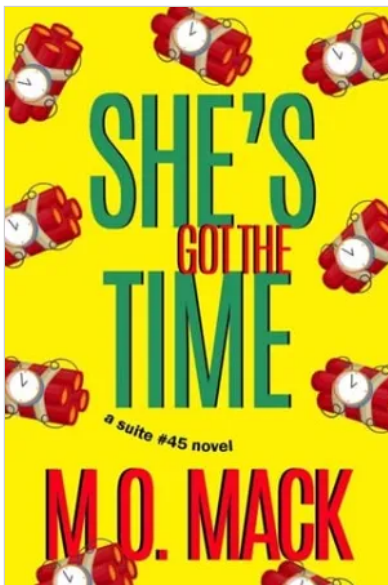




# She's Got the Time (Suite #45, 3)

**Author:** M.O. Mack

**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** SENTENCED FOR A CRIME SHE ONLY WISHED SHE'D COMMITTED...

Emily has made some pretty tough choices in order to survive. Some she regrets. Others, well, not so much.

Running from her corrupt FBI husband, for example? No regrets. Ending up working for a group of hit men? Big regrets.

On the bright side, the group only kills bad guys. On the not-so-bright side, the biggest cartel south of the border wants the group dead, and she's number two on their list.

Emily's biggest regret, however? Growing feelings for Charge, her hit man boss.

Because when the feds arrest her for the murder of her ex, Emily knows she's been set up, and all signs point to Charge.

Why would he do this to her? The prison is filled with vicious criminals, and there's a price on her head. Ten million dollars.

Can she find a way out before her time is up? Because she'd really love some sweet revenge.

The clock is ticking...

**Total Pages (Source):** 28

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:48 am*

## CHAPTER ONE

From the cabin's breakfast bar, Emily watched the shirtless hit man prepare an egg sandwich with his back to her—a sign of trust after she'd saved his life.

It hadn't been the easiest decision to murder someone for a man who handed out lies as easily as he handed out death, but nothing over this past six months could be described as simple.

Pure survival. Though, for Emily, living on the edge had been the daily norm since she'd fled her abusive husband.

Now she could add the cartel to the list of people who'd never stop looking for her, wanting their pound of flesh. Anything is better than living with my ex.

A content smile flickered across Emily's lips as she sipped her black coffee, knowing that whatever came next, at least she'd be in control. She wasn't weak or worthless, like Ed—her ex—used to tell her. She'd survived him, she'd survived working for a group of hit men—a temp gig that had landed her here—and now she would survive this next chapter: being hunted by the Heroin King, who was just as likely to sell her to sex traffickers as he was to put a bullet in her head.

As for surviving her intense attraction to the shirtless, six-two hit man with intense gray eyes, unkempt dark hair, and a rugged short beard, that was a jagged story. Charge was dangerous, and not because he killed for a living, but because she couldn't say no to him. Not such a good thing for a woman who should be focused on staying alive instead of getting mixed up in the business of killers.

“How are you feeling today?” She set her mug on the butcher-block breakfast bar. The cabin had one big great room with an attached kitchen and two bedrooms. It came with all the plaid curtains and rustic hunting decorations a person could want. Or not want.

Charge’s back muscles worked as he struggled to slice a tomato. “My ribs are better, but my broken fingers still feel like hell.”

I bet . But he was lucky to be alive. Charge had been worked over pretty good by the time she’d gotten to him and put a bullet in Mr. Dearheart’s head. She often wondered how a man like Dearheart, a man who prided himself on being the best mercenary in the world, felt when he realized his “glorious” life would be ended by a nobody in the parking lot of an old strip mall.

Probably annoyed . She, on the other hand, felt mostly numb. She was no killer, but Charge had saved her life more than once, and she’d owed him.

“Your nose is almost back to normal. Less like a small eggplant, and more like a nose.”

He grunted with a nod, being especially nonverbal this morning. He was probably anxious to get back in the saddle. The group of hit men she had helped him lead, who used the code name “suite forty-five,” was probably wondering what happened to them, though God only knew how many operators were left on the team. Last she checked, the forty-five were down to thirty-eight.

Now they’d been forced out of El Paso and every other US border town they once protected after the Heroin King hired the Warren Group, a private team of killers who’d contracted Dearheart to dismantle suite forty-five.

But unlike suite forty-five’s team, the Warren Group didn’t care whom they killed.

They answered to the highest bidder, and now that bidder was the Heroin King, which meant the fragile peace in communities like Juarez, Mexico, had disappeared overnight. Dangerous drugs, human traffickers, and anybody with enough money to pay the cartels' tolls were waltzing right in by the millions. It was a fucking mess, and there wasn't a damned thing Charge or she could do about it.

"Have you given more thought to what comes next?" she asked.

Charge grunted again. "Want mayo?"

He was cooking for her? That was sweet. "Sure. Thanks. But sooner or later, you'll have to fill me in. We can't hide out in this cabin forever." They were three hours north of El Paso, in the mountains of New Mexico. It had been the only place to go after Emily rescued him.

Charge ignored her.

"Please turn around and talk to me," she snapped. "We probably won't be safe here much longer, and now that you're able to move around, we should start planning—"

"If you don't feel safe, then leave."

She tilted her head and blinked. Three weeks ago, she'd had one foot out the door. Charge had been saved, she had a plan to disappear, and her involvement with these hit men would become a thing of the past. It was Charge who'd convinced her to stay with four little words: Help me find Ed.

Ed was now on the run after he and his corrupt FBI friends had been exposed for the abusive sex-traffickers that they were, a fact she'd learned later in their marriage.

"I don't know where this is coming from, but," Emily whooshed out a breath, "I feel

I've earned transparency."

Suddenly, a paper plate with eggs flew across the kitchen, splattering into the wooden pantry door.

Charge turned and yelled, "Why the fuck do you think you've earned it? Because you saved my life? I never asked you to do it."

Wow. How's that for gratitude? Up until now, Charge had been grateful for her actions. Why the sudden change?

She cleared her throat, remaining calm. "Yes, as a matter of fact, I do think I deserve your trust. You, on the other hand, have repeatedly lied since we met—about who you are, what your team does, and even what you knew about me when you offered me a job." She'd had no idea what she was getting into when she took a gig answering the phone for Charge's "pest control" business all those months ago. He'd also concealed that he knew her real name wasn't Emily and that he was very familiar with her ex because there was a contract out on him. Powerful people were not happy with Ed.

She continued, "Still, I came to save you. Then I stayed to care for you. And I'm still here. Shouldn't that buy me something?" She stared into his intense gray eyes, noting the ticking jaw beneath his thick black stubble. There was a time when those ice-cold eyes terrified her, but not anymore. She knew he'd never hurt her. Lie, yes. Hurt, no.

"I need you to run an errand for me in town," he said.

She took that to mean he wanted a moment to collect himself.

He added, "I'm out of pain meds. The doctor sent in a refill."

“Anything else?”

“No.”

She reluctantly pushed back in her chair, knowing it was best to give the man his space. Charge was the sort who didn't react well to being pressured. He was also methodical. Careful. He always had a plan and ten backup plans. The only thing he didn't have was a trusting heart, which was probably the reason he didn't want to tell her what came next.

Well, too bad. I'm in this now .

“When I come back, you and I are sitting down and going over the plan.” She pressed her index finger onto the countertop. “And it had better involve finding Ed.” Ed had to answer for what he'd done to those poor women. He, his brother, and friends made millions off drugging women so they could be raped ten times a day. Justice had to be served, and it was the only reason she'd stuck around when Charge had asked. At least, it was the only reason she could confess to herself. The other reasons, like helping Charge heal or feeling a sense of illogical calmness around him, weren't reasons to stay.

“Yeah, sure.” Charge went for the paper towels to clean up his man-tantrum on the floor.

“Leave the eggs. I'll clean up when I get back.” She grabbed her purse and the keys to the old blue pickup. “And Charge, don't ever yell at me again. I'm done taking shit. Even from hit men.”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:48 am*

### CHAPTER TWO

Emily put on her black wig, oversized sunglasses, and Astros baseball cap, doing what she did best: hiding in plain sight. No red hair—her natural color—and no showing her green eyes. No flashy or tight clothes either. Goodwill jeans and faded tees only. Though, her body wasn't what generally drew attention. She was five-five and far too slender.

When she'd been with Ed, gaining even a pound had been unacceptable. "I don't fuck fat women," he'd say, or, "If I want a cow, I'll buy a farm. Great place to bury mistakes." It meant that he'd punish her in the worst sort of way if she ever got bigger.

Thank God they'd never had kids, because his emotional punches had left a scar deeper than the physical ones. She still pushed herself to run every morning even when injured, and she had to fend off panic attacks whenever she ate too much. So messed up. Thanks, Ed. But she knew the only cure for her demons was time.

Emily did some quick shopping at the small grocery store, buying herself some nuts, a green smoothie, and a protein bar for breakfast. More eggs, too. Then she hit the drugstore, buying the basics for Charge—some of those icy-heat packs for his hand and more tape to wrap his fingers.

She walked up to the pharmacy window and asked for Charge's prescription.

"Oh, uh...just give me a sec?" said the man behind the counter.

“Sure. No problem.” Emily pulled out her phone and started checking the posts on this platform she’d learned about that focused on hunting wanted criminals like Ed. It was sort of an amateur-sleuth deal.

Her eyes immediately stuck to a post at the top in red letters. “Missing FBI Agent Found Executed on Boat.”

Was it Ed? Because she’d always suspected he’d fled the country on his boat. With a pounding heart, her eyes quickly scanned the article.

Suddenly, she felt cold steel pressed to her left temple. Her heart jolted, realizing there was a large man to her side, holding his gun to her head.

“Slowly raise your hands,” said the man.

Her hands began shaking, and she dropped her items. Fuck, the cartel found us. I have to warn Charge!

She slowly cranked her head to the left. The man’s bulletproof vest read “FBI.”

FBI? She didn’t know if she should be relieved it wasn’t the cartel or more worried.

“Turn around,” he said.

She obeyed, her knees going wobbly.

“Emily Wilson, you are under arrest for the murder of a federal agent.” The man cuffed her and patted her down.

They hadn’t said his name, but it had to be Ed they’d found executed. Who else could they be referring to?



But why were they arresting her?

How had they connected her alias—Emily Wilson—to Ed? She'd been careful to sever all ties. This didn't make sense.

"There must be some mistake," she said. "I haven't seen my ex for months." Charge could validate her story.

Charge might not be able to show his face in public, but with a few quick calls, he could clear her name. He knew people. Powerful, important people.

The agent silently marched her toward the exit while shoppers looked on, some even filming with their phones. Several more agents waited outside, where a crowd had gathered across the street.

Emily's eyes nervously swept through the faces. If the cartel didn't know her whereabouts before, they sure knew now.

One of the agents opened the back passenger door of a black SUV parked along the curb closest to them. Just beyond that vehicle, a set of cool gray eyes drilled through the crowd.

"Charge?" she mouthed.

Charge gave a nod.

Oh, thank God. He had a plan. He was going to make sure she wasn't charged with this.

The agent to her right nodded back before Charge turned and walked away.

Wait. What the hell? Charge's nod had not been for her.

Emily's heart dropped to the floor. Charge had set her up?

\*\*\*

"I want a phone call!" She pounded on the solid steel door as a guard in a beige shirt strolled by her cell. He couldn't hear her, but she yelled anyway. "I have a right to an attorney!"

I hope? Emily had no clue which state she was in, but this was the sort of prison where inmates were delivered in the middle of the night with bags on their heads. Was it some kind of black site? Or a prison for extremely dangerous federal criminals? The only thing she knew was that they'd treated her like a terrorist the moment she got into that SUV. The agents had covered her head and then driven for over seven hours, only allowing her to make one stop to relieve herself in some gas station bathroom.

Even then, she hadn't been allowed to remove the hood until she was in the stall, and she'd been forced to pee with her cuffs on. A female agent had helped pull up her jeans, and the hood had gone right back on. It had been degrading, not to mention wet.

When she'd arrived here, they'd put her in this cell, uncuffed her, and left. She'd taken the hood off to find an eight-by-ten cell with a steel door, a cot, and a toilet. No water. No food. No answers.

"Justine Hays?" An older man in a brown suit appeared in the tiny window of the cell door.

Justine Hays was her legal name, but when they'd arrested her, they'd used Emily

Wilson. It was...strange.

“Are you my lawyer?” she asked through the slot he’d opened. “Where am I? What’s going on?”

He flashed a bright white smile. “Haven’t you been told? You met with your lawyer and confessed to everything in front of a judge.”

What? “I never met with anyone. I didn’t confess to anything.”

He shrugged. “Well, we have your signature. Murder of a police officer.”

A cop? But she thought she’d been arrested for killing her ex—a federal agent—not a police officer. What was happening? There was only one explanation.

“I’m being set up. I didn’t kill anyone,” she said.

“But you did. And since you were so cooperative, the judge was kind enough to only sentence you to thirty years here in Vanderhorst Supermax.”

“Supermax? I’m in a supermax?” What the fuck! Her entire body went numb, followed by her stomach knotting into a ball of dread. I’m going to be sick.

