we brought three emotionally damaged girls into the mix. What the hell was I thinking? And my feelings for Jeremiah are all over the board. I know the idea of going on without him in my life actually hurts my heart. He's burrowed into my soul and now I'm hooked. He isn't the man I thought he was. Jeremiah is the most generous person I've ever met. I mean, especially if you are part of his life. He told me last year Beatrice was complaining in the winter about how cold she was until her car warmed up because of how old the car was, it didn't have a remote start. He didn't put one in, he bought her a new car that not only has a remote starter but heated seats and steering wheel. It's all-wheel drive and an SUV because of the rough winters we have. He said the feeling he got from her was one of the best feelings ever. Except when he bought his parents their dream house. Well, yeah, he bought the land and had the house built. This was a phenomenal man; what woman wouldn't want to spend their life with him? But flip that coin and I'm damaged goods. Fucked in the head and body, though Jeremiah can make my body sing.

"Jeremiah, I have a lot of baggage. Saying that, don't know how, but you've kind of grown on me. That weekend keeps running on a loop in my head. Then we had the fire, death, and attempts on one or both of our lives. I've never felt taken care of in the fashion you do. I can't say I'm madly in love with you, but know that you mean something to me. I'd love to see where we can go, but want to make sure you know

I'm not after your money. I'll sign something so that's taken off your thought process. I think we need to make the girls safe, which means they're not staying here for now, until we find out who's responsible."

He seems to be taking in everything I just said. When his eyes smile, I know he's to the part about us. But then a shadow falls over his face.

"You're right, Violet, we need to get them outta here as soon as possible. Hang on one second."

He grabs his phone and hits a few buttons and then puts it on speaker. I hear a bunch of squeals first then the deep timbre of Nova.

"Yeah, Jeremiah, how are those girls settling in?"

"Not bad, Nova. You're on speaker, got Lourdes with me. We were talking and agree the girls can't stay with us until we figure out who's after us. Do you think, if you asked, your friend, Brick, would let the girls stay at The Refuge? I'd can send both Beatrice and Lucille with them. Don't want to burden anyone, but we don't want them in the line of fire of this demented asshole we're dealing with."

"Jeremiah, yeah, he'd more than welcome them. And with Alaska, his woman, around she'd keep a close eye on the girls, as would all of his partners. I'll give him a call. When do you want to send them down to New Mexico?"

"That was my next question. Could you maybe help us get them outta here undercover? I'm sure whoever is our pain in the ass is watching my plane, just in case we decide to just run away."

As the three of us talk, it dawns on me that Jeremiah didn't even question anything I said about us. So deep in my own thoughts, I feel his hand grab mine right when I

hear him tell Nova to give him a minute or two.

“Hey, what’s put that frown on your face? Did you hear, Nova said we should move the girls tomorrow night. We’ll sneak them over to where he has the helicopter and that will take the five of them to The Refuge. That okay for you?”

I just nod. That’s when he grabs my face and leans down, kissing the ever-lovin’ fuck out of me. When he finally pushes away from me, I hear his growl.

“What was that for?”

“To get your head outta your own ass. No, don’t get pissed off. As far as I’m concerned, we’re good. What you said let me know we are both on the same page, though you are hesitant because of your past. I can handle and work with that. So about the girls, what are your thoughts?”

With that we get back with Nova and put our plan together to make these girls safe, no matter how far we need to go.

16

DONOVAN

‘Nova’

Hearing my three children getting ready for school as I wait for both Jeremiah and Styx to get here, I’m running the different options through my head. Spoke to Brick already and, after he took a bit to talk to his partners, they are all on board to have the three girls come out to The Refuge to keep them safe from whatever is going on here right now. Also reached out to a friend and had them check on the names Jeremiah provided me, after explaining what happened to Styx in foster care. Supposedly, her foster father is still incarcerated but the foster brother was let out on good behavior two months ago. Today, I have Bones and Sardines personally checking in with the asshole’s parole officer and, hopefully, will be able to pursue that officer to give them the location of the halfway house the ex-con was assigned to.

The thought of having to inform Styx the asshole got early release, after what he and his old man did, is pissing the fuck out of me. Also, Malachi is still looking into Dino, who’s a damn snake in the grass. We already know he was embezzling from Jeremiah, though haven’t told the man that yet. I want everything when I lay it out for Jeremiah. That motherfucker is going to prison if I have anything to say about it.

The sounds of footsteps bring me back to now. I look up and see the only three reasons I’m still on the earth. First is my eldest, Killian or as his mother called him Killy, who’s coming up to fifteen, followed by Shane at almost fourteen. Yeah, Fiona wanted twins but instead we had Irish twins, being just around eleven months apart.

The baby bringing up the rear is my baby girl, Nessa, who the memories of when she came into the world almost bring me to my knees, as she was a premature baby. My wife Fiona picked Nessa's name because she's fierce and ambitious. Neither of us knew, a couple of years later Fiona would be dead, and now I am the only parent my poor baby girl knows, as her memories of her momma seem to have faded to almost nothing. Shaking my head, I try to be in the present as I hear kids coming down the stairs.

"Daddy, Killy was mean to me this morning. He pushed me because he wanted to use my bathroom because Shane was taking a poo and Killy said it was stinky."

Trying hard but I can't hold in my laughter. Damn this girl, she always can make me laugh. The boys seeing me laughing, they join in. Then I stop when I look at Killy. He puts his head down because he knows what's coming.

"Killian O'Hara Finnegan, what have you been told about putting your hands on your younger sister or brother? Now what do you think your punishment should be?"

Before Killy could answer, of course, Nessa's soft heart comes to the surface because she loves her big brother.

"Daddy, no, Killy wasn't that mean, I think the smell of Shane's poops had Killy confused."

All three of us bust out chuckling. So much for trying to be stoic so I can dish out punishment. My kids are what have kept me alive and going. Clearing his throat, Shane looks at all of us and I know to brace with my loose cannon of a son.

"Dad, it's partially my fault. I had a huge burrito with hot sauce with the skull and crossbones on it yesterday after practice, and that old saying about going in hot, coming out steaming is so friggin' true. Thought I was dying and I can attest, the

smell was worse than when Nessa was a baby and had a nasty diaper explosion. So, sorry, Killy and Nessa.”

I love these kids so much. I look to Killy, who grins first then gives me what I want.

“Yeah, Dad, I was wrong. Won’t watch television tonight and, Nessa, I’ll do your chores for the rest of the week.”

My little princess stands up and, holy shit, starts to wiggle and dance around the kitchen. What almost gives me a heart attack is her shimmying her hips and moving her tiny butt around. I start to think, Oh God, I’m not ready for this, and so wish my wife was standing here with me watching our little girl and boys growing up. This is one thing I cannot fuck up. My wife’s legacy is standing right in front of me.

As they sit down to breakfast, which today is scrambled eggs with English muffins and fresh fruit, my phone vibrates, letting me know my security system is spot-on when the doorbell goes off. Knowing who it is, I tell the kids to keep eating as I go to the front door, opening it and seeing Styx, Jeremiah, Danny, and Lil Man. The last two must be their security for today.

“Hi, come on in. Getting the kids off to school. If you don’t mind having a cup of coffee ’til they’re gone, I’d appreciate it.”

I see the four exchange looks and it hits me, yeah, some of the people in my life know my story but just a handful have met the kids, Danny being one of them. As we walk through the foyer into the family room, turning and then entering the kitchen, you can hear the kids talking and laughing. They immediately stop goofing around when they see we have company.

“All right, that is my oldest, Killian, or as we call him Killy, next is Shane, and finally my baby girl, Nessa. Kids, this is Styx, Jeremiah, and Lil Man. You remember

Danny, right?”

Danny walks toward the kids, giving Nessa a hug and shaking both boys’ hands. The kids have been to Danny and Claire’s place and have played with all their animals. Once everyone says hello, I get four cups of coffee, putting sugar and the cream server on the table. When I see Styx looking at the server then me, I get it.

“Styx, when my wife was alive, she was very proper at times and that shit, I mean stuff, has stuck with me. Yeah, I know, baby girl, I swore, sorry about that.”

We keep the conversation generic and lighthearted. First Nessa’s bus comes, then the boys. Once they are gone, I move the conversation into the dining room so I can spread out. I run my laptop from my locked office because of the kids, and then the file I had been putting together.

“So let me vomit the information, then we can run through it. First, yeah Brick and his partners are ready for the girls whenever we can get them there. Besides sending Beatrice and Lucille, I’m going to include Mustang and Coma to keep an eye on everyone down there at The Refuge. Jeremiah, we don’t have everything yet, but Dino is a piece of shit and I won’t rest until that jagoff is in prison. We can talk further on that once everything is in. Styx, sorry to be the bearer of bad news but, yeah, we checked and your foster father is still incarcerated, but your foster brother was let out recently on good behavior. Two of my men are on their way to talk to his parole officer and try to locate him. I’ll keep you in the loop. I know you have guards but be diligent at all times.”

When I see both Danny and Lil Man look at Styx, it hits me she hasn’t shared. Son of a bitch, didn’t want to make this even harder for her. She sees me putting it together and mouths “all good, it’s time,” then turns to her friends and co-workers.

“Okay, please don’t make a big deal about this, especially you, Lil Man. In my last

foster home, the man and his son both sexually abused me. His wife, the kid's mom, turned them both in and she kept me 'til I joined the service. I never told either of you because I'm not only embarrassed but don't want you guys to think I'm weak, because I'm not. Can we talk about this later? I'd appreciate it, I can only handle so much at the moment."

Danny gets up and slowly walks to Styx, pulling her up and hugging her tightly. I see it before I hear it, the shaking of her shoulders. I look to Jeremiah and we nod, then get up and walk back into the kitchen, giving them some time together without us watching.

"What did you mean, Dino's a piece of shit?"

I motion for him to sit down then I tell him everything we've found so far. I see the pain in his face, knowing someone he believed in broke that trust. One of the hardest things to find out when you've become successful and thought you found your team. One of them letting you down. We talk about some of the options and what I'm waiting on. Jeremiah tells me he hasn't heard from Dino since the end of last week, so it's been a couple of days. I'm wondering where the asshole is when Styx, Lil Man, and Danny walk in. The five of us sit around the island, trying to come up with a couple of plans. Since my men took the helicopter to Styx's hometown, we figure maybe tomorrow night we could sneak the girls out under the cover of darkness. Jeremiah already told me Beatrice and Lucille were on board, and that put the girls at ease. The rest of shit is up in the air and that's when all five phones start ringing and vibrating. Jeremiah is the first to answer.

"Yeah, Rome, what's up? Say that again? Have Beatrice show you the downstairs room and get the girls in there. Did you call the cops? Okay, we are on our way. No, don't do that. Are Malachi and his guys there? Oh shit, they're on the way. Call them back and tell Malachi to come in the back way and park in the back garage. They can go through the second door in the garage to the secret room through a tunnel you

have the codes. Yeah right. On the way.”

We all wait 'til he hangs up then bombard him with a ton of questions until he raises his hands.

“Rome wanted us to know there are like four or five blacked-out vehicles at the gate standing off with my security patrol. Cops have been called and Malachi, Vito, and Freddie are coming back from getting the girls suitcases and some other items. We need to go now.”

And that's exactly what we do. In three vehicles, we take off like the beasts from hell. All the way there I pray that Jeremiah's and Styx's people can keep everyone safe 'til we get there. Because otherwise it will be a bloodbath and those girls don't need to be involved or even have to see shit like that. They've been through enough already. I thank God that my kids are on their way to school and safe. Though I learned a hard lesson when I lost Fiona, thinking anyone is truly safe is definitely a lie. We can only do what we can to keep those we love as safe as possible. The rest is up to God, higher power, or whatever you call it or believe in. My faith was blown away when I lost my wife, but for my kids' sake I keep that to myself. Fiona would want it that way, and I'll always do what I think my wife would want with our kids. It's all I can give her anymore. Since, she's no longer with us because of my work. And it eats at me every single motherfucking day.

17

LOURDES

‘Styx’

After we left Nova’s unexpectedly and as we are rushing back to Jeremiah’s house, I’m worried about this next incident but feeling sad too. Not sure why, but my heart is heavy knowing the girls will be going tomorrow on a new adventure, even though it’s not a true vacation. I told Jeremiah to make sure the folks out at The Refuge try and make it fun for the girls. Even though I know it’s to keep them safe but shit, I’m not liking it. Only thing keeping me from calling it off is that not many people know what’s going on: just the chief of police, Nova, Danny, Lil Man, and Jeremiah. Per Nova, he won’t tell the other guys any more than they need to know, though he promised me his team is vetted for just about anything. The two going with will learn their next mission late tonight.

Jeremiah is quiet too, so I look at him to see a frown all over his face. I know he was speaking to Nova off to the side, so I wonder if that’s what put that grimace on his face. Reaching over, I grab his hand, squeezing lightly.

“Hey, you okay? Nova give you some bad news because you look like you lost your best friend, Jeremiah? Anything I can do to help?”

“Not right now, Violet, though thanks. Let’s handle this next crisis and I hope to Christ it’s not something bad again, or I’ll lose my fucking mind. Then maybe we can talk later. Thanks for caring, Lourdes.”

He squeezes my hand and doesn't let go. This is how we drive the rest of the way back to his house with everyone else behind us, as we have no idea what we're going to find. Jeremiah turns down the long driveway to his property, and when we get to the gate and guardhouse, it's a standoff for sure. No one has gotten out of the darkened SUVs and the security shack is closed up tight, except for the automatics pointed at the vehicles. Probably not a good idea to get out of Jeremiah's bulletproof SUV, but that's exactly what he does when it stops. He stops right in front of the guard shack. Nova is behind us. Hoping these guys have a plan because we need to get the girls out of here. As Nova walks up to us, Jeremiah leans over and they have a one-on-one conversation. Trying not to listen, I look around and that's when I see the passenger window on one of those blacked out vehicles coming down slowly and a hand pop out.

"Jeremiah, they have grenades. Watch out!"

I fall to my knees on the floor of the passenger front seat, hands on my head. I hear both men swearing like truckers, right before a loud explosion. When I peek up, I see they are trying to blow open the gates which, unless they have a missile launcher, ain't going to happen. Jeremiah said the entire fence is just about a permanent structure with the way it was built with concrete footings for every post. When I hear pinging off the side of the vehicle I'm in, I realize it's gunfire. Fuck, I think to myself right before Nova and Jeremiah jump in with me.

"Not sure who the hell they are, but they are packing a punch or two for goddamn sure."

Hearing the frustration in Nova's voice scares me. Usually that man shows no fear. Jeremiah grabs his phone.

"What's up, Boss?"

As Jeremiah speaks to his second-in-command of security, Charlie, my mind is wandering. I feel my phone vibrating, telling me I've received a text. Looking down, I see it's from Beatrice, shooting me a photo of the girls sitting at a poker table in the basement room playing what looks to be Candy Land. Well, at least they are safe. Beatrice texts she'll protect the girls with her life, as will Lucille. That puts my mind at ease, at least a little bit. Jeremiah disconnects then redials. I hear him giving Malachi an update, so I sit quietly. Nova reaches over from the back seat, squeezing my shoulder. When I turn to him, he mouths, "It's gonna be okay." God, I pray he's right.

Just as Jeremiah disconnects with Malachi, the five vehicles start up. Nova tells us to brace as we hear a very loud noise. Looking up, I hear Nova chuckling so I'm assuming this is his helicopter. When I look up in the sky, that's when I see Bones hanging out of the helicopter, a huge gun in his arms. Somehow, he looks to be clipped to the helicopter, though not sure how but I pray he is. Guess that scares those assholes or maybe not, as the back end of one of the vehicles opens and a dude sticks out with a huge gun aimed up into the sky. Everything happens at once, not sure how but Bones sees it and switches his position. Before the car on the ground can fire, Bones aims and I watch as a mini missile comes down from the sky and literally blows that vehicle into tiny bits, and pieces shower our vehicle. I can hear screaming but don't know where it's coming from until Nova is in my view, telling me to, "Calm the fuck down, woman, and breathe." As the burning pile of rubble continues to smoke, the other vehicles are trying to get away, which isn't happening with the ton of police showing up and the helicopter extremely low to the ground, with now both men, Bones and Sardines, hanging off the side, weapons in their hands. I can't believe this is my life right now is the thought that goes through my head as I see the chief of police pulling up, with Mayhem and Coma directly behind him in the big guy's enormous truck. Not how I thought this day would go.

Another long-ass day. Thank God I'm not on the rotation at the firehouse because I'd be useless. It was a standoff for a while until state troopers arrived, along with what I

think was the FBI. The four vehicles must have seen they were screwed. Each SUV had four to six men in it. What was beyond surprising is that none of us knew any of them. Not one of them is talking, except to request an attorney. When the police searched the vehicles, they found in the back of one there were some signs of a struggle, and a huge stain of what looked like blood. No way to know whose because the jerks aren't talking.

Finally, I'm in the tub soaking, trying to relax. Jeremiah was going to work in his office and Beatrice left dinner in the oven. She went home to pack and get her things together for tomorrow when the girls, along with Beatrice and Lucille, head to New Mexico and The Refuge. I've been adding hot water because I don't want to get out. I'm just about to doze off when something, and I don't know what, jerks me awake. I open my eyes and don't see anything out of order but my gut is telling me something is off. I reach for my phone that is on the ledge and dial Jeremiah's phone.

"Hey, Lourdes, you okay?"

"Not sure, I'm still in the tub but something is freaking me out and I don't know what."

"On my way up, don't move, be there in under a minute. Stay on the phone with me."

I can hear him running up the stairs and before I know it, he's pushing the door open and slides right to the tub. I feel the air rush out of me just at the sight of Jeremiah. Before he can say a word, we hear screaming coming from the girls' room.

"Fuck, stay here, call 9-1-1. I'll go check and see what's going on with them. What the fuck how is shit happening with all the security around this place. Here, let me help you out."

"No, go to them, Jeremiah. I'll be fine. Just throw my robe over here. I'll be right

there, please check on them.”

I watch him struggling, but in the end, he turns and runs toward the girls’ room. I reach for the bar and pull myself out of the tub, quickly dry off, and put my robe on. Then I follow Jeremiah’s footsteps to the girls’ room to find them all on Ellie’s bed, hugging Jeremiah. The sorrow in his eyes breaks my heart, though I have no idea why or what the hell is going on. Until Wren starts talking,

“Please don’t send us away, Styx. We can try to be gooder and not so loud. And we will clean up our messes. We don’t want to go away. Please...”