“You’re going to love it here, Justine. They only send the worst of the worst to this place—the most violent criminals. Like you.”

She had broken the law—many times by now—but she was far from being a violent criminal. They would eat her alive in here.

Emily pressed her palms to the cold steel door. “You can’t do this! I want to see a lawyer.”

He clicked his tongue. “You’ll be lucky to see another Christmas.” He turned to walk away but stopped. “Oh, and just so you know, Warden Mitchel likes to make special accommodations for people like you. Enjoy.”

She swallowed hard. This was bad. Very, very bad.

Why, Charge? Why?

### CHAPTER THREE

Emily was provided a set of orange scrubs and then taken to another building by two female correction officers who wouldn't give her the time of day. It was as if she were invisible to everyone, including the legal system. Except for that man in the suit back there.

Who was he, anyway? Whom did he work for? It had to be someone powerful with very deep reach because he claimed she'd been arrested, sentenced, and imprisoned without so much as seeing a courthouse.

"I'm an American," Emily yelled at the two female guards to her sides as she stumbled along, trying to drag her feet. God only knew where they were taking her now. "I have rights!"

"Dead people don't have rights." One of them laughed.

"What do you mean?" Emily's heart pounded in her chest. Images of being hanged or shot streamed in her head. After all, she'd been taken to prison under the sketchiest of circumstances. It wasn't a stretch to imagine they intended to execute her.

The guards ignored her, leading her down a long corridor where the prisoners watched in eerie silence through the tiny windows on their cell doors.

Why were they staring like that? It couldn't mean anything good, right?

The guards stopped in front of an empty cell and pushed her in.

For one split second, Emily felt relieved it wasn't a room with an electric chair. "Please tell me what's going on?" Emily pleaded.

"You're in prison for murder. What more do you need to know, sweetheart?" said one of the guards before slamming the door in her face.

"Hey!" Emily pounded. "This is illegal! I didn't kill anyone." A lie. She most definitely had. Just not Ed or a police officer.

One of the guards opened the slot in the middle of the door. "If I were you, I'd use this time to make peace with God or the devil—whoever sick people like you worship." She closed the slot.

The guards walked away, and Emily burst into tears. This can't be happening.

Sadly, she already knew that wasn't true. It was a dirty world out there, the kind that looked the other way while the cartels had begun taking over the border communities. It was a world where big politicians cared more about their careers than for the safety of their citizens, so those communities had been forced to take matters into their own hands and seek protection from the likes of suite forty-five. It was a world that didn't care when the most violent cartel in the world recently hired the Warren Group to make their final territory grab. It was a dirty, bloody, and dangerous world. So yeah, this was happening.

A few minutes later, Emily received a tray with juice that smelled like urine—because it was—a slice of moldy bread, and a rotten apple. Warden Mitchel's special accommodations.

Fuck. I am going to die in here. But what she couldn't understand was why she'd been brought here at all. Why not kill her and dump her body in a ditch if death was the goal?

Maybe they want me to suffer. A slow, painful death. But who were “they”?

She racked her brain. The Warren Group would definitely let her starve to death. The Heroin King, too. Then there were Ed and his band of corrupt, greedy degenerates. Could this whole thing be linked to them? Was Ed even dead? Last thing she’d heard, Ed, his brother, and their entire group had left the country. Not even Charge had been able to find them. Would they really risk being caught to orchestrate this?

Not likely.

And none of it explained why Charge had handed her over.

“I’m an idiot for trusting a hit man.” Because facts were facts: someone wanted her to die in here, and Charge had given the green light.

\*\*\*

The next morning, Emily’s empty stomach grumbled, followed by sharp stabbing sensations. She hadn’t eaten in two days, and dehydration was kicking in. The faucet in her sink didn’t work, but the shit-caked toilet flushed. Maybe they wanted her to drink from it, which would surely kill her. She could tell they’d put something in the water, something red and corrosive that was eating away at the metal, leaving behind patches of rust on the bowl.

Poisoned food, no clean water, and no help.

Around nine a.m., a new female guard with the last name of Roberts showed up to Emily’s door and unlocked it. “Time for your exercise.”

Emily sat up in her bed, her heart surging with nervous palpitations. “Please, please help me. I don’t know what’s happening, but if I die in here, it’s on you. It’s on all of

you.”

The heavyset woman with a hard gaze took out her baton. “Out. Now.”

Emily slowly got to her feet and went out into the hallway. Strange, how Roberts hadn’t cuffed Emily and that all the other cells were empty.

No witnesses. “Where’re you taking me?” Emily asked.

“The yard. For your group exercise.”

Supermax group exercise? According to every prison documentary she’d ever seen, these sorts of prisons were set up to prevent the inmates from mingling. She was about to be shanked.

“Can you just tell me who?” Emily asked, walking as slowly as she could down the corridor.

“Who what?” asked Roberts.

“Who wants me to die?”

“Everyone.” Roberts scanned her badge at a heavy steel door and pushed it open. Outside were some of the coldest-looking women she’d ever seen, all standing in small groups. Every single one of them looked like they were jonesing to slit Emily’s throat.

Emily’s feet stuck to the concrete floor. “All I’m asking is to know why?”

The guard pushed Emily outside and slammed the door.



Emily stood there, meeting the predatory gazes of the dangerous animals surrounding her. So this is where I die. She exhaled slowly, preparing to be jumped.

### CHAPTER FOUR

That night, Emily lay awake in her cell with a scorching thirst and gnawing hunger unlike anything she'd ever known. Her tongue felt like sandpaper, and every time she attempted to stand, the floor did the wave. She had one more day, two at best, before she died of dehydration. The last thing she'd drunk had been coffee at Charge's cabin.

Before he betrayed me. Before this slow execution began.

That was their plan. She was sure of it now. This morning in the yard, the women had not slit her throat, punched or kicked her. Instead, they'd turned their backs, as if she were too low even for them.

Too low for a cartel mule? Or a serial killer? Either way, she was "off-limits" to the other inmates, and if Emily had to guess why, it wasn't because someone wanted to save her. This situation appeared to be a well-orchestrated effort to demoralize her in every possible way while she took the scenic route to the grave.

If Ed were an institution, he would be this place. Ed had taken away her humanity and will to live, piece by piece, but his weapon hadn't been turning his back. Instead, he'd hit, beat, and sometimes locked her in the closet. He'd insulted her "weak" mind, lack of education, and bumpy upbringing, all with the desire to make her feel too small to fight back.

It had worked.

Every bit of it.

She'd played the dutiful wife and hosted his poker parties. She'd dressed in little sundresses to please him. She'd even bitten her tongue when his corrupt friends groped her ass in the kitchen while Ed was busy smoking his cigars and attempting to win their money in the living room. She'd let them do what they wanted because Ed had made it clear that his friends were more important than her, and if she made things uncomfortable for him, he'd make her life hell.

Eventually, she'd reached a point so low that if Ed had told her she was a cockroach, she would've swallowed poison to cleanse his home of the pest.

Then, one night, everything changed.

She'd heard one of his partners talking about expanding their rape business. Yes, rape. Sex trafficking was far too sterile a term because what they did to those women wasn't sex. His was an operation that abducted destitute women and forced them to take drugs so that vile, sick animals could fuck them against their will.

So when she'd heard Ed and his buddies talking about catering their business to clients who preferred their victims younger, she'd lost it.

This and this alone had become her turning point because she had something beyond herself to care about and fight for. She'd begun recording their conversations, videotaping them talking about the women they'd kidnapped, and taking notes about where they got the victims.

When she finally ran, the bravery she'd needed hadn't come from a desire to save herself—someone so broken—but from an obligation to save these little girls and women before they became versions of her. No hope. No future. That was how Emily had ended up in El Paso, working for Charge. Those women were free now, but she

was once again a prisoner.

“What am I going to do?” She rolled onto her side, feeling the hard cot press into her boney hip.

Am I really going to allow myself to die here? All that pain, all the mistakes, all of the lines she’d crossed to be free couldn’t be for nothing. Maybe she could get word to someone who could pull a few strings and get legal help.

Emily’s eyes sprang open. Olivia...

Olivia was an operator (aka “hit man”) who’d recently left suite forty-five, looking to escape the killing business. Mostly because she’d fallen in love with Flint, a fellow operator, and had gotten pregnant—a big fraternization no-no. Emily didn’t know where to find Olivia, but if anyone could help, it was her.

So how could Emily get a message to this woman when she was locked up and Olivia didn’t want to be found?

Emily tossed and turned for hours, each minute marking another step toward her last heartbeat. Finally, around three in the morning, the solution hit her.

The money. I’ve got the money. And she had the guns. Emily had about a million in cash buried on Charge’s property. Where had the money come from? A long, long story involving an SUV she’d stolen from the Heroin King, but it was hers now—the money, not the car. As for the guns, Emily had briefly been in charge of suite forty-five and resupplying the group. She’d ordered a shipment of ammo and guns and instructed the dealer to leave everything in a shipping container in a railyard just north of the border. And I’m the only one who knows where it is aside from the dealer.

Emily dragged her hands over her dirty hair. She had two bargaining chips to work with. Money and guns. If she could bribe one of the guards to get a message out to Olivia, then the rest of the money and guns—which could be sold for more cash—might be useful to spring her from this prison. Or get her a lawyer. Of course, Olivia would want something for her trouble, too, but there was enough there to work with.

The first challenge was finding a guard to help. The second would be communicating with Olivia, and it just so happened that Emily had the perfect way to do it.

### CHAPTER FIVE

The next morning, Emily's mouth was so dry she couldn't swallow, her lips were cracked, and she could hardly stand. The red water in the toilet was starting to look like her only option to end the misery. That, or attack a guard and pray they killed her.

No, she told herself, they're trying to turn you into an animal. Even if she smelled like one due to the lack of showers, she could not let them break her. She could not lose hope.

Around eight a.m., the guard Roberts showed up with her tray of inedible food and juice that wasn't juice.

"Hey," Emily whispered as the slot opened, "whatever they're paying you per year, I'll double it. No, I'll triple it. I just need a favor."

Roberts shook her head. "Not interested."

"This is a legitimate offer. All you need to do is post a message on a website. That's it. And bring me some clean water."

"Fuck you," Roberts said.

"Name your price."

"I'm not risking my ass for a cop killer."

“I didn’t kill a cop.”

“Then why are you in here?” she asked.

“I don’t fucking know. But I wasn’t given a lawyer or a trial. All I’m asking you to do is post a message so a friend knows where I am. That’s it. It’s not even illegal.”

Roberts looked both ways. “Even if you are telling the truth, I can’t risk losing my job. The warden made it clear what would happen if anyone helped you.”

“Five hundred thousand dollars,” Emily blurted out. “For two minutes of your time and a glass of clean water.”

Roberts blinked. She was definitely considering it. “How would you get me the money?”

“The message you post will be for a friend. Once she sees it, she’ll find me. Once she does, I’ll tell her where the cash is, and she’ll give you the money.”

“What happens if your friend doesn’t show?”

“Then I’ll tell you where the money is. You can go get it yourself.”

“Tell me now.” She narrowed her eyes.

“I’m desperate, but not stupid.”

Roberts closed the slot and started walking away.

“Wait!” Emily pounded on the door. “Come back!” Emily watched her hope fade from view. “Come back!” Emily collapsed on the cot, feeling the fight inside her die.

I give up. I fucking give up .

Like the guard said on Emily's first day here, it was time to make peace with God.

\*\*\*

Hours later, a loud clanking on the metal door woke Emily from her daze. She slowly opened her dry eyes, spotting Roberts standing outside. A tray sat in the slot with a bottle of water.

Emily jumped to her feet and scurried over, only to watch Roberts pull the tray back.

"I want cash within twenty-four hours," she said. "If I don't get it, I'm going to have you transferred to the other solitary—the one without a bed or window—and I'll see you're given half a cup of water a day." She raised a brow as Emily's foggy mind tried to sort through the meaning.

"Just enough to keep me alive a little longer," Emily concluded.

"That's right, cop killer."

"I didn't..." Emily's voice faded off. Roberts wasn't going to believe her, nor was she going to send a message to Olivia out of the kindness of her heart. This was a business transaction. "I agree. Twenty-four hours."

"Even if your friend never comes, I get my money."

Emily nodded.

"Good, because if they find out I'm doing this, and I go down, you will wish you never had this water." The guard slid the tray back toward Emily.



Who is they? Emily grabbed the bottle, chugging it down. The refreshing liquid slid down her throat, sparking her soul back to life. She instantly felt the moisture absorbing into her cells.

“Hide that bottle under the cot,” said Roberts. “Give me, and only me, the empty bottle tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

“What’s this website, and what’s your message?”

Emily let out a sigh of relief. She gave Roberts the info to log in. It was a florist site, and each bouquet or flower placed on the home page was a code for the suite forty-five team. For example, violets meant “all clear” after an event where the team needed to lie low. A bouquet of red roses with baby’s breath was an alert to stay cautious because the team’s primary location had been compromised. There was no code for “Help! I’ve been framed for murder and am being held in prison,” so she’d just have to use real words.