Oh, son of a bitch. I feel my heart tearing in two. I never thought the girls would think they did something wrong and we were sending them away because of it. This whole situation is so fucking messed up. I crawl on the already crowded bed and pull Wren and Lottie to me and grab Ellie’s hand. I try to think of what to say, but figure it’s best to be honest.

“Sweetie, none of you did anything wrong. There is a lot going on that you don’t know about. Jeremiah and I are doing this because we care about all three of you beautiful girls. We want to keep you safe and, right now, going to stay with Brick and Alaska is what’s best for all of you. I hear they have animals, including a very friendly cow who gives kisses. It won’t be for long, but knowing that people are keeping you safe is what we want. Do you trust us?”

They look at each other than back at me, nodding. Well, that’s a relief, I think to myself. We talk quietly and even Jeremiah is doing his best to sell The Refuge as a vacation spot, though for them it will feel like it, even with the therapist checking in with each of them to gauge where they are at with all that’s been going on. First Lottie then Wren drift off, leaving Jeremiah, Ellie, and I talking quietly. This young girl is wise beyond her years, that’s for sure. Especially when she asks us the question about which one of us is in trouble. She looks us both in the eyes when asking and I

can feel Jeremiah tense up, but once again, I'm a firm believer in telling the truth, even to children.

"Ellie, someone has been watching me and it's gotten worse. So between Jeremiah and Nova, we decided that for now, I would stay here and when working my crew will keep an eye out for me too."

"Why do you have to work, Styx? Jeremiah is rich, can't you just stay home and what do they say...Mom used to say it all the time to Daddy. Oh yeah, that's right, 'I sit home all day and eat bonbons.' We all knew when Mom said that, she was getting mad at Daddy."

I wait for it and it comes sooner than I thought it would. Ellie puts her head on Jeremiah's chest and first her shoulders shake, then she starts to sob. It literally breaks my heart because there isn't a goddamn thing either of us can do to ease the agony of losing her parents. Already she's taken on the role of surrogate mother to her two young sisters. Lots to carry on such tiny shoulders. I glance at Jeremiah, who to my utter shock has tears running down his face as he watches Ellie break in front of him. He's got one hand on her back, moving slowly up then down. He must feel my eyes because when he looks up, I gasp at the look of pain in his eyes. We stay just like this until Ellie's sobs get less and less. When she lifts her head, her eyes catch first Jeremiah's then mine.

"I'm sorry for being such a baby. If you think this is the best thing for us, then we will go to your friends' and not cause any problems. Beatrice said that both her and Lucille are coming too. Thanks for that, the girls really like them both, they are so nice. We will come back here, right? And has there been anything on our brothers?"

Since we have nothing to share, we tell Ellie that. I move to the end of the bed and slowly get up. Reaching over, I grab Lottie and gently lift and carry her to the bottom bunk bed, placing her down and covering her up. She never even opens her eyes.

Poor thing is beyond exhausted. Jeremiah is already lifting Wren and he puts her in the same bed, lifting the cover and then placing it over both girls. Ellie is standing and when I get close, she hugs me tightly. I'm filled with such emotion for this young girl, it's overwhelming. Feeling his warmth first, then Jeremiah wraps us both up in his huge arms and we stay like this for a bit. Finally, Ellie whispers a soft, "Thank you," and goes back and gets into bed. Jeremiah tucks her in, then sits down next to her, pulling me close.

"Ellie, I promise you this will pass and we'll figure out what's next. All five of us together will make decisions going forward. From Lourdes and my point, if at all possible, and remember we need to talk to an attorney and CPS, maybe we can keep you all here. Hey, don't start crying again, but this is between us for now. Let's get through this and once all three of you are back, we'll have a talk and see what you three girls want to do. Sound good?"

She nods, trying to pull herself together.

"Jeremiah, I already know because we talked in your secret room earlier. We feel safe with the both of you, and if it's not too much trouble, we all agreed we'd like to stay here. We'll do chores and not ask for a lot; we just don't want to be separated."

After hugging her, we both say goodnight then leave, closing the door but leaving it open enough to get the light from the hallway. Dark is not good for the three girls right now. Jeremiah grabs my hand, leading me to his, no, our bedroom. Shutting and locking the door, he reaches for the tie to my robe and opens it to remove the robe, flinging it on the floor behind him. Then he leads me to the bed and shows me exactly how he feels, and he never says a single word.

18

JEREMIAH

‘Miah’

Damn, it’s so quiet in this house without those three little girls running and laughing around this place. And since Lourdes is on shift for the next twenty-four hours or more, I’m sitting here with my finger up my ass. Nothing is holding my attention. Been down to the gym and just about beat the bag off the rafters, and still, I’m tense as hell. Caught up on emails, and even had a Zoom call with my offices overseas to fill them in on the updated computer systems Malachi and his people are working on for us. I just feel like gloom and doom or that something is about to happen, though don’t have any idea what.

Nova checked in earlier to let me know the girls are doing great. Alaska has Ellie helping at the front desk, while Wren and Lottie are helping Tonka, one of Brick’s partners, with not only Melba the cow but also the horse, goats, and whatever else, including Brick’s three-legged dog, Mutt. Nova said Brick told him we should probably get the girls a dog or else they were going to try and steal Mutt from him, especially Wren. Nova said Brick is not okay with giving his buddy away, so if the girls stay here, will need to have that conversation with Lourdes. The update helped, but fuck do I miss them. How is that possible, children have never really been in my future plans? Well, neither had Lourdes, but guess life knows better than we do what we truly need to have a fulfilled life.

Getting up, I head to the kitchen, though without Beatrice it’s like walking into a

funeral home. Quiet as shit. Though she did take time, not sure how, and had made a bunch of food for Lourdes, me, and all the guys who are still on guard duty. Nothing from Dino or Lourdes's stalker, but that doesn't mean a thing. The damage at the condo of all of her personal items has really hit her hard, and now that she doesn't have the distraction of the girls, I think it's weighing down on her. I wish there was something I could do, but shit, my hands are tied too.

Hearing the alarm notice on my phone, I open the program and see Malachi, Vito, and Freddie walking up to the front door, so I turn and head that way. I open the front door and the three of them walk in, heads down. Shit, now what?

"Hey, everything okay?"

Malachi looks at me and nods.

"Yeah, all good, brother. We checked in with our families earlier today and, ya know, that homesickness takes over. My girl, Ruby, is out at my house in Cali, hanging with my parents and brothers. I miss her like crazy."

His two buddies are snickering behind him.

"As you can see, Jeremiah, our friend Malachi is whipped. And when you meet Kitty, she's a tiny little thing, so it's hilarious to see them together. He follows her around like a puppy."

I look at them confused.

"Okay, I'm lost. You said your girl is Ruby, then who is Kitty?"

Malachi lets out a breath then looks my way.

“Forgot you don’t know the bunch up in Montana. So I met Ruby a few years ago when she and a bunch of friends took a trip to Texas for a book signing. I fell hard but didn’t know at that time she was part of an all-female motorcycle club. And once in the club, the members each get a name from one or a bunch of their club sisters. They named her Kitty and don’t ask me why, but I refuse to call a grown woman Kitty, so while everyone in her life calls her Kitty, I refer to her as Ruby.”

Vito leans over the island that we are currently standing around, his eyes huge.

“Damn, Jeremiah, you need to meet these badass women. I mean their names alone: Tink, Shadow, Glory, Taz, and Vixen to name a few. And now two of the women have hooked their stars to two of our boys, so we are getting to know them pretty well. And what their club does is beyond astonishing. Anyway, we stopped by to check in on you since you’re all alone. We don’t have anything to do, so thought we could all maybe watch a movie, play some pool, or if you feel like losing some money, we could play poker. Which is your poison?”

As we try to decide on what to do with ourselves, it dawns on me that since Lourdes moved in, my life is really never boring. Yeah, I took on the role as her sentinel but she’s given me so much more in return. My life is starting to feel full, which was something I was truly missing. Not to mention these three guys are now becoming friends of mine, and I’m thrilled because they each bring something fresh to my life. Those are my thoughts as we make our way downstairs to hang out while I fill time ’til my woman comes home.

Watching Vito and Freddie fucking around with the dance game the girls love is beyond hilarious. Malachi and I are drinking beer, laughing our asses off because—got to say—neither of them has any rhythm to talk about. I mean, even Lottie can move better than them and she’s a little girl. It’s been a pretty fun afternoon with these three keeping me company. Malachi let it slip that Lourdes didn’t want to leave me home alone, so I could then get in my head. The only downer

is Nova called to tell me that Dino was found at the morgue. Poor son of a bitch pissed someone off because they beat him within an inch of his life and death, then strangled him, throwing him in the woods, covering his body with leaves. Two hikers found him early this morning, so guess he's not behind all the bullshit we are dealing with. Nova and a few of his men are working with the police and have been searching his place. I've not heard anything yet so when my phone rings, I assume it's him. When I pick it up though, the shiver that runs up my spine has me dropping my beer. That's when I hear the noise behind the voice and it's Danny.