“Just post, ‘To Olivia: Emily Wilson detained. Vanderhorst Supermax. Boss in on it. Needs lawyer.’”

Roberts’s expression turned flat, like she was trying to mask a reaction. “Emily Wilson. Your name is Emily Wilson?”

“Yes. Why?”

“I thought your name was Justine Hays,” said Roberts.

“It used to be—never mind. Will you post the message?”

Roberts eyed her with a strange almost nervous expression. “Sure, sweetheart.”

Emily sighed with relief. “Thank you.”

Now, all she needed was to survive another day. Olivia would see the message, and if she didn’t, someone on the team would. They’d know that Charge had betrayed her, that he’d had her imprisoned under a fake conviction.

Roberts left, and Emily sat down to finish her water. She needed more, but this bottle was her lifeline to buying time.

What she still couldn’t wrap her mind around was why Charge would do this after she’d saved his life? The betrayal cut deep into the fibers of her soul. In some strange way, it hurt as badly as her past with Ed.

Maybe because while she’d feared Ed every minute of the day, she’d never respected him. Charge had been different. He was a man who didn’t believe in backing down no matter how difficult, bloody, or painful the situation got. It took a special breed of person to accept a life of killing for what one believed in and killing to protect something you loved—be it a person, your family, or a community under siege by criminals.

The average man or woman could probably shoot an intruder, though they might hesitate to pull the trigger before doing it. They might struggle with the notion of ending a life, even if the act was justified.

But people like Charge had arrived at a philosophical place in life where they saw things clearly. They understood what it meant to be a lion whose job was protecting the pack. Charge had once told her she was a lion, too, and the sooner she accepted it, the sooner she’d find peace.

Initially, Emily had outright rejected his words and left El Paso but ended up returning after killing a man in a bus station bathroom in Denver. It was an incident she'd tried to block out of her head a million times. The man in question had been in the process of raping a poor woman in the next stall. Emily hadn't enjoyed pulling the trigger, yet the act gave her clarity. She was a lion. And despite her insecurities, baggage, and pain, she would never hesitate to step up to protect another person. Even other lions. Like Charge.

That was the crux of it.

Charge had seen her for who she truly was. He'd set her on a path to discover what she was made of. For this, she respected him despite his ambivalence toward killing—a trait that would terrify the average person. She saw beyond his profession and hard shell and sought to understand him as a means of understanding herself. She'd looked up to him.

That was why his betrayal hurt worse than anything Ed had ever done. She'd trusted Charge. I put my life on the line for him. She never would've done that for Ed.

Emily lay back on the hard, thin mattress, staring up at the discolored ceiling. There had been moments back at the cabin when she'd wanted to let Charge into her heart. She'd even slept in his bed a few times for the first week. She told herself it was to comfort him, but that was just another lie. Curling up to his strong body at night was the safest she'd felt in years. It was like sleeping with a god of war sent to earth to protect her.

No, not protect her. To show her how to protect herself.

She sighed, forlorn. "Why, Charge?" Why throw me away like this? Part of her knew the answer didn't matter. It wouldn't change the situation.

If Roberts didn't come through, she would die in here, and no one would care. Just another forgotten girl who became a forgotten woman crushed by an uncaring world.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:48 am*

### CHAPTER SIX

A loud clank on the door woke Emily from her nightmare, delivering her into another.

“Get up. You have a visitor,” said a deep voice just outside her open cell door.

Emily rubbed her eyes. “Visitor?”

“Hurry up. Ain’t got all day.” The guard’s tag read Hellman. He was a thin man with a dangerous glint in his dark eyes.

“What time is it?” Emily asked.

“Two.”

“In the afternoon?” She’d slept an entire day?

“At night. Now move the fuck out of there.”

Emily swallowed the dry lump in her throat. This couldn’t be good. Not that she’d been told the visitation rules, but it wasn’t a huge leap to say that late night visits weren’t standard protocol.

“Who wants to see me?” she asked.

“You have five seconds to get your ass out here, or I’m closing the door.”

Could it be Olivia? Or one of the other operators? Had they paid someone to get in here?

Emily couldn't risk losing this chance to tell someone she was here. She got up and exited into the hallway, following the guard down a long corridor. Funny how they never handcuffed her. Was it because there was nowhere to run? Or perhaps it was because they could shoot her at any time and claim she'd escaped her cell.

The man placed her in an empty room with only one door. She waited, pacing back and forth, gnawing on her thumbnail. Who was here to see her?

Suddenly, the door opened, and a set of pale gray eyes greeted her.

Charge? Rage exploded from deep inside, and she lunged at him. "Fucking asshole!" She swung her fist, missing his face. He turned her around and captured her in a bear hug from behind. She kicked and screamed, but it was no use. She was weak, hungry, and tired. He was not, despite his injuries.

"Why, Charge?" She began to cry.

"If you calm down, I'll explain."

She relaxed her body, and he let her go. She scrambled to the wall, pushing her back to it.

"What the fuck, Charge?" She whisked a tear from her eye, noticing he wore a blue dress shirt and navy slacks. His beard had been trimmed, too. This was not his usual look of jeans and snug T-shirts.

"I know what you're thinking," he said.

Did he? Because she was thinking if she had a weapon right now, she'd kill him. "How could you stab me in the back like this? I saved your life. I went through hell for you."

"That's why I paid a substantial amount of money to have you brought here."

Emily blinked. "You paid to have me starved and deprived of water?"

He looked down at his leather shoes. "I didn't know about that."

Huh?

He added, "There's a price on your head, Emily. Mine, too. Ten million each."

She sucked in a hard, cold breath. That was a shit ton of money. Still, that didn't help explain why she was here.

"So you fucking had me arrested and locked up?" She seethed.

"No. I had it look like you were arrested; then I had you taken here with fake paperwork."

"I don't understand."

"This is the only facility in the country where active cartel members aren't allowed. Managing them takes twice the staff, since they're notorious for breaking out, and this place already deals with the most violent criminals in the country."

"I'm sorry, but did you just say that you sent me to the most dangerous prison in the US?" Was he insane?

“It was the only safe place I could find on short notice.”

This place wasn't safe! “They've been trying to get me to drink poisoned water from a toilet. They give me tainted food to eat and urine to drink. I haven't had a shower since I got here. The only reason I'm still breathing is because I bribed a guard into giving me water.”

Charge ran a hand through his dark hair. “Yeah, I know about the deal you made with her, and it's caused a big problem.”

A problem? Still being alive was a problem?

He continued, “I paid for Emily Wilson to be very publicly arrested so the cartel would know you were no longer on the run, but in custody. I figured you wouldn't put up a fight if the arrest was for killing a federal agent. You'd assume the mess had something to do with Ed.

“Then I had you transported here in secret and had your paperwork—under the name of Justine Hays—show you'd already gone to trial and confessed to the violent murder of a cop. No one is looking for Justine Hays.” He sighed with remorse. “You were to be remanded to isolation due to your violent nature. The staff was supposed to believe you were just another murderer, already processed by the system. But I didn't know that the warden is corrupt, nor that the treatment you're getting is standard for prisoners who kill cops, federal agents, etc. Apparently, the warden's brother was a sheriff and murdered.” He exhaled sharply. “I should've done my homework. It was a miss on my part, and I'm sorry.”

Charge was notoriously thorough. It wasn't like him to overlook something like this. Did that mean he was telling the truth about the urgency of his decision?

“So...you didn't send me here to die?” she asked.



“No. Like I said, this prison is the one place the cartel wouldn’t find you. I made sure there was no paper trail for Emily Wilson. And after ensuring your arrest went viral, the cartel immediately got the word out to find the facility you were taken to and have you killed. Eventually, they would come up empty-handed and assume you’d gone into witness protection—likely turning against me. They’d stop looking at that point and simply wait for you to resurface in whichever trial you were going to testify in.”

Fucking Charge. This was so like him. He never did simple. He went the extra mile to make every plan impossibly complicated. On the other hand, his plans were generally well thought out to achieve the goal with maximum certainty. In this case, it was to hide her so well, no one would ever find her.

“Why not just tell me what was up, Charge? I could’ve found my own way to hide out and—”

“No. You are not trained to disappear. Not like I am. And I knew you’d never agree to my plan, nor could I risk you being caught while I work on taking out the people who put prices on our heads.”

“People? As in plural?” she asked.

“The Heroin King has an army now. And they are all looking for you. For us .”

“Wonderful.”

“But for better or worse, my plan to keep you out of their reach didn’t work. Good job getting the word out about your situation via the florist site,” he said sarcastically.

She would’ve died in here if she hadn’t. “I’ve had one bottle of water in three days. I haven’t eaten, bathed, or—”

“That message you posted for Olivia went out to the entire group and told them where you are.”

“That was the point.”

“Well, we must have traitors in suite forty-five, Emily, because that information was passed to the Heroin King. It’s just a matter of time before they find a guard willing to kill you. You have to get out of here.”

Um. No shit. “Then get me out. Tell your friends who put me in here that I didn’t kill a cop.”

“That’s the thing. I can’t. I paid a lot of people to stick their necks out and make it look like you’re just another inmate. Undoing it will take time. Weeks. Maybe a month. Something you don’t have.”

Fuck. “Are you kidding right now? What am I supposed to do?”

He scratched the side of his head, avoiding eye contact. “You need to kill a guard. I’ve selected one already.”

Her heart stopped. “What?”

“And you have to do it fast.”

“Why do I need to kill a guard?” she asked.

“Because you will claim the cartel ordered you to do the hit.”

“Charge, I can’t just kill someone—”

“It’s the only way to save your life, Emily. You’ll be immediately transported to another prison until you stand trial for killing the guard because active cartel criminals, which you will become after the hit, are not allowed here. And when they transfer you, I will break you out—something I cannot do here. Security is too tight.”

“Charge. No. I can’t have a murder conviction following me my entire life.”

He stepped up close to her, his lips flat, his eyes hard. “You came back to El Paso after you left the first time. You knew the life you were choosing, Emily.”

It was the sort of life where it didn’t matter if she had a murder conviction, especially because killing was their business. This was a life outside the law, where the only thing that determined if you were good or bad was your moral code. If you killed bad people, you were a good guy. If you killed criminals who sold deadly drugs, you were a good guy. If you killed people who enslaved children and women for sex, you were definitely good.

“I get what you’re saying, Charge, but I can’t murder an innocent guard just to save myself.” That would be crossing the line.

He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to her. She unfolded it. Inside was the name Roberts. “What’s this?”

“The guard who’s on shift tomorrow for visitational escorts is Roberts. I believe you already know her.”

Roberts was the guard she’d bribed to get the message posted on the web.

Charge added, “Roberts has a thing for torturing and raping inmates in this prison. You’d be doing the world a favor.”

Emily's eyes stared at the name. "Why the hell is she going around raping and torturing women here?" Jesus.

"Warden Mitchel, as I've recently discovered, is a psychopath. He hires likeminded people who don't have issues with harming inmates. He also uses their indiscretions as leverage to keep them compliant."

"Charge, how could you put me in here?" She dropped her head and rubbed her brow.

"The warden has done a very thorough job of silencing the prisoners and making any deaths look like your standard inmate violence. He has complete control over this place. If I'd had more time to vet a solution, I would have uncovered the truth about him. Hell, I probably would have found a much better place to hide you to begin with."

Shit. So the warden hired serial killers and rapists. Emily was already terrified of being here, but this was way worse. "Can't you get me out right now? Bribe someone to sneak me out?"

"The best I could do was call in a favor from a friend, who told the warden I'm with a private group interested in renting out the inmates. That's why I'm here so late."

Rent? "I'm not following."

Charge raised a brow. "Rent. As in providing services."

"Sex?" she whispered.

"Not the consensual type, but yes."

She was going to be sick. They loaned out the inmates to be violated. What a bunch

of assholes.

“They think I’m trying out the goods right now,” he added. “I asked for someone who wouldn’t put up a fight, someone who deserved to be punished.”

Her face went pallid. “You mean, they think you’re raping me?”

“Yes. Do you understand now, Emily? You need to kill that guard. You need to get out of here.”

She understood that she was in a fuck ton of trouble, and it was Charge who put her here. “What’s to say they won’t kill me after I take out this guard?”

“Tomorrow, there’ll be a team of lawyers here—the do-gooder types—who are trying to get one of the inmates a new trial. My friend has arranged for the lawyers to request a visit with you, too.”

“Why?”

“They’ve been led to believe you have exculpatory evidence for their client. Roberts is on the schedule tomorrow, which is why I vetted her for you—someone I know deserves to die. When she brings you to see them, you will kill her in front of the lawyers. You’ll tell them you’re a cartel hit man—”

“Hit woman.”

Charge ignored her correction. “And you won’t stand for being rented out for sex. You’ll tell them it’s beneath you to be treated like a common whore.”

“I’m sorry, but the plan is to have me brag about killing people? After killing someone? And then make it sound like I’m upset for not getting the proper respect for

my profession?”