“Fuck, Jeremiah, need you to get down here immediately. We got called out on a Class A fire, meaning like a typical home fire. When we got here it turned into a Class B and we had to hustle because it was burning fast. One minute we thought it was under control but then it reflashed and all hell broke loose. By the time we had it under control, not sure how, but we lost sight of Styx. Now don't fucking go there, dude. Everyone is doing the best they can. Cops are here, along with our entire department. Jeremiah, she's gone. Goddamn, I hate having to say it out loud. Behind the building, Paco and Rome found her gear under the back awning in the corner. All of her equipment was there and her cell phone. I don't know how this happened, she was one of the main hoses with Ash, while Stash was picking up the end. When the place blew, Ash went to talk to Cap but Stash is no slouch. It all made sense when we found Stash's head bashed in, right by Styx's equipment. He's on his way to the hospital, probably going to need either surgery or a whole helluva lot of stitches and staples. He can't remember anything except there were at least three guys who took our girl. And that she put up a hell of a fight.”

I can't breathe and my body is shaking. Don't remember Malachi grabbing my phone, though Freddie pushed a chair behind me and Vito made me sit, then he pushed my head between my knees. A bottle of water appeared in front of me, already opened. Before I can even put it to my mouth, I feel cold water running down my neck and face. I jolt back to see Vito holding the bottle, slowly pouring it over me.

“Dude, you needed something to bring ya back. Chill and tell us what whoever that was just said. And breathe, you look like you’re ready to pass the fuck out. I mean, you get any more ashen, gonna have to dial 9-1-1 ourselves. What’s up?”

As I try to explain what Danny just said, I’m watching Malachi, whose eyes are on me but they are blank. When he disconnects, he immediately tells us to get our asses up, we are outta here. Before we go, I move to the locked door next to the laundry room. I put my hand on it and you can hear the locks disengage. When the door opens, I hear them all let out air. The room has shelves and hooks and just about every space is covered in guns, along with ammunition. Before I can walk in, Malachi moves in front of me.

“Jeremiah, think first. My vehicle has a hidden compartment that is packed with all kinds of weapons. Take one or two that you feel comfortable with, but you will not be needing a gun. Your job is to help find Styx and then take care of her. You hear me? Don’t think you’re going to be a fucking hero because she’s going to need you alive and breathing. Let’s go.”

As we head out, I look at my house and realize without the girls and especially Lourdes, this is just a house, not a home. The few things she’s brought here have warmed it up and made it our home. Fuck, I should’ve told her how I feel about her and not dicked around about where we are heading. I was so fucking worried about how she probably would have freaked out, so I was waiting and trying to show her how good we are together. Son of a fucking bitch did I mess up. Now, goddamn it, my brain won’t even go down that road because if something happens to her, it will destroy me for the rest of my miserable life. For Christ’s sake, I can’t do this.

Vito is rushing toward Malachi’s vehicle and pushing me in the back. Freddie jumps in the front and off we go. The entire time I sit quietly and say nothing. All I can do is try to pray, which is a joke because I can’t remember the last time I prayed. But I will every single day of the rest of my life, as long as she’s okay. I’d give anything, or

more specifically, everything I have to guarantee that. I hope whoever is in charge of everything can not only hear me but make my prayers happen and return Lourdes to me.

By the time we get to the scene, the place is jumping with so many people. I see Lourdes's crew, they look devastated. Their chief, Cap, is trying to hold them together, but it ain't working. Then I see Nova and his crew. Mayhem is literally holding Lil Man up and it dawns on me, I'm not the only one suffering. These people have known her so much longer than I have, they are her family. Danny walks toward the car, opening the door, pulling me out and into his arms. That's when I totally fucking lose it. No one approaches us, they just let me have a moment to break down and let all my fears out. Danny is whispering shit to me, but I'm not even listening. My heart feels like it is going to bounce out of my chest and my ears are ringing. After a few minutes, I pull away to see Danny's eyes and just seeing them almost brings me to my knees. This man went through hell for Claire, and now he's going down that same path with his sister, Styx. That thought hasn't even left my mind when two huge arms surround me from behind and pick me up. I know before I turn that Lil Man is behind me. When he leans down, I brace.

"We're gonna find her, Jeremiah. We have too. And if they hurt her, I'll personally kill each and every one, I promise you that. Come on, Nova set up an area, he's got his people going through cameras and shit."

He puts me down and grabs my shoulder, keeping me close. I should have never judged him or any of Lourdes's crew because I can see how much they love her.

"How's Stash?"

"Not sure, he started convulsing when they got him on the stretcher. One minute he was trying to talk, the next he was having some kind of a seizure, blood coming out of his nose. They think he might have a hematoma or a brain bleed. Claire and Ash's

wife are going to meet at the emergency room to be there for him. All we can do is wait and pray he's okay. From what I saw, he put up a hell of a fight. They almost beat him to death. These are some real jagoffs, for sure, Jeremiah."

My head falls and I feel like I'm going to lose my mind when I hear Nova's voice, void of all emotion.

"Jeremiah, head up, eyes to me. You told me when Styx's stalker got real that you were going to be her protector. Well, brother, now is the time for you to step up to the plate. I need you to push everything else out of your head and truly be Lourdes's Sentinel because she's going to fuckin' need it when we get her back. Now, let's see if anyone was able to see something on the doorbell cameras or the city overheads. Let's go."

Following Nova, he's right. Now is not the time to let emotions rule me, I have to do everything and anything to bring Lourdes back. Don't have any other option.

LOURDES

‘Styx’

Something is very wrong. Did I get hurt at the Class A fire? I don’t remember if I did. But wait, Stash and I were together and then... what is wrong with my head? I try to grab my head with my hands, and I can’t move them. My God, my hands are tied to something above my head. When I shift, I can feel some kind of mattress under me. Oh shit, I’m fucked. Why me, and where did they take me? My eyes feel like they are glued together. So a massive headache, which probably is why my eyes are sticky, the blood is drying or dried across my face. As I struggle to open my eyes, I feel a breeze over my body at the exact same time I realize I’m not in my gear, which means someone took it off of me. Immediately, I try to take a minute to see if I am hurt anywhere else. My feet are also tied, though not to whatever my hands are, my feet are bound together. First mistake. My eyes finally open and I see I’m in the dark. It’s dank and damp, so probably in a basement. It feels like I’m lying down on some kind of bed with something, maybe a metal headboard, to tie my hands to. I’m trying not to think about what I’m lying on or what’s on it because if I concentrate on that I’ll drive myself batshit crazy.

It smells like a basement that has probably flooded because it smells musty and moldy. Don’t see any light, so either a room in the basement or no windows in this area. The air is chilly, as basements are. Out of the blue, my mind seems to open up and a memory comes to the forefront. Oh my God, Stash. They beat the ever-lovin’ fuck out of him. He was not moving, if I remember correctly. I take a second to send

a prayer out to the universe that my fire brother pulls through. My next thought is, what the hell am I going to do? At that moment, it dawns on me that I should have been true and real with Jeremiah. Fuck, if I don't make it out of this, he'll never know what he means to me. I love him. And I stupidly didn't share how much he's done for me during our time together. Thank God we got the girls out of here. Though with the thoughts of Jeremiah and the girls I feel my eyes filling up, though I fight to keep it under control. Never let the enemy see your weaknesses.

I must have dozed off because the sudden loud noises above me startle me. I can hear voices talking loudly and what sounds like chairs being moved. I stretch my body and try to move my hands and feet, so if I get the chance, they aren't numb and useless. As I'm moving, that's when my bladder makes itself known. Shit, I have to pee, but I'm going to try and ignore it for now because I sure the fuck don't want to be lying in my own pee. I can feel my anxiety rising as my heart is starting to beat faster and faster. I close my eyes and imagine I'm in Jeremiah's arms in our bed. The way he would spoon me made me feel safe, and I'd kill to feel that way right now. Knowing that until everyone can find me, I have to depend on myself and my skills. Breathe in, hold, then slowly let it out. I have no clue how long I do the breathing thing, but it helps to calm me down enough so I can be present and take in my surroundings. I'm straining my ears to try and make out all their sounds coming down to me. When I hear the voices getting closer to me, panic jumps right into my chest. Fuck, now what? Do I fake sleep or try and stare down whoever walks through the door? I have no idea, so I'm back to trying to keep myself from losing it. When I hear a lock turn, it dawns on me, this is it. Whoever walks in has to be my stalker. That thought scares the fuck out of me because that means I'll be coming face-to-face with a person who hates me. The why doesn't matter anymore because they have the upper hand at the moment.

The door swings open and I'm blinded by the sudden bright light. I close my eyes for a quick second then blink to try and get accustomed to the light. By the time I can focus, I can see at least two people standing right inside of the open door. One looks

to be a larger person, while the other is either a woman, kid, or small guy. When they start to walk toward me, I feel the hair on the back of my neck standing up. Oh no...no way...it can't be. But as they get closer, I can see that, yeah, it is them. It's Doug and some teenager, though I don't recognize him. The family of the woman we lost in a questionable fire a couple of years ago. Doug blamed me specifically because his wife, Amber, was trapped in the back bedroom which was blocked with the beam from the ceiling. I couldn't lift it by myself, so by the time Lil Man, Stash, and Danny made their way to me and we moved the beam and broke down the door, Amber was unconscious on the floor with a towel over her face. We think she succumbed to smoke inhalation. She survived for almost a week then passed. Doug blamed Engine 23 for her death. He sued the fire department and when that failed, he turned around and tried to sue me. Not just me, but also Lil Man, Stash, and Danny. He told me to my face that women should not be allowed in this profession and because of me trying to prove myself, I killed his wife. Everyone at the firehouse supported me and testified on my behalf. In the end, Doug lost and he promised, no threatened, me that one day I'd pay. Well, guess the day has arrived.