“Yes. And your life depends on selling the story. They are the sorts of lawyers who will want to use the incident as proof that the prison is not being run properly. They’ll immediately file with the court to get you—their key witness—under protection and moved. The warden will have no grounds to deny the request because you will have provided hard evidence that you are exactly what you say: a cartel hit man. Woman. Whatever. And as I’ve already said, this facility is unauthorized to hold any kind of active members—ones who have pull within their organizations.”

This was a lot. “How can you be so sure it’s going to play out like that, Charge?”

He gave her a poignant look. It meant he’d already made sure it would. Maybe someone on that legal team owed him a favor or had been bought off.

“What happens to me in the meantime, before I’m transferred?”

“Right now, I’ll make sure you’re fed and get clean water and a shower. After that, you just have to do your best to stay alive for twenty-four hours.”

“How?” Because after she took out Roberts, they weren’t going to bake her a cake.

Charge gave her a stern look. “You’re going to play the part of a cartel hit man. You’re about to take out a target on their list. Use that. Remind the warden and other guards who they’re fucking with. It’s not just you. It’s who you work for, and those people don’t fuck around. They’re the types who go after families, friends, and assets.”

No, Emily wasn’t working for the cartel, but if they all thought she was, and she had gotten to one of the guards, it would scare the hell out of the others. Maybe. “So you want me to tell them they’re next if they touch me.”

“Tell them their children and spouses are next. Remind them that there’s nowhere to hide. Tell them that the guard you killed was the target, and now that it’s over, to stay out of it.”

Emily whooshed out a long breath. She couldn’t believe this was happening. I can’t believe Charge did this to me . She had no words for how messed up this was. But dealing with Charge or his rationale would have to wait.

“My time is up. Take this.” He handed her a plastic pen.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“It’s the only thing I could get past their metal detectors.”

“Am I supposed to give the guard a good inking?”

“Use your imagination, Emily. You only need one sharp point aimed at the right spot on the neck. Now come closer.”

“Why?”

“Because I need to make it look like I just fucked you,” he said.

“You mean raped me.”

He looked away. “This isn’t easy for me.”

Easy for him? She seethed. “Well, I’m sorry about the smell, Charge, but some asshole put me in a third world prison.”

“We both know that’s not what I meant, Justine.” He’d used her legal name.

“Don’t call me that. Justine is dead.”

He leaned down, grabbed her face, and kissed her. She froze, not expecting it. It was a gentle kiss. Warm, kind, soothing.

She was about to pull away, but he did it first. Then he backhanded her cheek, sending her onto the cement floor with a hard thump.

“You’re worthless, Justine. You’re nothing without me.”

He used the words Ed had spoken the last time he beat her. How did Charge know? Because he’d been scoping out Ed, preparing to take him down, and had been spying on them from a house across the street. Charge had seen and heard everything.

The painful memories flooded back. The fear, the hopelessness, the rage.

Emily lay there, her body shaking with pain. Charge stood over her and tore open her orange shirt.

“Wait. Stop!” she yelled, trying to push him off.

He went for her pants, ripping them at the seam on the side until her pants came down most of the way. “Stop!”

“Shut up, Justine. One more word, one more sound, and I’ll make you wish you were never born. Got it?” Ed’s words.

Charge pounded on the door. Emily sobbed, her mind going back to those memories of her ex. She’d been so weak, so terrified of him.

The guard with the cold eyes, Hellman, entered. He took one look at her trembling



body on the floor and smiled.

“Looks like you had a good time,” he said to Charge, who was pretending to button up his pants.

“I like it when they scream,” Charge said.

“Don’t I know it,” replied Hellman.

That one. I’m going to kill that one, too, Emily thought.

“Make sure she’s cleaned up, fed, and given plenty of exercise,” Charge said. “I like her face, but she needs more meat on her bones. Helps them take the punches better.”

“Yes, sir,” replied Hellman.

“I want her and the five others I discussed with the warden for next week. I’m having a fundraiser.” Charge looked at Emily and blew her a kiss. “See you soon, sweetheart.” He disappeared out of sight.

Emily palmed the pen Charge had given her.

“Get up.” Hellman jerked his head at her.

She slowly got to her feet, pulling the front of her shirt closed with one hand while holding up her torn pants with the other. Her heart was racing, half of it fighting off Ed in her mind, the other half in the here and now, wanting to tear out Charge’s throat for doing that. Yes, it had been to make it look legit. Yes, it had been to save her life. But did he have to hit her or use Ed’s exact words?

She didn’t know whom she wanted to kill more: Charge, the warden, this disgusting

guard Hellman, or Roberts.

She slowly trudged by Hellman. He took her by the elbow, and she jerked it away. "Don't touch me."

Hellman laughed. "Looks like he fucked you hard. Guess he likes 'em dirty."

She glared, almost daring him to touch her again.

He leaned in slowly, placing them nose to nose. "I like 'em dirty, too. After he's done with you next week, I'll be visiting every day, cop killer." He licked his thin lips.

"Why wait?" she snarled, gripping her pen. Of course, she couldn't hurt him if she wanted to escape this prison. It had to be Roberts who went down in front of the lawyers.

He reached out and stroked the raw spot on her cheek where Charge had hit her. "Greedy for more cock. Such a trashy little cunt." He dropped his hand. "But you need to be in good working condition for our customers." He pushed her out in the hallway, noticing a tall blonde guard approaching. "Back to your cell, inmate."

Hellman was suddenly acting professional.

"Hey, Hellman," said the blonde, whose badge read Summers. "What happened to her?"

"She's an animal is what happened. Attacked Debbie earlier today. We locked her in the quiet room, and I guess the day shift forgot to get her out."

Summers looked at Emily's wrists. "You might want to cuff her, Hellman."

“She ain’t going nowhere. Got enough tranqs in her to kill a rhino.” Hellman grabbed Emily’s elbow while she tried to keep her clothes from falling off.

“I’ll take her back to her cell,” Summers said. “You have a call waiting in the break room.”

Hellman gave Emily a stern look—a warning to keep her mouth shut. “You behave for Summers here, cop killer.”

Emily stared back with hatred.

Hellman looked at Summers. “The nurse said to schedule her for a shower first thing in the morning. Oh, and bring her some food and clean water.”

“Now?”

“Yeah. From the back fridge in the kitchen. She said she hasn’t been eating, and the drugs will wear off soon. Feed her now while she’s too high to make a fucking stink about it.” Hellman, the bastard, looked at Emily. “You’re hungry, aren’t you, cop killer?”

Emily snarled, “Yes.”

“There. You see.” Hellman walked away.

“Did he do that to you?” Summer’s eyes swept across Emily’s face.

It was nice to see that not all the guards here were sadistic rapists, but Emily wasn’t going to deviate from the plan. “No. I...did it to myself in that room.”

“And your clothes?” she asked.

“That too.”

Summers sighed, not buying a word of it. “If he or one of the guards hurts you, you need to say something. Inmates are here to pay for their crimes, not to become victims of more crimes. If you deserve more suffering, that’s up to the courts. Not us.”

Emily felt her insides calming. She could tell Summers was a kind woman. “Thank you, ma’am. I’m okay, but I appreciate the concern.”

Summers shook her head. “Come on. Let’s get you to your cell.”

### CHAPTER SEVEN

Emily was given two ham-and-cheese sandwiches on white bread, real orange juice, and a bottle of water. She devoured everything, immediately regretting it. Her stomach was a mess from lack of food, but she forced herself to keep it down. I am not going to die in this place.

That meant making sure she was ready for whatever happened when Roberts came to escort her to see the lawyers. A pen wasn't the ideal weapon, but if thrust properly into the neck, it could pierce the jugular. It would be a question of speed and aim. Speed she was good at. Aim, not so much.

As for killing a guard to save her own life, Charge had to have known this wouldn't be easy. It was why he'd selected someone she could justify ending. Emily wasn't a killer by nature, but she was a protector, and the women in this place were being physically abused by Roberts and the warden's other psycho pets. If she could feel okay about ending anyone's life, this guard was it.

Later that same morning, around seven a.m., Emily was escorted to the showers by a guard who seemed too tired to mess with her. She was uncuffed and then given an entire two minutes to wash her hair and body. She stole some toothpaste from a tube left on the floor and rubbed it on her teeth, working it in with the corner of her clean prison shirt.

Emily was walked back to her cell, where she tucked her pen into the waist of her underwear and sat to wait for Roberts. Almost an hour later, Summers showed up. "Hays, you have visitors."

Emily's stomach lurched. "What—what are you doing here?"

"One of the officers called in sick, so I'm picking up a half shift." She lowered her voice. "I also wanted to check in on you. Change your mind about telling me what really happened last night?"

Oh God. Oh God! Where's Roberts? Emily needed to kill her in front of the lawyers. She could never hurt Summers, even if it meant rotting in this hellhole.

"That's, uh, really nice of you, but I'm fine. I swear," Emily said.

Summers shook her head. "I'm here on weekends and Wednesdays if you ever change your mind."

"Who's here to see me?" Emily asked, stalling for time.

Summers shrugged. "Some lawyers."

"Um. Okay." Charge had said to kill a guard in front of the lawyers, but did she really need to kill? Couldn't she simply attack?

Fuck. Even that would feel wrong.

Summers led Emily downstairs to the section of the prison for visitors. Emily's hands began to shake, sweat dripping down her brow.

"You all right?" Summers asked.

Not even a little. "I'm just not a fan of this place."

"Prison isn't supposed to be fun."

They stopped in front of a door, which Emily assumed was a visitation room. “I know, but this place is especially terrifying, which is why I was asked to kill Roberts. But now you showed up.”

Summers’s demeanor instantly shifted. She stepped back, reaching for her stun gun.

“No. No. I’m not going to hurt you. If that was my goal, I wouldn’t tell you a thing, right?”

Summers didn’t budge. Emily could tell she wasn’t foolish enough to trust a criminal. Especially one who just confessed to being there to kill a guard.

“I can tell you’re a good person,” Emily said. “Which is why I’m going out on a limb here. The cartel wants Roberts dead,” Emily lied. “Apparently, she killed someone, and they want revenge.”

Summers frowned. “The cartel doesn’t have inmates here.”

Emily arched a brow. “I can prove I was sent here to do a hit. Look up my name, Justine Hays, on the internet. You won’t see any news about a trial or conviction. That’s because it was all arranged to get me inside.”

Summers narrowed her eyes. “If what you’re saying is true, why tell me?”

“I don’t want to do the hit. And I sure as fuck don’t want to be here, but the cartel didn’t give me a choice.” Emily drew a breath. “If you can help me get transferred out of this prison, I can buy protection with a rival cartel gang,” she lied again. Really, she just needed to give Charge a chance to break her out during transport. “It’s the only way I’ll survive until I can figure out what to do.” It was the world’s flimsiest story, but it was the best Emily could think up on the fly. Please buy it? Please?

Summers stared, as if trying to work out why she should care or lift a finger.

“Roberts tortures the inmates,” Emily added. “Sexually. And she doesn’t do it alone.”

“You’re saying Warden Mitchel is in on this?” Summers asked.

“Yes. He rents out the inmates for sex. I’m already teed up for a party next week. That’s why Hellman came to see me last night as a sort of warm-up.” Another lie.

Summer stared. “I knew it. I knew he was up to something.”

“You have to get me out of here,” Emily said. “Tell the warden I’m cartel. Then he’ll have to send me somewhere else.”

“He’d want proof.”

“It’s not like the cartel gives out membership cards.” Emily pleaded with her eyes. “Please help me?”

Summers inhaled slowly. “I’ll make a few calls and see what I can do. In the meantime, you’re expected to meet with the lawyers.” She jerked her head toward the door.

“Better just take me back to my cell.”

“You sure?”

“I have nothing to tell them.”

\*\*\*



“I heard you’re no longer needed next week.” Hellman stood over Emily. She didn’t know the time, but it had to be early afternoon.

“What are you doing in my cell?” She sat up and backed herself against the wall, reaching for the pen she hid under her pillow.

“Warden says you’re being shipped out to a different prison.”

Emily exhaled. So Summers had come through. What had she told the warden to convince him?

“Did he mention why I’m being moved?” Emily asked for informational purposes.

“You opened your mouth about his little side business.” Hellman began unbuckling his belt. “Do you know what happens to inmates who talk?”

Emily’s hand began shaking under her pillow as she clenched the pen. “What happens?”

“Same thing that happened to Summers.”

Oh no. “What—what did you do to her?”

Hellman smiled. “You killed her. Cold blood. You’ll get the chair this time.”

What? Summers was dead? Emily’s heart sank. She must’ve confronted the warden, and the warden decided to keep her from talking.

Hellman stepped forward, whipping out his cock. It was the smallest, thinnest piece of meat she’d ever seen. “What are you going to do with that? Stir your coffee?”

Hellman slapped her. “Shut the fuck up, or you’ll spend your last few days in the hole, getting fucked by every guard in here.”

Emily cupped her stinging cheek, anger pumping in her veins. She was so damned tired of being hit! No more...

“Do you know what I did for a living, Hellman?” She smiled. “I ran a group of extremely skilled, well-connected hit men who absolutely love killing men like you. Sometimes, they even do it for free. That’s how much they enjoy it.”

“That supposed to scare me?” he said, still holding his sad little swizzle stick. “That story ain’t gonna save you, sweetheart.”

“No, but this will.” She pulled out the pen and lunged. Hellman fell over, and she straddled him quickly, pushing one elbow into his cheek. She pierced his neck and quickly placed his hand over the wound. “That’s a hole in your neck, Hellman. So if I were you, I’d keep my hand pressed hard.”

She slid off him and got to her feet, backing away. “Now, you’re going to get up, leave my cell, and close the door. And when you scream for help and they ask what happened, you’re going to tell the warden that my team will go after anyone who comes near me. They’ll go after everyone you love, everyone you care about.” Not exactly true, but she had to try something to keep these psychos away.

He got to his feet, thick syrupy blood gushing between his fingers and down his neck.

“Hurry up before you bleed to death,” Emily said.

He rushed outside, closing her cell door behind him.

“Help! Help!” she could faintly hear him yell.

Through the tiny glass window, Emily spotted one of the female guards coming to his rescue.

“That was for Summers, you pig.”

### CHAPTER EIGHT

It took little time for the beatings to start. On the first day, the guards focused on her legs, using clubs. The second day, her arms. The third day, her back. She knew today would be the face. Or worse.

Emily guessed that Hellman had either died before talking to the warden, or he hadn't sold her story successfully. Either way, it had been worth it. If Hellman lived, he'd think twice before touching a woman again.

Still, that didn't resolve the Roberts issue, nor the warden issue or the "everyone else who was sick as fuck in this place" issue. They were an organized group of degenerates preying on inmates.

Not that Emily didn't believe in punishment for one's crime. If you strangled your wife, shot ten people in a drive-by, or killed fifty kids with fent, you had to pay. Just like Ed had to pay for what he'd done to the trafficking victims.

However, it wasn't up to the employees of the prison to decide the punishment. That was up to the law. The prison staff's job, plain and simple, was to carry out the legal punishment and nothing more. Emily had been tortured many times by Ed and then by the cartel who'd captured her once. Charge had saved her, but not before they'd hit her and shot her up. Not fun. In short, torturing people wasn't okay. Not even criminals. They were human beings, too. Daughters, sons, mothers, fathers. No, there could be no sympathy for the truly cruel individuals of this world, but the abuse in this place wasn't about them so much as it was about living in a decent society.

Good people deserved to know that the law would protect them. Good people deserved a legal system and government who obeyed the law—aka the will of the people. People had to know that if they were somehow convicted of a crime—wrongfully or deservedly—that they wouldn't be beaten and raped by the very people paid to carry out their incarceration. Punishment had to be carried out legally. Period. Otherwise, what were we? Animals? Third world thugs?

Emily sighed. Who was she to lecture anyone about legal justice? She'd just tried to kill a man with a pen. Hell, maybe she'd succeeded. Judge, jury, and executioner here. And let's not forget working for a group of vigilantes.

As Emily lay on the concrete floor, unable to move, she couldn't stop thinking about the choices she'd made leading to this moment. It had all started when she was seventeen after her legal guardian, Aunt Mary, died. Her father, Big Carl, had died five years before at sea, living the life of a North Atlantic fisherman, and Emily's mother had run off when she was little. With everyone gone, and Emily not being eighteen yet, she'd been placed in a group home.

That was the moment her life had really begun this slow crawl towards death. She had been young and so alone. She'd been placed in a new town, new school, new home where everyone either ignored her or looked at her like she was trash. And for what? Because the people she'd loved were dead?

Justine Hays hadn't been trash. She'd been a child who'd lost everything and everyone.

It was no wonder that she welcomed the first hand of friendship to reach out—a girl at the group home named Larissa. Larissa had come there under very different circumstances. The crackwhore mom. The no-show dad. The state intervening after Larissa's fifth arrest for stealing and possession. The home was where they'd placed Larissa after a year in juvy.

When Emily met her, however, she didn't see Larissa's past or recklessness. She saw another girl her age who was angry at the world, saying, "Fuck it. Let's party. What else do I have to live for?"

Larissa's eighteenth birthday had come two weeks before Emily's. The moment she walked out of the home, Larissa took her to a dive bar where IDs weren't needed. Just cash.

They drank. They laughed. They ate the most disgusting chilidogs. Later that night, Monica, another girl who'd left the home several months earlier, showed up. In a drunken stupor, the three decided to go to Atlantic City.

When Emily asked what they'd do for money, Monica told her not to worry. "We're hot. We're young. We don't need money."

Emily would soon find out that what Monica had really meant was hitting the clubs and bars, looking for old horny men who'd pay for things—booze, food, a room—in exchange for sex.

"That makes us prostitutes," Emily had argued with Larissa that first night in Atlantic City.

"Women let men take them out, buy them clothes, cars, and even houses. Fucking in exchange for pampering isn't prostitution. It's life. It's what everyone does."

"No. Not everyone," Emily had said.

"Wake up, girl. Even if you work at a gas station, you're required to haul your ass down there and stand around all day. You're using your body for money. I mean, not like you can just show up with your mind and get a paycheck."

Emily hadn't agreed, nor did she participate, but her decision hadn't been any better. The other girls flirted, danced, and fucked. And in return, Emily ate. She had a clean bed every night. She had clean clothes. She found herself living off them, and it somehow felt worse than if she'd done all those things herself.

After one week, she told Larissa she was going back to Maine to look for work.

Larissa gave her two hundred bucks and then disappeared inside the motel without a word.

Maybe that was the moment things truly changed for me. Emily had bought a bus ticket and went to a diner across the street to wait for her departure. That was when Ed walked in. Nice suit. Tall. Broad shoulders. Hot. He looked so confident and respectable. She couldn't take her eyes off him.

After a few minutes of trading side glances, he came over and sat next to her at the counter.

Looking back, she now knew he'd been there fishing for "merchandise." What made him take her out to dinner that night, she'd never really know, but in a strange, sick way, she was grateful he had. Otherwise, she would've ended up in one of those houses where women were locked up and, well, the worst happened.

Emily laughed, rolling onto her side, the cool concrete soothing her swollen leg. "How fucking sad." She was actually grateful for being his punching-bag wife.

"Good morning, Justine. Ready for breakfast?" said a sour female voice, one Emily wasn't familiar with.

"Go fuck yourself." She stared at the wall, remembering how she used to cower when Ed would play the same games. But if this was her last day on earth, she'd spend it as

a whole person. Not some street dog people kick.

“You can eat or not. I don’t give a shit, inmate. Either way, you’re leaving in thirty minutes.”

Emily slowly turned her head, her body screaming with pain as the muscles stretched. “Where am I going?”

“To hell, where you belong. And after that, hopefully the electric chair for murder.”

“I didn’t kill Summers,” she muttered.

“Maybe not, but you sure as hell killed Hellman.”

Emily smiled and turned her head back toward the wall. Good riddance, motherfucker.

\*\*\*

“I can’t take her like that,” said the US marshal standing just outside the door of the office where they admitted prisoners or released them. “They’ll ask what happened, and I’m not about to try to explain it.”

Sitting against the wall inside the office, Emily heard the warden grumble something under his breath.

“No,” said the marshal, “you either give me paperwork—a full incident report, signed off by you, the involved staff, and the doctor—or she stays here until she doesn’t look like she’s been through a meat grinder.”

Did she really look that bad? Funny, because she actually felt pretty good,



considering her ribs hurt and she had bruises on every inch of her body.

“You should see what the cartel did to me once,” she mumbled. “This is nothing.”

“What did she say?” asked the marshal.

“Who the fuck cares? You need to take her.” Warden Mitchel lowered his voice, but Emily could still make out his words. “I’m already under fire for the deaths of two staff members, thanks to her.”

“And?” said the marshal.

“I can’t guarantee her safety. Just look at what they did to her,” said the warden.

“You run this place.”

“The staff isn’t exactly under twenty-four-hour surveillance, if you know what I mean. The prison is designed to monitor inmates, not correctional officers.”

Liar. Charge had said that the warden ran things and hired everyone. He had complete control of this place. If Warden Mitchel wanted her shipped out, it had to be for another reason.

Mitchel added, “I need her gone before she ends up dead and I’ve got another investigation to deal with. Just name your price.”

Ah. There’s the real reason. Mitchel didn’t want to come under more fire because then someone might start digging around and find out about his side hustle.

“Sorry, but no,” said the marshal. “Take it up with my boss if you want, but I’m not touching this with a ten-foot pole unless it’s by the book.”

Emily heard the man walking away and Mitchel swearing under his breath.

“So I guess you have to keep me alive now, huh, Warden?” she mumbled.

He marched inside the office. “Do you have any idea the mess you’ve caused?”

“You started it,” Emily replied.

“Think you’re funny?”

“Not really.” Because now that her head had cleared a little, she realized that she needed that marshal to transfer her to another prison so that Charge could break her free.

“Let me talk to the marshal. I can convince him to take me,” she said.

“How?”

“Convincing people is my specialty.” So was taking a punch, apparently. “Just give me two seconds with him.” She winced and cradled her sore ribs.

“Why should I trust you?”

“Because I want to live.” She coughed and spit on the floor.

“I’ll be back, Justine. But if you double-cross me, I’ll personally make sure you never see the light of day.”

“I believe you.”

A few minutes later, the marshal returned. He was a clean-cut man with leathery skin,

dark eyes, and a bald head.

“What do you want to tell me?” he asked.

She tried to smile. “What would it take to convince you to transfer me out of here right now?”

“Proper documentation of how you got your wounds and that you won’t die during transport.”

“What if I told you that the person responsible is dead now and there were no witnesses?” she asked.

“Then I’d say you have to stay here until you’re healed. I’m not getting involved.”

“You’ve already seen me, and you know a staff member did this in retaliation for killing two guards. All I’m asking for is my day in court, which I won’t get if I stay here.”

“Why did you kill them?” he asked.

She had two choices: tell the truth or make up a big ugly lie to scare the crap out of him. Lie. “One guard pissed off my boss, so I was ordered to kill him. The other tried to rape me. Either way, my boss has eyes everywhere. They know you’re here, and they’ll know you refused to help me. Is that what you want?”

“You threatening me?” asked the marshal.

She laughed. “Funny, that’s just what the last guy said. To which I replied, ‘Nope. Just telling the truth.’ He didn’t believe me either when I said I’d kill him if he touched me. Now, I’m telling you that my boss won’t be happy if you leave me here

to die.”

Jesus, where did she come up with this BS?

The marshal shook his head. “And if I transfer you? How am I going to explain your condition?”

“Anyone who asks why I look like a spoiled banana will be told the truth: the staff here did this—just like I told you. Then you go your way. I go mine.”

He looked away for a moment.

She added, “Hey, it’s not like I’m asking you to break me out. I’m just going to a different prison.”

“Fine. I’ll sign for you, but if you give me any trouble, I’ll bring you right back.”

Relief washed over her. She’d be getting away from this terrible nightmare. Afterwards, she’d deal with Charge and break ties forever. She wanted out. No more hit men, cartels, suite forty-five, or prisons. “I’ll be on my best behavior. I promise.”

### CHAPTER NINE

With her hands shackled to her waist, Emily was handed over to the marshal and taken to a waiting van inside the prison's transportation yard. Her eager heart raced with anticipation.

God, I hope no one gets hurt. Least of all the marshal. Beside him, there was a driver—something Charge should easily know how to handle without casualties.

Charge has a plan. He always does.

She got into the van, and they cuffed one wrist to a chain connected to a steel loop on the van floor. The marshal took the seat behind her, and they got on their way.

“Which prison are you taking me to?” she asked.

“Florence Federal Penitentiary in Colorado.”

“Is it bad?” she asked.

“You’ll fit right in.”

So lots of murderers . “What’s the gang situation?”

“Typical.”

“Meaning?” she asked.

“It’s where the biggest and brightest go to vacation. What do you think I mean?”

Emily could only imagine the type of women incarcerated there. Thank God I’m not actually going. In a few hours, she’d be free. Well, freer. She still had a price on her head, and Charge would probably want her to lie low for a minute while he took care of things. Of course, she’d tell him to pound sand and then take the million in cash she had accidentally stolen from the Heroin King and buried near the cabin. Afterwards, she’d never look back.

The marshal added, “I’m sure your people will be happy to see you.”

“My people?”

“I assume you work for organized crime since you mentioned your boss had you kill a guard.”

“Oh. That. Well, they’re not my people.”

He didn’t reply. Likely because he didn’t care.

“Thank you again for helping me,” she said.

“Did I have a choice?”

He actually had. “Either way, thank you.”

The conversation cut off after that, and with each passing minute, Emily became more anxious. Where was Charge?

After two hours, her anxiousness notched up to panic. “How much longer?” Emily asked. “I have to pee.”

“Half hour,” said the driver.

Dammit. Where was Charge? He hadn’t told her the plan, but she’d assumed Charge would intercept the van well before they arrived at the new prison.

Of course, the plan had changed a little in terms of which guard died, but she’d achieved the desired result. Got a transfer. Stayed alive. But where was he? Maybe word hadn’t gotten to him about her transfer. Please, please, please show up, Charge.