"Awe, look, Junior, the fire bitch is awake. Now the fun can start, son."

My eyes shift to Junior and his face tells me everything. This isn't his gig and his dad has dragged him into it. Poor kid, but I have to keep my mind clear because this guy is totally deranged and crazy.

"Surprised to see me, Styx? Gotta say, that is a stupid name, especially for a woman. So guess you didn't expect to see me, did you? Thought I'd forget and let it go? Well, not happening. When Amber died so did my free ride and broodmare. She was the one who worked, cleaned the house, shopped, and cooked. Not to mention she took care of my needs, no matter what. Even if it included making sure my friends were happy. We were working on having another kid, so you ruined my entire life. Now I'm here for my payback. My son is here so he can see how to really treat a woman. None of this modern equal rights bullshit. A real man doesn't believe in that crap. He

needs to learn now so when he's looking to find his own broodmare, I mean wife, he gets the best out there. Oh, someone else is here, but she's cleaning up; I got her a little dirty."

That demented laugh of his sends chills down my spine. I'm totally fucked. This man is messed up in the head and nothing I say is going to change it. And that poor kid will be scarred for life, if he isn't already. Besides being scared and confused. Poor Junior, not a way to grow up, for sure. So deep in thought, I scream when someone cracks me across the face.

"Untie her, son, now. And you, bitch, pay attention. I don't want to kill you too fast, but won't hesitate if I have to. Now once Junior removes the ropes, sit nicely on the side of the bed. Just so you know my plans, you will be staying with me for a bit, not here, we're moving soon. Once I've had my fill, got a friend who is going to take you off my hands for a pretty price, as long as I don't mangle your face up. Also, I will be reaching out to that rich prick you've been fucking for ransom. Yeah, that's right, I'm double-dipping. He won't miss a few million, will he? And where you're going and after your new 'daddy' is done with you, the only thing you'll wish for is death, not to come back to your fuck buddy. That I can promise. So we are gonna get started right away. Junior, once you untie her, leave us for about a half hour, then come on back in."

Now I'm fucking petrified. I can't be left alone with him because his intentions are all over his face. As the kid is untying me, the asshole is unbuckling his belt. I mean, if he was going to beat me with it okay, but guessing he's going down another road. And if he puts his hands on me, I'll kill myself because I could never face Jeremiah ever again. I look to Junior to see his hands shaking, but he shifts so the old man can't see his face. He looks directly at me and mouths, "We got you."

Not sure who we is, and don't know the plan, but don't have a choice so I mouth, "Please be careful."

When the door opens again, my head jerks to see who it is, and a girl probably around Junior's age walks in, head facing down. She's in a cotton T-shirt dress that has seen better days and is barefoot. Her arms look to have burns up and down them, not sure, can't see but might be like cigarette burns.

"Awe, lookee here, my baby girl finally made her way down. Why so sad, sweetie, you'll always be Daddy's little girl, you know that. She's gotta pay for what she did to Amber."

I hear an intake of breath then to my utter shock, a soft voice replies, "Daddy, she didn't kill Amber, you did. Remember, you started the fire and piled all that stuff in the way to her bedroom. Right, Junior? You told all of us kids that she was useless because she was fat and probably infertile, so you wanted her gone. Why are you blaming that woman and more importantly, why is she here?"

Before anyone can say a single word, Doug flies toward the door, grabbing the girl by the hair, swinging her around, and throwing her to the ground. Her dress shifts and I can see that she has no underwear on. Worse, I can see recent bite marks up and down her thighs. I feel something dark and when I look up, Junior is staring at the bite marks.

"Dad, you touched her again, didn't you? With all the whores, junkies, and hitchhikers you put in that shack in the back, why do you need to put your hands on her?"

Doug shifts and the evil coming out of his eyes has me take a deep breath. Even Junior shifts, which Doug sees and smirks.

"Son, she ain't yours, remember that. I brought her to us, and I'll do whatever the goddamn hell I want with her. If I want to snap her scrawny neck, I will. I've told you this time and time again. Don't fall for the first whore who puts your dick in their

mouth. They are all evil, never forget that.”

Doug walks toward the bed and Junior moves to the young woman on the floor. When he helps her up and pushes her hair behind her ears, I can’t believe my eyes. One side of her face is stunning while the other side is brutally disfigured. Her eyes find mine and she stares right at me, no, through me. I can feel her pain just from that look. Junior puts his fingers on her chin and shifts her to look at him.

“You okay, Genie?”

She doesn’t speak but tries to lower her head, but he won’t let her.

“Need your words.”

“Yeah, Junior, I’m fine. Thank you.”

Doug stops before he reaches me and turns toward the two kids.

“Awe, ain’t that sweet? Enough of that shit, both of you wait outside. NOW.”

My body is going into shock, I can feel it. Can’t let this man touch me. All I can do is pray that when I try to protect myself he either kills me instantly, or I’m unconscious. I wait ’til he’s closer, then I lean back and flip my feet up and into his ball sack as hard as I can. The noise he makes sounds like an injured animal, but I don’t take time to care. Jumping up the pins and needles in my legs cause me alarm, but I push through it. Jumping on his chest, using my numb hands, I start to wail on his head. Every couple of seconds I reach behind me and squeeze his junk. When I feel something poke me in the back of the head I stop, breathing heavily. Turning, it’s the girl Genie with a gun in her hands, eyes dead.

“Get off of him. Come on, move, we don’t have a lot of time.”

I shift and fall next to Doug on the concrete floor, my eyes staying on Genie. She hacks up something and spits it at him. He's trying to shake off my beating, but when she puts her bare foot between his legs he starts screaming threats at her.

“Better think twice, girl, because you do it, you'll be in the box for a month with only water and bread. Even that asshole over there won't be able to save you this time 'cause he'll be planted in the ground. Conspiring against me, you two dimwitted kids. Believe me, there have been a lot smarter bastards who thought they could take me down. Even Amber, that's why I started the fire. She wanted a divorce, couldn't stand for me to touch her anymore. So I told her I wouldn't, but then I had my friends come by and take care of her in front of me. She begged me to stop; that she was sorry. I don't care 'cause after they got their filthy hands on her, I sure the fuck didn't want her back especially in my bed.”

My mind is split, I can't keep up. Why then is he blaming me when he wanted her dead? Guess you can't figure out crazy. I see Genie look at me then she turned back to Junior with a sad smile. Knowing something was about to happen, I try to get up, but my legs are still mostly asleep so I fall back on my ass. Genie raises the gun at Doug.

“You need to hear this before I do this. I never liked your hands, mouth, or limp dick anywhere near me, old man. I put up with it because you left the other kids alone. You turn my stomach, the stench of you, the fumbling when your dick won't get hard or stay hard. The pills you were taking for that. I've watched you hurt, rape, and torture little kids, Doug, and couldn't do a thing. Well, I've waited and watched for any opportunity and I have it now. Don't snivel, won't work on me. You taught me well on how to control my emotions and not let what I see bother me or show on my face. That is what you liked, that no matter what you did to me I didn't cry or show it hurt. Even when you did this.”

She's pointing at her face and I look at the monster sitting next to me on the floor.

My God, what makes someone like him such a horrible human being? My head is turned, looking at him, and his eyes get huge right before I hear a loud bang that has my ears ringing. Doug goes completely white before he starts to literally howl. I know what I'm going to see before I look, though I can't stop my head from turning. His hands are covering his junk while blood is pouring out between his fingers. Looking up, Genie is holding the gun in her tiny shaking hands. Well, until Junior walks up behind her and takes it away from her.

"Miss, you might want to move."

This is what Junior says to me. Oh shit, no, can't let them ruin their lives on this piece of shit.

"Hey, look at me. Don't do something that is going to mess up the rest of your lives. He isn't worth it. I promise that I'll help both of you. My boyfriend will too. I'm not lying."

"Yeah, we know, Styx, both of us have been watching you with Doug. Your man seems really nice, and I could see how much he loves you," Genie says that in an awed whisper.

Junior bends to her, whispering in her ear. Her cheeks turn a pretty pink, even the scarred side, and she leans into him for a brief minute. When he lifts up, she moves around him and comes toward me, her hand held out to help me up. I grab it and between the two of us I get up on my feet, wobbling a bit. As soon as I'm up though, a second loud bang rings out and I put my hands over my ears, feeling something wet. Shit, think one or both of my eardrums shattered.

When it hits me what the noise was, I look down to see Doug doesn't have a face any longer. Junior bends down going through Doug's pockets, then stands up, handing me a cell phone.

“Styx, call your man. Neither of us are going anywhere, we need to get help for the rest of the kids on the farm. And in this neighborhood gunshots mean nothing. Let’s go upstairs, away from this shit.”

He reaches for my hand at the same time Genie starts to shake. She moves closer to Doug and starts screaming, swearing, and sobbing while kicking his dead body. Junior tries to calm her down, but she pushes away from him and continues kicking and swearing. I reach for her and one of her hands swings and hits my face. Instantly, she stops and looks at me, shock on her face.

“Oh my God, Styx, did I hurt you?”

She’s not only in shock but her mind is trying to process the end of this traumatic situation. I nod while pulling her close. She wraps her arms around me and lets it all out. She gives me so much of her weight, I lean back right into Junior. The three of us stand like this for what seems hours but is probably just minutes. When Junior pulls back, he waves the phone in my face.

“Call Jeremiah, Lourdes. It’s over for all of us. Genie and I will pay for our part in it, but you are free.”