Her stomach knotted into a painful twist, and she began to hyperventilate.

“You all right?” asked the marshal as they turned down a long road. The sign said they were only ten miles away now.

“Sure. Just excited to see my new home.” Charge. What the fuck! You can’t do this to me. But apparently, he could. And now she was really going to a prison filled with people who had ten million reasons to kill her.

\*\*\*

By the time the van pulled up to the prison’s back entrance, Emily was in a full-blown meltdown, trying to come up with ways to get herself out of this and not die in prison. There was the option to bribe a guard again to ensure she was protected, but if they already knew she’d killed one—or two—at her last prison, they wouldn’t be so keen to help.

Makes me wonder what happened to Roberts. She’d never come back to claim her bribe money. Seemed odd because it was a ton of cash. Five hundred thousand dollars.

The other option was to land in solitary. Can’t be too hard, right? Just attack an

inmate or a guard?

Problem was, those weren't long-term solutions. If she was going to be here for weeks, months, or, God forbid, longer, then she'd have to do more than keep her head down.

Dammit, Charge. Where are you? Had he double-crossed her? Killed by the Heroin King or one of his disgruntled clients over losing control of the border? Then, there was the Colombian, one of Charge's biggest clients.

At first, when Emily began working for suite forty-five, Charge wouldn't talk about the various kinds of funding for the group. She'd deduced that some of the money came from your everyday hits, i.e., killing pedos, murderers, and rapists who'd escaped the law. Then there was the secret funding from the local communities' leaders who'd just needed help. But from time to time, Charge would mention "the Colombian." Eventually, she'd learn that the Colombian was Bernardo Castillo, the world's largest cocaine trafficker.

Yes, suite forty-five worked for a narco. Very bad. Except that Bernardo was the lesser of evils among the cartels in that he refused to traffic heroin, fent, children, or women. And he kept most of the violence contained. When the Heroin King began edging in, that was when things got ugly.

Now, Bernardo was completely out, as was suite forty-five. It wasn't a stretch to imagine that Charge was on Bernardo's shit list for the epic fail.

Finally, and most importantly, somehow during that fight for the border, the Heroin King's guys got a hold of Bernardo's daughter. Emily had received the shock of her life when she'd learned that the young woman ended up trafficked to Ed. Twist of fate. Because that was how Emily had crossed paths with Charge, who'd been ordered to find Bernardo's daughter and kill whoever had her: Ed. Charge had been



mid-prep for the job, watching Ed's every move, but he never completed the contract. Everything had blown up with Ed's operation before Charge got the chance.

I'd bet my million dollars that Bernardo the Colombian isn't going to let that fly. It wasn't like the guy was a kind and forgiving narco just because he wasn't as greedy or ruthless as the Heroin King, a monster.

The thought made her realize just how much danger they were both in. If the Heroin King had a contract out on her, this prison would be the perfect place to take her out. As for Charge, the only reason for him not showing today was death.

Emily's stomach lurched. The thought of Charge being dead twisted her heart. But why? She should be furious with him for getting her into this mess. Then there were the lies, the dangerous situations he'd put her in again and again, and...

How he saved me. She wasn't simply referring to the times he'd come to her rescue either. She'd been at the lowest point in her life when she met him, still mentally trapped inside a world painted by Ed. In that world, she'd been scared all the time.

Charge had changed that, and not through his words. He simply wouldn't accept her excuses or fear, which were products of being brainwashed by Ed. To be clear, Charge didn't show her who she was, he made her show herself. She'd had to face men with guns chasing her, getting left behind after a hit in Juarez, and being kidnapped by the cartel. She'd had to act as muscle for a loan shark to earn the money needed to pay a ransom, and she'd also faced off with car thieves who'd kidnapped Olivia.

Now, I guess I can add surviving a supermax to that list. The point was, Charge never patted her on her head and told her nicely to just do her best. He said, "Go fucking do it. Take care of business. Or else." Sometimes, the "or else" came from the very violent criminals pursuing her, but it didn't matter. Again and again, she'd faced

terrifying, life-or-death situations, and she'd stepped up. At least if she died in this place, she would go out knowing one thing: She was a lion.

The van pulled inside the prison yard and parked. Emily's blood pressure shot up, her head pounding. This was happening. She was about to enter a regular prison. Where the inmates mingled and didn't live in solitary. It would probably be overcrowded, filled with every gang imaginable, and not enough staff. Aka her worst nightmare.

No, no. They'll put me in the high-risk section. She'd just killed two prison guards. Well, technically one, but they didn't care.

"End of the line, Hays," said the marshal.

"Did you have to put it like that?" Because she fully intended on surviving this place.

A man in a beige correctional officer's uniform slid open the side door. He had deep frown lines, a beer gut, and huge arms. He looked like the type of man who cracked skulls during the day and drank away his stress at night.

"Justine Hays. Welcome to Florence Penitentiary," he said.

Emily watched him unlock the chain connecting her to the floor of the van.

"Thank you," she replied grimly.

"We're told by Warden Mitchel that you're a very special guest." He pointed for her to step out.

So he did know about the dead guards. Probably knew she was doing time for killing a cop, too. "It was self-defense."

“Sure it was.” He chuckled. “Out you go, inmate. We’ll get you settled into a nice big cell with gen pop.”

Gen pop? That was the lowest level of security in a prison, meaning hundreds of prisoners would have access to her cell, her shower time, and, more frighteningly, her.

“But I’m dangerous. Do you really want me mixing with the other inmates?” Emily said, hoping to sway him.

“Who do you think is going to teach you some manners?”

Emily doubted he was referring to crossing her legs or using a napkin. Prison manners likely meant learning whom to kiss up to so you didn’t get stabbed. Maybe it meant giving out sexual favors to the guards for food or killing other inmates in order to prove allegiance to a group. Who knew? Honestly, she was going off what she’d seen in movies. Whichever the case, she doubted the guards were going to play nice if they already knew she’d killed one of their own.

Emily looked behind her at the marshal, who didn’t seem one bit interested in this conversation. Probably because he hadn’t appreciated her veiled threats earlier. Now, she was someone else’s problem.

Fuck. Emily climbed out of the van. “Any chance I’ll get to speak to a lawyer?”

“For what?” the guard asked.

“You know, for what Warden Mitchel told you. I assume I’ll be tried for it.”

“Not sure what you mean.” He gave her a sinister, knowing look.

Oh God. They're going to handle things here . Personally. She never imagined being put in prison, and certainly not one as bad as the supermax. But this place just might be the worst of all. Inmates and guards trying to put my head on a stake.

You've survived worse, Emily. You'll survive here, too. But why did it feel like this next chapter would be a test of everything she'd learned to survive?

Probably because it would be.

### CHAPTER TEN

The settling-in process here had been way different than the other place. Mostly because she'd had to endure a cavity search in a cold, gray, concrete room lacking any signs of humanity. Yes, it was prison, but there were few things more degrading in life than bending over and showing two strangers your privates.

At least there's clean water. Her cell had a cleanish sink and toilet, too. Also different was that there were two bunks, and one cellmate read law books. A thick stack of them sat on the windowsill next to a pile of old gossip magazines.

"Where is everyone?" Emily asked the guard who'd escorted her to the cell after giving her a new set of orange clothes, toilet paper, and a small bag of toiletries. The slide-on tennis shoes were white, cheap, and uncomfortable, but they were new, so no complaints. After leaving Ed, she'd survived on Dollar Store snacks and could only afford thrift-store clearance items.

"They're all at work," said the guard. "Laundry room."

"Will I get a job?" Emily asked.

The woman laughed. "You won't last that long, stick girl."

Stick girl. Nice, she thought sarcastically, though it was better than narco chum or fertilizer in waiting.

Emily stored her stuff in a little cubby by the window and made her bed. One sheet.

One scratchy gray blanket. Both nicer than the supermax. She slid into bed, hoping to take a minute to calm her nerves. The last thing she wanted was to come off as easy pickings.

Two minutes in, a woman with neck tats depicting bloody knives walked in, climbed the creaking bunk, and plopped down above her. Not one word. Though, her eyes had been loud and clear: “Come near me, piss me off, I’ll shank your ass.”

Fine by me. I’m not in a talking mood either. Emily closed her eyes.

A few minutes later, a small party of three popped by from the Bible team to welcome her, aka “Join us if you want to live,” followed by the white power ladies. Scary as hell. Emily just nodded and said nothing.

She was just about to ask herself if the real troublemakers would show up when they did. Four or five different gangs passed by her open cell to size her up. No doubt for a shakedown later on.

“Fresh meat must get them excited,” she muttered to herself.

“Who the fuck are you?” said a small brunette, stopping in the doorway. She had short hair and full sleeves of quotes in cursive.

Emily looked up from her bunk. “No one.”

“You wanna play it that way, huh?”

Emily looked away. Better to not engage.

The woman strutted in, grabbed a law book from the sill, and plopped down on the lower bunk across from Emily. “Look, girl. Talk. Don’t talk. Don’t care. But if you

wanna keep that blood inside your body, I suggest you start making friends.”

“Friends can’t help. Not when the guards are going to get me first.” Or the cartel members once they realize who I am.

“Watchoodo?” she asked.

Emily shrugged. “They say I killed two guards in the supermax.”

“Did you?”

“Just one. He tried to rape me. Took him out with a pen.”

The woman laughed. “Girl, you’re a fucking hero.”

“No. Just a survivor.”

“Yeah, well, you’re right about one thing, the guards won’t let you live long after that, but they ain’t gonna get their hands dirty. They’ll just pay someone here to do it.”

“So how many packs of ramen is my life worth?” That was what they supposedly used as currency in these places, right?

“Five. Maybe six.”

“I’m worth less than a gas station burrito. Good to know,” Emily said.

“Look, I ain’t saying I can help, because at the end of the day, we’re all on our own here, but I can buy you some time.”

“How much time?” Emily asked.

“A day or two,” the woman replied. “You got money?”

Emily nodded. “A little. But I can’t get to it right away. I need my friend to access it and—”

“How much you got?”

The woman across from Emily might be smiling, but she knew she was being preyed on. “My husband was a corrupt FBI agent. Trafficked women. He got caught, but that means our assets were frozen. He hid a few thousand in a safety-deposit box,” she lied. “But what good is money here?”

“I get out in a week. And my girls here, well, they could use some commissary funds. Yanno?”

Ah. “Well, if you can keep me alive for a few weeks, I’ll have my friend deposit the money wherever you like.”

“Two days.”

“What?” Emily asked.

“A few thousand will buy you two days.”

Now the teeth were out. “I don’t run my friend’s schedule. He’ll get here when he does, so it’s not like—”

“Two days. He gets me two large, or we’ll be the ones taking you out for the guards.”



Emily swallowed. She could mention that she had no way of getting a hold of Charge, but it wouldn't make a difference.

"We got a deal?" the woman asked.

Emily nodded.

"Good. My name is Lita, by the way. That one is Knives." She pointed to the bunk over Emily.

Knives. Who would've guessed? "I go by Emily. What about the other cellmate?" Her eyes moved to the bed above Lita.

"Oh. She dead. Stabbed yesterday. Welcome to puta -fucking hell, Emily."

\*\*\*

Food. Yes, God. Food. Emily had never been so happy to see canned string beans, soggy mac-n-cheese, and a browning apple slice in her entire life. It hadn't even bothered her when Lita took her orange Jell-O, another payment installment for keeping Emily alive for forty-eight hours. As long as she had something to eat and clean water, it was better than the last place.

During dinner, Emily was introduced to Lita's other "friends," who all worked in laundry and were in for murder, attempted murder, or kidnapping. As they ate and talked shit about the other inmates, Emily felt all eyes in the cafeteria on her, including the guards'.

"Why's everyone staring?" Emily asked Lita.

"You're a legend, girl. We get a lot of cop killers here, but a guard killer, too?" She

slapped Emily on the shoulder. “You royalty, man.”

Emily tried not to react, keeping her eyes glued to her tray in the noisy mess hall. She hadn’t killed a cop, and if she had, she wouldn’t feel proud. Not even if the officer had been a corrupt rapist like Hellman. Bottom line, killing wasn’t glamorous or fun. It was dark and savage. It left a permanent mark on a person’s soul, even if the world was a better place with one less violent asshole in it.

This was the reason she respected Charge. He’d come to grips with his place in the world, whereas she would never get used to taking a life, no matter what. That didn’t mean she wouldn’t do it, but it was the truth. Killing wasn’t fun.

Lita leaned in. “Just remember, girl. Tick tock. Money talks.”

Emily finished off her last bite of apple. “Just waiting for the bank to show up.” That was, if Charge was still alive. It was possible he might not be. In which case, she was screwed. Emotionally and physically. All this time to reflect was making her see that her attachment to Charge wasn’t just about survival. After all, there was that confession he’d made right after she’d saved him from Dearheart. Did he mean it?

Emily pushed away the thought like she’d done a thousand times. Did her no good to think about it when her energy had to go to surviving. Not into hit men.

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Hays! Your lawyer’s here!”

Early the next morning, Emily was woken by one of the guards screaming for her to get her ass out of bed. It was barely light out, which meant the odds of this being a real visit were low. Oh, and then there was the fact that she didn’t have a lawyer.

Emily looked at Lita, who was rubbing her eyes in the lower bunk across from her.

“What do I do?” Emily whispered.

“Why you lookin’ at me for? I ain’t got nothin’ to do with this. No skin to play.”

What did that mean? No skin. The only answer was that Lita had no leverage when it came to the guards hauling Emily off to a private cell for some good old-fashioned murder.

“Maybe next time,” Emily hissed, “be more specific when you offer to keep someone alive for two days.”

“Hey, I’m in prison, bitch. Not like anything’s guaranteed here.”

No kidding. Emily got up and slid on her shoes. “Isn’t it a little early for lawyers?” she asked the guard.

“I was told to come get you. So I’m getting you. Move, inmate.” His eyes were cold

and heartless.

Yep. Going to die now . Well, at least Lita the Soulless wouldn't get her money.

The guard cuffed Emily's hands in the front, and they proceeded through several sets of heavy doors with cameras encased in protective cages over them. Each door opened remotely with a loud buzz. Security was tight here.

The guard stopped in front of a door with a big glass window. Inside, Charge sat at a table, wearing a gray suit and black tie.

Her heart leapt. He's alive.

The guard let her in, and she locked eyes with Charge. She sat across from him, trying to form a coherent word while the guard cuffed her to the table.

Once he left, she leaned in. "What happened? I thought you were dead."

Charge growled in a low voice, "What happened was that you were supposed to do a job, and you didn't."

"Job?"

"I gave you specific instructions, and you didn't carry them out. You have no one but yourself to blame."

Emily's blood rushed through her veins, panic setting in. Or perhaps it was anger. She wasn't sure yet. "Why did you...call it 'a job'?"

Charge stared with those ice-cold eyes.

That's what this is? "Did you get me incarcerated to do a hit on Roberts?"

"Emily," Charge warned, like she shouldn't even go there.

She ignored him. "Answer me, goddammit. Is this whole thing really about a contract?" Her face flushed with rage because she already knew the answer. She just wanted to hear him say it.

"What 'whole thing' are you referring to?" he snarled. "All you had to do was kill one person. One."

Holy shit. Holy fucking shit! This had nothing to do with keeping her safe. Getting her into the supermax was about doing a hit. He'd set her up again. He'd lied. Again. I knew better than to trust him. Dammit, Emily! What's the matter with you?

He added, "I'm out here scrambling like hell to keep us both alive, not to mention save suite forty-five."

"Did you just say that you hung me out to dry because you were too busy?"

"I didn't say that, but my operators are being hunted, and I must put the team over my life, your life, or anyone else's. You know that."

That was terrifying news about the team, but this wasn't about them. This was about Charge manipulating her and making choices "for the greater good" without consulting her. It was about him hurling a colossal fireball of destruction at the trust between them. The irony was that if he'd told her the truth and laid out the situation, she probably would have gone along with the plan. But he'd robbed her of a choice. Again. He'd played with her life. Again.

Emily's bitter rage bubbled over. "I thought you loved me," she spat, now knowing

the confession he'd made after she'd saved him from Dearheart all those weeks ago was just another lie.

Honestly, she'd dismissed Charge's words as a moment of weakness after he'd been pumped full of painkillers, but afterwards, while she'd been nursing him back to health, she began to wonder if he'd meant it.

The morning of her arrest, when Charge just stood in the crowd, had been pretty solid proof that his love confession wasn't real, but a tiny part of her kept clinging to a thread of "what if?"

Now, there was no doubt left. No room for hope. Not that she'd actually hoped anything would happen between them. He was a hit man, not dating material. He's a cold-hearted, manipulative asshole!

Charge jerked his head back, like he'd been taken off guard. "What's that have to do with anything?"

"It's everything." Because he'd told her that while he'd been preparing to do the hit on Ed, he'd watched her from afar and fallen for her. He'd said it was the reason he'd helped her after she'd run from Ed. "You've been playing me this entire time. Haven't you? The story about you loving me was a scam to get me to keep working for you." And it had worked. He'd probably done it because he believed she'd eventually lead him to Ed.

"I don't have time for this right now. And I've proven my loyalty to you."

"No. You said whatever you had to in order to make me trust you." She hung her head. "I can't believe I fell for it." Not to mention, she genuinely cared for Charge. She'd taken a life for him. She'd risked her own ass, too.

“I’m sorry you think that,” he said smugly, “but it doesn’t change the situation or what has to be done next.”

“And just what’s that? Am I supposed to take out the warden next? Or the head of one of the gangs here so you get paid?” She pushed back in her chair. “I’m done, Charge. Done.”

“Don’t be silly. You won’t get out of this prison alive unless you pull your head from your ass, Justine, and follow my instructions.”

This again. And why did he always call her Justine when he wanted to control her? Did he think it was a psychological magic wand to garner compliance?

He went on, “You only have a day, two max, before someone realizes you have a ten-million-dollar price on your head. You don’t have much time, but it’s enough time to—”

“No, Charge. No more. I’m not buying into your crap. I mean, look at where I am.” She tried to throw her hands in the air, but they were chained to the table. “We both know I’m not getting out of here. Not after I killed that guard. At best, I’ll survive a week, and if it’s all the same to you, I’d like to enjoy what little time I have left.”

Right on cue, the guard came through the door. “Time’s up.” He freed her cuffs from the table while Charge stared with a pulsing jaw covered in a sheen of inky stubble.

“Yes, it is,” she said. Maybe it was poetic justice getting to die in this place. She’d done terrible things in her life, but none were more deserving of punishment than being that coward Justine Hays. She’d known for a long while what Ed, his brother, and friends were doing for money, yet she’d let it go on. Didn’t once try to stop them until the teen girls came into the mix. All those women who suffered and had been abused and all she’d done was sit and cower from Ed’s fists.

I deserve to die here. Not for killing thugs or rapists, but because she'd looked the other way when innocent people were hurting. And because she'd been stupid enough to trust a hit man.



### CHAPTER TWELVE

“You get the money, girl?” Lita asked the second Emily walked into the cell.

“No. And there won’t be any, so do what you gotta do.” Emily slid into the lower bunk, pulling the charcoal gray blanket up to her chin.

“We had a deal.”

“Deal’s fucking off, so either kill me or shut the hell up.”

Lita raised her hands. “Whoa, girl. I got six days left. Not getting my hands dirty.”

Emily gave her a look. “Just like you weren’t really going to protect me, right?”

“Can’t blame a girl for tryin’ to make a buck.”

Emily’s bubbling rage flowed into a steady stream of bitterness as the truth about Charge seeped in. Word by word, lie by lie, he’d played her.

“Get up, Lita.” Emily hopped from her bunk, tossing the blanket to the floor while Knives roused from her sleep to watch what was about to go down.

“Wassup witchoo, girl?” Lita said, staying put.

“I’ll tell you what’s up,” Emily seethed. “I was manipulated by a hit man into running an entire group of them in El Paso, partially funded by the world’s biggest cocaine

dealer, who controlled the border for years, which sadly was a better alternative to what we have now: the Heroin King. Narcos aren't nice men, but the Heroin King's the sort who doesn't mind selling children to make a buck. What's up is that I took out his lead sicario , and I stole a million dollars from him after my team members killed his son." What a horrible night that had been. "Now there's a price on my head for it. So if you want to know what's up , the answer is I've got bigger issues than you, and I'm not taking your shit. Tell everyone here, including the guards, that if they want a piece of me, then come and get it. Just know, I'll put up a fucking fight and take out as many of you as I can before I go because it doesn't matter one little fuck to me." She lowered her head, putting her nose to nose with Lita. "I'm already dead."

And it had been a slow, painful death without her even knowing. Pieces of her had withered away in that closet after being beaten by Ed; in that pest control office, being played by Charge; in that warehouse, being shot up with heroin and beaten by the cartel; and in that prison cell in the supermax, hoping for a rescue that never came. The final piece just died in that visitation room, realizing Charge never cared about her. It had always been about the work. Suite forty-five.

Emily ground her teeth. "Tell everyone, you can't kill someone who's already dead, and you sure as hell can't scare her."

\*\*\*

Sometimes, during moments of anger, people said things they didn't mean, but that moment with Lita had been Emily's coming to Jesus, and she regretted nothing. Coming to the realization that she'd never truly gained control of her life felt like a lightning bolt to the soul. Shock and pain, followed by a vivid awareness.

She might have physically gotten free from her ex, but mentally, he still owned her, and he always would if she looked to others for a rescue. Charge was just another Ed,

trying to control her for his own reasons. No, she couldn't claim they were the same men, but they had plenty in common. Using her, for one. Lying constantly, too.

If she wanted to reclaim her life—her true freedom—it was up to her now, and the first step was complete. Acceptance. She alone had made the choices that led her here. She'd chosen to marry a bad man. She'd chosen to trust another. She'd ignored her gut repeatedly, giving in to fear instead. What will happen if I try to leave Ed? What will happen if I expose Ed? What if I don't take this job at the sketchy pest control company? How will I eat? If I don't save Charge, will it make me a bad person?

Her choices had been about avoiding her fears or giving in to them instead of pushing her energy in the opposite direction. She could've gone to college or learned a trade after high school. She could've joined the military or gotten a job. But no. She'd chosen to go to Atlantic City with those girls from the group home. Why? Because it had been easier to go along and blame everyone else for her shitty hand in life.

Otherwise, she would've gotten on that bus home to Maine all those years ago and never seen Ed again. Or she would've filed charges and left Ed the moment he hit her. She would've turned him in the second she found out how he really made enough money to buy a boat. She would've left the moment she saw the run-down pest control office without customers. I never would've returned to El Paso.

But with this clarity, she finally understood one thing: all those moments had been her self-inflicted undoing. She'd made those choices, and she owned them. No one else. The victim story she'd been telling herself was bullshit.

Not that there weren't moments in her life when she'd been victimized, but being subjected to cruelty and violence didn't make one a victim with regard to their entire persona. For most, the status of victim was situational. Like when a policeman filed a report after an assault. One person was the victim, the other the assailant. Purely

situational. The victim didn't walk around for the rest of their life identifying as a victim.

Emily could even argue that repeated victim situations over many years still didn't make a person a victim in their entirety. Yet, that was what she'd believed since her father passed away, followed by Aunt Mary. She saw herself as a victim of life instead of understanding that those were merely difficult moments. The truth was, she'd never been a real victim, the sort where their situations in life were the very definition of it.

She had never been a young girl sold to the cartel and then chained to a bed in a whorehouse until she died of disease, violence, or a drug overdose. She wasn't one of the mothers who'd had her daughter taken by these degenerates. All around the world, there were people trapped in a state of victimhood. Their existences were the very definition of being a victim. But for the rest, the label was transitory. Situational.

Regardless, the word only defined a person if they chose to let it. So, as angry as it made her, as hard as it was to accept, the truth was now clear. She had always been in charge.

And I want out of here. She wanted her life back. And she didn't mean the one where she worked for hit men or lived on the run. She wanted a rewarding job, to marry her soul mate, and maybe have a family. She wanted to sit on the porch and sip iced tea in July and pet her dog—or cat—whichever she adopted. She wanted a partner who didn't hold back when it came to honesty and who wouldn't hold her past against her. He'd see her luggage as a sort of graduation certificate from the school of hard knocks that demonstrated her true nature. A fighter. A survivor. A good woman who wanted to live an honest life in a world that was far from perfect, but worth fighting for.

And I want to sleep in! No more running at the crack of dawn because she'd been

programmed to. No more depriving herself of joy, good food, or love.

But none of those things would happen if she didn't find a way out of this. On her own terms. No more obedience. No more killing. No more Eds, Charges, deals, or trade-offs.

Emily went up to the guard who manned the door leading to the work areas inside the prison.

“Hi. I'd like to report a guard who tried to rape me. And I want to see a lawyer. I'm pressing charges.”

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:48 am*

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Sitting behind his desk, Warden Perry raised a gray brow. “You’re telling me that you killed a guard at Vanderhorst, and you want to press charges?”

“Yes. I killed him. In self-defense. They’re running a sex ring, too, which is why I was transferred here. The warden didn’t want to draw more attention to his operation, and he knew his staff would kill me in retaliation. So he sent me here to let your staff do it instead. You also need to know that I didn’t kill the second guard, Summers. That was the warden. Summers tried to intervene on my behalf, and that turned out to be a big mistake for her.”

He laced his hands and rested them on his large belly, staring with narrowed eyes. Emily didn’t know if he was in on anything corrupt here, but if he was like any of the other powerful men she’d come across, he’d try to save his own ass before being taken down.

Just have to make it clear: he can go down with the ship or join me. “Before you say anything else, though, you need to know I will go public with or without your help. There’s no keeping this a secret.”

“Is that so?” he asked.

“Yes. And if you’re a smart man, you’ll listen to my entire story before deciding what you do next, because there’s way more to this book than her cover.”

He leaned back in his chair with a smug, amused grin. “By all means, go on. I’m all

ears.”

“Great. Because I am— was —a member of a group of hit men...”