With those words I start to bawl, when I can feel the weight of everything start to lift from my shoulders. Taking the phone, I look at the number pad, realizing I don’t have Jeremiah’s number memorized it’s in my cell phone. Racking my brain, one number keeps coming to the forefront so I push in the digits and wait, hoping he picks up.

“Hello.”

“Lil Man, it’s Styx, please come get me. I want to go home.”

20

JEREMIAH

‘Miah’

Watching Lil Man, I know something is about to happen just by the emotions running across his face. He’s nodding like the person on the other end can see his actions.

“Give me an address.”

That is all he says, and I’m ready to strangle him when Nova grabs my shoulders, holding me back.

“Wait, Jeremiah.”

That’s all he says, but it brings me back from the dark side. It’s not Lil Man’s fault this shit is happening. I mean, for Christ’s sake, Stash is literally fighting for his life at the moment because he was trying to protect Styx. That thought and why I use her nickname when thinking about her and her firehouse family tells me that Styx is theirs and Lourdes is mine. So Engine 23 and Truck 315 is her work family, and me and the girls—fingers crossed—are her forever family.

“Yeah, okay, I hear you. I said I hear you, calm the fuck down. Feels like I’m in the middle of a damn heart attack. See you soon. Hey, I love you.”

Everyone’s heads jerk up in time to see Lil Man end the call but he says not a word,

just stares at his phone. When he lifts his head, I hear the gasps around me as I see the wet rolling down his face. Oh my God, if the big guy is losing it then it can't be good news. My legs give out and I hear Nova screaming for Mayhem. Between the two of them, they hold me up under my arms as I continue to watch every move Lil Man makes, including when he walks toward me and pulls me to him, wrapping those huge as fuck arms around me. I still can feel both Mayhem's and Nova's hands on my back. I can't, please don't tell me she's dead. That will be the end of me for sure. People are running toward us and I can see Malachi, Vito, and Freddie, concern all over their faces. Most of Lourdes's work family are making their way toward us also.

Lil Man leans down, I'm guessing to whisper in my ear, but I don't want to hear his words. Well, until he holds on to me like a vise and tells me to settle in a voice filled with emotion. Time stands still and I can hear someone breathing hard, it takes a second or two to realize it's me.

"That call, Jeremiah, was, damn, don't know if I can get the words out. Give me a second, not kidding, might be having a fucking heart attack. Okay, man up, big man. That call was Styx."

Everyone is looking at each other confused. Did Lil Man mean about Styx? Maybe he is having a coronary event. I look up at him and he nods. Then he shocks the ever-lovin' shit out of me.

"No, I mean it. That was Styx calling, telling us to come get her."

I can't think because of all the yelling, screaming, and crying going on. Well, until Mayhem whistles, shutting everyone up.

"What the fuck does that mean, Lil Man?"

"Dude, I have no idea. All she told me was it's over and she needs us to come and get

her. So if we want answers, let's go and pick your woman up."

In less than a minute or two, I'm back in the vehicle with Malachi, Vito, and Freddie, while the remaining Engine 23 company are in their truck—lights and sirens blasting—and Nova with his team are behind us. Nova was going to call the detective on the case as the cops at the scene had to remain there. I can't sit still; every limb is shaking. Well, at least she's alive, that's a start. Right here, sitting in the back seat with Malachi, I make a promise to myself that no matter what happens, it doesn't matter because she'll be okay. I'll find the best doctors and therapists to get her back to herself. It takes us about twenty-five minutes to arrive. When I look around, the sight before me tells me this is a very rough side of town, judging by the abandoned buildings and cars on the grass and in the driveways, rusting and rotting away. A few houses look like someone lives in them, but my head tells me they probably shouldn't, as every house on the block appears to be one hard wind away from collapsing on itself. As we go farther down the street, I can see three people sitting on the concrete steps of a pretty dilapidated house. When I get closer, I tell Vito to stop and let me out. When he slams on the brakes, turning to ask me why, I jump out and start running toward the person wrapped in a bedsheet. Because that person is Lourdes. When she sees me, immediately tears are in her eyes and she struggles to stand, but the two kids help her to her feet.

When I reach her, my hands go to her face. I can see one cheek is already starting to bruise and she looks a mess, but never has she looked so beautiful. I pull her close, feeling my emotions taking over. All I can get out is three words.

"I love you."

She literally collapses into me, softly crying. I glance at the two people standing on either side of her and don't recognize either of them. They are both probably in their late teens or early twenties and both are covered in blood and whatever else. The girl's face looks to be mangled, but her eyes are soft as she takes in the two of us. The

young man grabs her hand and she lets him, turning to him with a stunning smile, her eyes shining at him. Everyone is running toward us so I gently move and sit down on the stairs, putting Lourdes on my lap. She burrows into me as close as she possibly can.

She lifts her head to see what all the commotion is about. When everyone is around us waiting, she looks around then glances down to see the two kids sitting below us together. She smiles at them softly then looks to me, hand on my face.

“I waited way too long to say it, but I love you too, Jeremiah.”

Sniffles come from below us and I see the girl wiping her face. Lourdes sees her doing it and reaches down, patting her on the head. Then she looks up again and tells it like it is.

“I’m only going to tell this story once, so let’s wait ’til the cops get here. In the meanwhile, I’d like to introduce all of you to my two new friends. This is Genie and Junior. And they not only saved my life but my sanity too.”

I’ve had my eyes on Lourdes since I jumped out of Malachi’s vehicle and ran to her. Never in my entire life have I met a stronger person, ever. With everything she’s been through, she’s more concerned about the two kids. And sitting here next to Lourdes in the largest conference room the hospital has available, I’m listening as she is telling the story of how she met Doug and what happened on that fire call a few years back. From what she’s saying, Danny, Paco, and Cap all remember it and agree with what she is relaying. They actually worked with the fire department and rules office to adjust their procedures when it came to people who couldn’t fit on the regular equipment. Lourdes explains the real reason Amber couldn’t be moved wasn’t just because of the beam, it was that Engine 23 didn’t have the equipment to get her out of there. Lourdes said it took five firefighters to literally drag her through the house to the only stretcher they had. When one of the probies went and asked Doug, his

response was, “Why bother with her, she’s useless.” Then he proceeded to try and flirt with some woman who was standing in front of their home. As I listen to her talk, I can’t believe a man would let his wife burn to death and not lift a hand to try and help her regardless of looks, size or ability to have a child.

I compare poor Amber’s story to Lourdes. When everyone heard about her being taken, I can’t even comprehend how many people showed up from every walk of life to help find her. Even some of her rescues came out to help, bringing food or offering to do whatever in the background. That goes to show how much people appreciate her for what she does. I can tell this is taking a toll on her so I stop her, telling the cops she’s done for today, as are the two kids. When they start to argue, I bring up she did this without a lawyer and if they want her to continue helping them, then let Lourdes get some rest. The doctors said she has a grade 3 concussion and they are keeping her for the night, even though she wants to leave because as much as she can remember, she passed out for at least fifteen minutes to maybe a half hour. All three are warned by the detectives not to leave the state because, of course, there is a dead body and they have to investigate for it being either self-defense or a level of murder. Genie came forward and said she was the one to shoot Doug in his junk. Just thinking of it, I want to lean forward and protect my own shit between my legs. I’m thinking, damn, that had to hurt like a total bitch. And he felt that pain until the bullet to the face. I spoke to the detective and he told me with all that Genie did to protect the other children on that farm from Doug, the detective found no reason for his report not to document it as self-defense from sexual assault. Genie was probably a little on the insane spectrum at that moment. Listening to the detective, it dawns on me that it sounds like the poor girl, Genie, had the weight of the world on her shoulders. I will do whatever to help her through this and get her to the other side. When I stand to push the wheelchair Lourdes is in to her room, both Genie and Junior stand ready to follow us. Can’t believe I’m thinking this, but they are cute in one way, which is the way they want to be where Lourdes is. However, we need to keep an eye on them because it can scare someone when they realize they’re free, and then they might cling to her in an unhealthy way. I really worry about Genie because of what Doug

has done to her. Both Nova and Mayhem told me they were reaching out to the Devil's Handmaidens MC because they deal with this exact situation, and they will have much better resources than we can ever get here. When I asked if they thought Junior needed to go too, Mayhem shocked the shit out of me.

“Jeremiah, that’s a definite yes. He’s showing definite signs of PTSD. The only thing holding him together is that young woman. If you separate them, you could destroy them both. Right now, I would do everything you can to keep them together, even if it will break Styx’s heart to send them to Montana or even to New Mexico. It’s for the best and, eventually, Styx will get it and they can always come back once they are healthy. Now not sure about you, but I need to get some much-needed sleep. Tomorrow is going to be a full day, trying to find that ranch the motherfucker has more kids at. Both Junior and Genie offered to try and help us find them. Even the detective told us to hold off ’til we have daylight. Give Styx a kiss, see you tomorrow.”

I watch him leave when it hits me how very lucky I am to have these people in my life. I’ll never take it for granted.

After we get back to Lourdes’s room, the nurse helps her get ready for bed. I pull the chair over closer to her and reach for her hand, but she throws the blankets back and pats the bed.

“I want to fall asleep in your arms, Miah. It was you who gave me the strength not to give up, especially when I finally found out who my stalker was and why. Where are Genie and Junior?”

“Danny took them back with him. They are going to be spending the night in Claire’s tiny home. No, don’t worry, Danny and Claire, along with the twins, are going to stay too. When Herb made it into a rental, they added on to it so it’s now a three-bedroom, two-bath cabin. Danny, Claire, and the twins will sleep in one room and both Genie

and Junior will get their own room on separate floors. That was Danny's decision. So don't worry, they have a chaperone/big brother watching over them."

First, I take off my shoes then my heavy sweatshirt, leaving on my T-shirt. I drop my jeans just as the door swings open and the night nurse walks in. She looks at Lourdes then me and the covers thrown back, then her head swings back to me.

"All I'm going to say is that sleeping in that bed with her is not permitted, but if at any time during the night I hear moaning, skin slapping, or cries of Oh God, Oh God with a follow-up of Yes!!!! I will come into this room and drag you out by your ears, buck-ass naked, and throw you into the security room, and I'll let them decide what to do with you. Now, I'm here to take this young lady's vitals. And just want to throw out there, since my husband passed away, I've not been with anyone but, young man, you look like a tasty treat standing there in those boxer briefs, so I suggest you go sit on that love seat and cover up with your sweatshirt until I finish because I don't want to embarrass myself or you."

By the time the nurse is done talking, Lourdes is doubled up, laughing hysterically. I kind of glare at her, which has her snorting from laughing so hard. I glance at the nurse, who has her one eyebrow raised up at me and when I see her name tag, I can't help but smile. Nurse Agnes is grinning at me when I look back up at her, which prompts me to go sit on the love seat and cover up with my sweatshirt. When's she done and Lourdes has fresh water and a snack of cookies, Agnes walks to the door then turns, and flips me some cookies too before she rocks my world.

"Jeremiah, right? Let me tell you something, J, if I was just say—ten or fifteen years younger—you wouldn't need to look at that one over there because I'd be rocking your world every single night. And that perfect derrière of yours would have my nail marks to prove it. Now, if you report me, I'll deny everything and tell my supervisor you were trying to sneak into Lourdes's bed. When I called you on it, you offered me some cash, which also said no to, so you're trying to get me in trouble."

My mouth drops open then I can't help but chuckle. Then I think I shock good old Agnes.

“If you ever decide to switch jobs, reach out to me, Agnes, because I'd find you something immediately. Damn, you can think on your feet. Have a good evening, Nurse Agnes.”

She winks then walks out, pulling the door closed. I stand, make my way back to the bed, and lie gently next to Lourdes, who as soon as I'm settled turns to me, head on my chest, hand across my abdominals. Just the feel of her instantly calms me down. Neither of us says a word, there will be plenty of time for us to talk. Right now, we need to just be in each other's presence. She falls asleep first and I'm not far behind her, but my last thought is I hope I can do this for the next fifty years or so.

21

LOURDES

‘Styx’

Damn, I can't believe all that has happened. This is my thought as we wait for the girls to get back from The Refuge. We're all waiting at the private airport, and I'm a bit nervous because what if they don't want to stay with us anymore? That will devastate me, for sure. Between the headaches and ringing in my ears, this concussion has been a bitch. I'm still out of work as Cap said don't bother coming back until I have a clean bill of health. So I've been spending time with Genie and Junior. Mayhem came by the other day to talk to all of us. He explained about the rescue work the female motorcycle club does in Montana and let both of the kids know they have an open invite to come out and see if it would be something to help them process, then move forward and start their adult lives responsibly. They both seem open to it, but wanted to meet the girls first and make sure I was okay. So here we are.

Genie is talking to Claire while they both watch the twins running around and away from Junior. He is such a good kid, my heart breaks for him. He hasn't shared a lot except that he once had a family but doesn't anymore. He did go into details about how he came to be "owned" by Doug. He broke down when he said the first man who had him and his siblings sold him to Doug. And in the beginning, it was just the two of them. Then Doug started picking up women and bringing them home to rape them over and over before he'd kill them. Junior said that broke him because he couldn't help them. Then he told us how this nightmare took a turn for the worse.

Doug couldn't find a woman to kidnap, so he was drinking heavily. One night he came into Junior's room and beat him to an inch of his life, and when Junior was defenseless, Doug raped him. That became the normal if Doug couldn't get a woman. Then he started collecting kids and when at the ranch got his kicks there. Junior's words not mine. We did find the ranch or farm don't exactly know the difference, and yeah, there were a few men guarding the kids that were left. They are all being treated and if they don't have family, they will be given the option of the ranch in Montana or The Refuge in New Mexico.

Hearing the helicopter noise, I bring my thoughts back to the here and now. Nova walks to the exit door, telling us to wait inside. A few minutes go by then both Mustang and Coma get out of the helicopter and are standing next to Nova waiting. I look to Jeremiah because I'm starting to get worried but he leans down, giving me a kiss on my forehead, telling me to relax. For some reason that pisses me off, but I hold it in. After about five or so minutes we hear voices. Then Coma is opening the doors and three young girls with huge smiles on their faces jump down, look around, then run directly to us, hugging us, and all talking at once. When I look at Jeremiah, he has the most adorable smile on his face. Yeah, if we can, they are ours.

When I hear a loud gasp, my head jerks down to see Ellie staring at Junior, who for some reason is pale, like he's seen a ghost. Ellie lets go of Jeremiah and starts shaking her head, then she scream-talks.

"Is it really you, Matthew? Where's Luke at?"

Junior starts to walk toward the girls and everyone can feel the weird vibe, so some of the guys start to follow Junior. When he reaches Ellie, tears suddenly start to fall down his cheeks.

"Ellie, is it really you? Holy shit, is that Wren and Lottie too? I can't believe this; how did this happen?"

Jeremiah's head is like someone watching a tennis match. Then he asks the question everyone wants to ask.

“Junior, how do you know the girls?”

Junior is shaking his head. Then Ellie drops the bomb on all of us.

“Jeremiah, that's our brother, Matthew.”

Instantly I feel dizzy and nauseated. I reach back for anyone and, thank God, someone is there to hang on to me. And whoever it is does just that, keeps me standing as one by one the girls go to Matthew and try to hug him. I can see the struggle but he handles it quite well, until Wren tries to get too close. Then all holy hell breaks out when Wren is monkey crawling up Junior and he pushes on her to get down, but instead she falls down, lands on her ass, and breaks out crying.

Before we know it, what looks to me like an angry crowd is coming toward us, but these dudes have guns in their hands. Got to stop this before someone gets hurt. Those are my exact thoughts when Lottie stands in front of Junior and screams at the crowd.

“Stop it, before you hurt our brother, who we just found. Please don't hurt Matthew.”

That little girl will never know the power her voice had on an angry crowd.

The same bunch of people who not that long ago had Junior's back were ready to put him down for letting little Wren fall. Now a young girl called them to the curb and it has them second-guessing their decisions, which gives Junior time to fall to his knees and gently pick his baby sister up while crying.

“Oh, Wrenny, I'm so very sorry. Please forgive your clumsy big brother.”

She wraps her tiny arms around his neck and together they both cry the beginning of their first healing tears. You could have heard a pin drop it is so quiet with everyone watching the two of them, then the other two sisters walk over. That right there is what life is truly about. Not sure how much more my heart can take.

What a phenomenal day. Once things settled down between the kids, we made our way back home. It still boggles my mind that Jeremiah didn't ask or say a word, he just paid a company to pack up and move my condo to his house, well, as he said earlier, to our house. Right now, we are in the process of blending our homes into one. It seems since we both said I love you everything else seems to just be falling into place. I came home from the hospital to see some of my personal items spread out throughout the house. And since I ended up staying in the hospital for two and a half days, due to passing out on the morning I was supposed to leave, and then later that day I got nauseated and had some vomiting. So when I saw a beautiful bookcase up in the great room filled with both my and Jeremiah's books and knickknacks, I totally lost it. When everyone was settled and Beatrice was busy getting some food together, Jeremiah helped me to our bedroom, telling me I needed to rest.

After taking off my clothes and putting on one of Miah's sweatshirts and a pair of my pajama bottoms, I'm cuddled up in bed, watching him make sure I have everything I need. My bedside table has my phone, tablet, big travel mug with ice water, and some crackers. I know he is supposed to be on a Zoom call, so I literally tell him, "I'm fine, get on your call now." Once he's gone, I lie back and let my mind run through the last couple of days. I'm going through everything when I hear a soft knock on the door. Softly I tell whoever is there to come on in. Seeing Genie, I smile at her, patting the bed. I see her flip her shoes off and come around the other side of the bed, coming to lie next to me. It's apparent she has something troubling her, so I don't say a word, giving her some time to talk about whatever is bothering her.

"Styx, what do I do now? Since he took me Doug made all of the decisions; not sure I know how to do that on my behalf. I've been racking my brain to figure out where to

go or do. I can't stay here indefinitely, since I have no family that I know of. When you look at it, I'm a homeless victim with nothing or no one."

"Hey, sweetie, what are Jeremiah and I? You are welcome to stay here as long as you want. I know Mayhem was talking to some friends, who might be able to help you process everything, the choice is definitely yours."

She starts to talk about Mayhem's friends and how she might want to go to learn how to work through all the stuff running through her head, but she's afraid and is worried that once they look at her messed-up face they'll tell her to go home. I laugh because Mayhem shared some things about the women in that club.

"Genie, all those women have gone through similar, if not worse, and yeah, there are worse things than what you went through, even if it's hard to believe. I know one had twins and the person holding her sold her babies. Another one was human trafficked and sold to multiple people. Another ran away from her family to protect them. Don't judge until you do this Zoom call with them. When is it?"

"Supposed to be tomorrow morning, if I want. Like I said, I'm scared. Would you maybe be able to sit in on it with me?"

"Of course, honey. Already told you whatever you need, I'm there."

I see her yawn and feel the same.

"Hey, Genie, want to take a nap? Not sure about you, but I'm exhausted."

She reaches over and gives me an awkward hug.

"Thanks, Styx, means a lot that both you and Jeremiah have been so nice that you'll help a perfect stranger."

“Genie, you’re not a stranger any longer. You are part of our extended family, never forget that.”

She breaks down so I pull her close and let her vent. When she’s finally cried out all of her anguish, she falls into a deep sleep. Poor kid , I think. I need to talk to Jeremiah to see if there is a plastic surgeon who might be able to help Genie with the scarring on her face. I can tell how self-conscious she is. Those are my last thoughts before my eyes close and, not even five minutes later, I join Genie in the land of dreams.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:08 am

‘Styx’

I’m sitting at the firehouse bullshitting with the guys, waiting for our shift to finally be over.

Our lives have kind of fallen in place. Jeremiah and I are stronger than ever. We’ve gotten into a routine and with all that life continues to throw at us, we have to stay on our toes.

I’m daydreaming about all that’s happened since that day at the airport when Junior was reconnected with his three sisters, one of the best things to come out of that dark time. Junior and Genie, after they were cleared of the murder of Doug which the judge called extenuating circumstances and recommended counseling for both of them, decided to take Mayhem up on his connection to the club up in Montana. I get weekly, if not daily, calls from Genie to let me know what’s been going on and how she’s progressing. They both are in intensive therapy and are employed part time on the ranch they are living on.

Genie told me one day not too long ago, even though she and Junior—or as we are all trying to call him his given name of Matthew or Matt—have feelings for each other, they’ve decided to wait to start a romantic relationship.

I guess their therapist, the Devil’s Handmaidens, and the Enforcers MC have some members who’ve taken the kids under their wings. Genie can’t say enough about Shadow, though when she sent me a photo of the woman I literally ran into Jeremiah’s office and screamed at him to get the kids back home. When I show him the photo, he laughed saying something about what I’ve told the girls, you know,

don't judge a book by its cover. And damn is that true because during one of our weekly Zoom calls Shadow showed up, introducing herself, telling the two of us not to worry about Genie and Matthew.

I thought that was kind of her and she said that she laughed, telling me never to tell anyone that. So those two are definitely on the road to recovery.

The three girls still live with us and we are officially foster parents. Jeremiah and I are in the process of adopting the three cuties, though they don't know because if for some reason it doesn't go through, we don't want to disappoint them. They are so embedded in my heart; I couldn't love them more if they were my own. Jeremiah has made it his mission to find the children's other brother Luke. All Matthew knew was a very scary man with an accent bought Luke and took him away. Jeremiah has Nova and Mayhem on the case so we will see. I hope we can find Luke for his sake and his family's.

Work has been hectic. Cap wants me to take a promotion. Not that I need it with Jeremiah, but it's an increase in pay, less time on Engine 23, and more paperwork. When I spoke to Cap, he told me he needs to start planning for when he retires. He can see who he wants where but it won't happen overnight. I'm thinking about it but not sure I'm ready to give up being a firefighter. Jeremiah has been extremely busy with his company and the alliance he's built with Nova and Malachi.

Malachi was a huge help getting the two older kids to go out to Montana. I had no idea he was involved with one of the Devil's Handmaidens. So Genie and Matthew see quite a bit of Malachi, which helps them with being in a new place with literal strangers.

Jeremiah and I have finally gotten time together to blend our stuff into our home. Where it was sterile and cold before, now it's colorful and eclectic. Best of both of us. I love going home and spending as much time with Miah as I can. And man do we spend time together. If we are both home and the girls are doing homework, playing,

or watching a movie if Beatrice or Lucille are there, we are in our room. I can't get enough of him and vice versa.

The alarm goes off and we all look at each other, like really, our shift is almost over. Damn it, there goes the evening plans of watching a movie with the girls while we devour pizza. We all run to put on our gear then get into Engine 23 while Truck 315 loads up too. I reach for my phone, sending a quick text to Jeremiah, letting them know to start without me. I put the phone back in my inner pocket as Paco takes a sharp right turn, shifting us in our seats.

"Dude, what the hell, almost fell out of my seat."

He laughs then throws it back.

"Awe, princess, can't handle the work anymore? Are you getting soft, Styx? That would be a shame, right, boys? 'Cause you used to be the badass of our company, don't go too soft, sister."

Everyone starts laughing and I join in. Another reason not to take the desk job, I think to myself. Another night out in the field fighting fires. As much as I love my job, tonight I was looking forward to spending time with my little family. That was what I wanted to do for my birthday, but oh well.

I lift my head just as we move through a familiar fence that lets Truck 315 in too. What the hell? I think as my heart starts to pound.

"Hey, why are we going to my house? Oh my God, Jeremiah and all three girls are in the house, along with Beatrice. What call was this?"

Lil Man reaches over, patting my shoulder.

"Calm the fuck down, woman, everything is fine. I told you idiots this wasn't a good

idea. She's freaking out. Just sit back and breathe, woman. We're almost there."

I'm almost hyperventilating when we hit the last turn on the driveway before the house comes into view. When it does, I laugh and start to cry at the same time. Holy fuck, what did Jeremiah do this time? I think to myself. I can't tell if it's a circus, zoo, or a mix of everything three little girls can come up with. Everyone, as they take it in, are chuckling. Leave it to Rome to put it into perspective.

"Guess when you have more damn money than God, you can do anything. So which part is something you would like for your birthday, Styx? I see Ellie's zoo and Lottie's circus, which I know isn't you 'cause you hate fucking clowns. Guessing that movie theater area is for little Wren since, shit, is that Frozen playing again? Nope, I've watched it with her at least five times already. I now know the words to the song 'Let it Go,' for Christ's sake. Definitely staying away from Wren. Though we all know that's a lie 'cause I can't stay away from the little princess."

That has everyone cracking up because our little Wren is hooked on her uncle Rome. The tiny little girl is intrigued by the huge bald Black man. Generally, people are intimidated by our Rome but not Wren. She ran to him the first time the guys came over and hugged his legs proudly, calling him Uncle Rome. As the truck stops off to the side, I almost pee myself when I see Wren running up to the fire engine, jumping up and down, her mouth moving. Probably calling for Uncle Rome. Danny sees it and points it out to Rome, who lets out a sigh.

"Well, guess I'm not going to the beer tent, instead I'll be going to the movie tent. Can't wait." Then to my utter surprise he starts to sing out loud, "Let it go..."

By the time Danny and Lil Man join Rome in the chorus of the famous song, everyone is hysterically laughing, including the three idiots bellowing the words. When the doors open and Jeremiah lifts Wren into the truck, the smile she's wearing brings tears to my eyes. She's watching them sing then joins in with them. The happiness on her face I will never forget. Once again, it dawns on me how one action

can literally change someone's life. If we hadn't found the girls, little Wren would never experience her fire uncles singing her favorite song for her. My mind tells me this is one of the best birthday gifts I could ever get. When I look at Jeremiah, his stunning eyes are on me and seeing the love in them takes my breath away. I was an idiot wasting all the months staying away from this man. He grabs my hands and helps me out of the truck, pulling me close and planting a kiss that has me forgetting we aren't alone, when my hands wrap around his neck. From the guys I hear, "Get a room" and from the kids we get, "Uhh, not again." Both comments have Jeremiah and I shaking with laughter.

When he finally pulls back, he looks at me.

"Happy Birthday, Lourdes. We didn't forget, and pizza and a movie isn't enough. The girls and I decided you needed a party. They told me what they thought you would like and I did it."

Can't help it, have to joke with him.

"So I love Frozen , the zoo, and—holy shit—no clowns, Jeremiah, I hate them. Not a circus."

He reaches into his pocket, scrolls down, and pushes a button.

"Yeah, it's Jeremiah. No, everything is great, though didn't know my love hates clowns so can you tell them they are welcome to stay, but no clown makeup. They can enjoy the party and I'll still pay them. Thanks so much, Steve."

Not sure why tears are filling my eyes. Then like a light bulb, the answer pops in my head.

All my life I've always expected doom and gloom. Somehow, Jeremiah was able to scale my walls and knock each brick down. Because of him, I truly have the life I

always wanted. And what Lil Man said one day at work, I was loving his words because they're true. I have a sentinel at my back. And for once, he's right. Jeremiah always has my back and loves me for who I am.

Little Wren in Rome's arms walks toward me, arms out. When I grab her, Rome thanks me and actually jogs away. Well, until Wren calls him back with an arrow to the heart.

"Uncle Rome, you promised."

He turns and puts his head down. I look around and see an apple dunking setup.

"Hey, Rome wants to go dunk for apples, Wren. We can go watch Frozen ."

"No, I want to see Uncle Rome get the apples."

Rome looks like he's ready to murder me until Paco hands him a beer. Then all is good. Just like men.

"Come on, let's watch Uncle Rome bob for the apples, Mommy."

That right there tells me I'm exactly where I'm needed and, more importantly, loved. I seriously can't wait for what comes next whatever it is as long as I have Jeremiah and our family.