\*\*\*

Emily had no idea what would happen next, but for the first time in years, she felt like her soul wasn't weighing her down. No more cowering, lying to herself, or believing she was a victim of a cruel world.

She'd laid all her cards on the table to Warden Perry, who now knew everything. And, given the speech she'd made earlier to her cellmate, Emily's secret was out at every level of this establishment.

Just have to make sure the truth goes public no matter what. Justice needed to be served to the powerful people sponsoring the heinous crimes along the border, to the sick individuals running the prison she'd just left, and to whoever killed Summers.

Emily was escorted back to her cellblock and uncuffed. She went directly to find Lita, who sat on her bed, perusing a very tired copy of US Weekly .

“Whatchoo want, bitch?” Lita said, not bothering to look up.

Knives wasn't around. Good, we're alone.

Emily grinned. “How'd you like to make twenty thousand dollars?”

Lita busted out laughing. “What? You win the lotto?”

“There's a ten-million-dollar price on my head with the cartel. You could, of course, try to cash in on that contract, but it would mean dealing with them. Or, the more

likely scenario: spending the rest of your life in here for killing me while watching one of the guards or the warden take the credit and collect the money. Not fun. That's why I'm offering you twenty grand. Free and clear. Money only you will know about."

Lita's snide grin melted away. "I'm all ears, girl."

"Good. Because I need you to listen closely and then write down every word when you get out."

"You want me to write a story?" Lita arched a dark brow.

"An article. I've seen those big books by the window, so I know you're not incapable." Lita was also assertive. "In fact, you're perfect for the job."

\*\*\*

This plan held little chance of succeeding, but at the very least, Emily could go out with a clean conscience no matter what happened.

No doubt Warden Perry would sit on Emily's story for a few days. He'd want to assess the facts and figure out what his personal exposure was. If he stepped in on her behalf, he'd be connected to a political scandal. If he stayed silent, he might end up becoming an accomplice. After all, he knew the entire truth now, and looking the other way would make him just as guilty as Warden Mitchel.

The trick was to back Perry into a corner, and the only way to do that was proving she'd meant what she'd said about the truth getting out no matter what.

That was where Lita came in. If she did as they'd agreed, Emily's story—flush with hard facts any journalist could confirm—would be public in six days. There wasn't a



news organization out there that wouldn't want to cover this story, but Emily figured they'd have better luck going to the local paper in El Paso first. As a backup, Lita would post on social media, too, and tag the FBI, Homeland Security, and every major news outlet. It was a dark, sad, delicious story of surviving in a world most people were never exposed to. Some didn't even believe it existed.

But it was real. All of it. The drugs. The guns. The money. The human enslavement. Please, God. Please let this work. Get me out of here. Expose these assholes. With Lita's help, she stood a chance.

"Inmate, what the hell are you doing?" said a tall man with light brown hair and stunning blue eyes. He was built like a gladiator, with broad shoulders, strong arms, and muscled legs.

"Who are you?" Emily asked, sitting alone in the cell.

He pointed to the name stitched into his beige shirt. "Collins. But you can call me Hunter."

Hunter Collins... He looked like a dream from a superhero movie. Clean cut. Beautiful lips. Sparkling eyes. Had God been listening to her prayers for help and sent an angel? Then again, he was a guard.

"What do you want?" she asked drably.

He leaned into the cell and whispered, "A friend sent me. To protect you."

"I don't have any friends."

He cracked a charming smile. "We both know that's not true."

She narrowed her eyes, studying him. He seemed too happy, too good looking and fit to be a guard in a hellhole like this, where the employees were just as miserable as the inmates. “Who are you really ?”

He lifted his chin. “Forty-four.”

She frowned. “Sorry?”

“I’m the last resort. I’m only activated when necessary.”

What. The. Shit? He was an operator for suite forty-five? She hadn’t met all of the hit men, but his number didn’t ring a bell. How had he gotten into the prison dressed as a guard? Maybe the same way Charge had gotten her into the supermax without a trial.

“If you want to live, Emily, you’ll do what I say.”

This again? She did not want Charge’s help. Her connection to him and the group was over. In fact, she was about to expose them all. Not out of vindictiveness but because there was no other way to tell the world what was really happening on that border or how she’d ended up in prison without a trial.

“And if I don’t?” she asked.

“I’ve been instructed to take you out. You know too much.”

Kill me? A lump formed in her throat. She’d spent the last twenty-four hours coming to grips with the fact that her life was likely over, but she’d expected the fatal blow to come from a gang member or the prison staff. Not Charge himself. Well, an operator sent by Charge.

Jesus Christ, Emily. What did you expect? She’d gotten mixed up with a bunch of hit

men.

And Collins is right. She knew Charge would take measures to protect his team. Especially now that she wasn't under his control. For all he knew, she'd end up doing something amazingly stupid like making a deal with the feds to get out of prison. Or I might go public.

Collins added, "But if it makes you feel any better, if it comes to that, I'll go down with you."

"Huh?"

He shrugged. "That's the price of failure for a job like this. Sampson has made it clear that if I can't get you free, then you must die, and so will I. He's not fucking around."

"Sampson" was the code name used for whoever ran suite forty-five, which had actually been many individuals over the years, since the torch got passed from one leader to another. Continuity purposes. "Sampson" always stayed invisible, behind the scenes, so no one knew who he or she really was.

For example, to the team, Charge was just another operator. Behind the scenes, Charge ran the entire operation for years, and Emily had been in training to take his place. Of course, that all went sideways. The point was that no one really ever knew Sampson wasn't a real person. Made him much harder to find.

"Let me get this straight," she said, "Sampson told you to keep me alive, but if I don't do what you say, you'll kill me and then yourself?" This didn't sound like Charge at all. Charge would do anything to protect his operators.

"If you don't do what I say, then we have no hope of getting you out of here in one

piece. So, yes, plan B is to execute you to minimize our exposure. And yes, I'm fucked if that's how this plays out. But I won't be killing myself. I just know Sampson won't let me live if I fail."

Bullshit. Charge would never do that. This was an emotional ploy meant to garner her cooperation. Charge knew she had a sympathetic heart and wouldn't want this man to die because of her.

"What are the terms?" she asked.

"Terms?"

"What does Sampson want, Hunter? I mean, if you get me out of here, there must be a price."

"No terms. He just wants you . Free. Safe."

She wanted that too, but not like this. Charge would want something in return, and she was done with all this corrupt, dirty, deadly crap. "No thanks."

"Didn't you hear me? My job is to protect you until we can get you free, but it will require your full cooperation."

"Then go home. Or put a bullet in my head right now," she snarled.

He jerked back his head. "You want to die in this place?"

"What gives you that impression?"

"You just asked me to kill you."

“No. What I said was that if you require my full cooperation, you’re not getting it.” She exhaled sharply. “I don’t want your help. And tell Sampson I’m done dealing with him, and I mean it.”

“But I can help—”

“I’m not interested in your help. ”

“Then what do you want?”

She didn’t know this man, so she wasn’t about to go through her long list of wants. “You can find out with the rest of the world next week.”

“Justine, what are you planning?” he asked, his displeased tone tinged with a threat.

“Nothing. Nice to meet you, Hunter Collins. Goodbye.” She picked up her book and slid into her cot. Just then, Lita walked in, returning from work. She took a long look at Hunter, who snarled and left.

“Whoa, girl. Did they upgrade the guards? And, shit, right before I’m leaving?”

“Trust me, you don’t want to get mixed up with that man. Stay far, far away from him.”

Lita gave her a curious look. “Danger follows you everywhere, don’t it?”

“What makes you think it’s danger and not just my stupid choices?”

Lita shrugged. “Because I made a shit ton of stupid choices, girl, and I still didn’t end up working for no hit men. Don’t have a ten-mil contract on my head neither. You got danger issues, girl. Big-time magnet.”

“Guess I’m just lucky.” Emily went back to reading her magazine.

“Or maybe it’s just that lions are territorial. They don’t like having you around.”

### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Lions were territorial. That was true. But it wasn't why Emily kept landing in the crosshairs of so many dangerous men. For certain, a few definitely felt threatened by her, but she wasn't about to start taking over their territories.

I mean, how absurd. Right? Me, the lion king. More like I'm the lion's next lunch . Her life would likely end right here in this hellhole unless everything played out perfectly—Lita got Emily's story out, the warden ensured her safety, arrests were made, and she was freed.

Who am I kidding? I'll be hunted the rest of my life if I get out of here. She'd made too many enemies, and more were in the works.

The prison's intercom system chimed twice, signaling it was their block's turn to eat.

Immediately, Emily's hands began to shake. By now, word had probably spread to the gangs about her presence.

Knives strolled past her. "You comin'?"

Funny. Knives hadn't spoken one word to her yet. Why now? She's probably getting in line to take me out.

"And miss Spam Tuesday? Never," Emily replied flatly.

Emily followed her cellmate, joining the stream of orange-clad women heading to the

cafeteria. Whispers echoed from every direction. Several women walking ahead kept looking over their shoulders.

Yep, word's out about me.

Lita scurried up from behind. "Girl, you sure I'm getting that twenty when I get out?"

She'd be getting much more. There was a million dollars buried in that large plastic bag near Charge's cabin, but if Emily had told her that, Lita wouldn't have believed her and agreed to get Emily's story out.

"Yes. Just don't forget: the money's location will be mailed to your aunt, like we agreed." Emily had already written the letter in Lita's name and placed it in the mail drop a few hours ago. The letter simply asked Lita's Aunt Viola to check in on a "friend" who hadn't been heard from in a while. The friend's address belonged to Charge's cabin. The postscript mentioned to say hi to her favorite owl, nesting in the tree with a big broken branch, i.e., where the money was hidden.

Emily continued, "But you have to get my story out like I asked. And quickly. If my contact doesn't see anything within three days of your release, he won't deposit the money." A lie. The money was already there, but this was a psychological game about timing.

The mail at this place took a week to go out since the staff checked all the letters. That would give Lita a few days to make Emily's story public before the letter arrived at her aunt's. Of course, the letter would come regardless. And the money would be there regardless. Lita just didn't know that.

"Okay, but if you fuck with me," Lita said, "I'll get arrested just to come back and slit your fucking throat."



Spoken like a true thug. Funny how people always said that men were the most cutthroat of genders. In Emily's experience, women could definitely hold their own. And then go the extra mile. Especially when it came to revenge.

"You do what I asked, and you'll get your money," Emily whispered. "By the way, what do you plan to do with it?"

"After I hit the buffet for an entire week and drink enough beer to kill me? I'm gonna open a legal clinic. Yanno, for bitches like me who ain't got no money, no love, no help."

"But you are smart. I've seen those books you read."

"Yeah, well, us bitches have to know shit if we want to make it."

Emily guessed Lita was right. Knowledge was power. "What are you in here for, anyway?"

"I killed my boyfriend."

Emily did a double take as they marched along. "For?"

"He called me a bitch."

That was not a good reason to kill a person.

"I'm just fuckin' with you, girl." Lita laughed. "He stole my money for law school. Took me seven years to get my bachelor's and another five to save for that shit. Had just enough, too, with my financial aid 'n' shit."

That was rough. "Why didn't you turn him in?"

“The asshole tried to kill me. Tied me up and put me in my car. Lit that shit on fire.”

Emily’s mouth gaped open in horror. “Wow. What a guy. Sounds like he and my ex would’ve gotten along nicely.”

“Yeah, well, he was stupid as fuck. Only put gasoline on the outside. Fire burned out in a minute. I untied myself, tracked him down, and put a gun to his head. I needed that money. I earned that money. Found out he spent it on some other bitch. I blew his head off.”

Emily winced.

“Don’t be judgin’, Hays. People take from you, you take back. So whatchoo in for?”

“Killing my ex.”

“He steal from you, too?” Lita asked.

“Worse. He let men pay to hit, rape, and kill a lot of women.”

Lita gave her a look. “For real?”

“Yes, but I didn’t kill him. Wish I had, but I’m just the lucky person doing time for it.” At least, that was the reason for her arrest. Now she was doing time for killing a cop she’d never met and who was likely fictitious—all part of Charge’s made-up story to get her into Vanderhorst Supermax. Now she was here in an entirely different prison, waiting to die.

“Well, when I open my clinic, girl, you’ll be our first client.”

“You’d do that for me?” Emily asked.

“Us bitches have to stick together.”

Lita was kinda right. It didn't really matter where a woman came from—good home or bad, rich or poor, educated or not—there were always bad people in this world looking to exploit them. Or worse, make them believe they were powerless victims. Luckily, most of the world wasn't like that, but the predators existed. And they never rest.

“Fuck yeah, bitch.” Emily smiled. “But maybe use the law next time instead of putting a bullet in your boyfriend's head? Just sayin'...”

“I'll think about it.”

The two entered the cafeteria, and the hair on Emily's arms spiked up. Every face in the room stared with a snarl, and she could hear a pin drop.

“Claws are out for you,” said Lita. “But I still get my money, right?”

“Stick to the plan no matter what,” Emily growled. “Even if I don't make it out of here alive.” Chances were slim at this point, but nothing to lose by trying.

Speaking of trying, Emily was about to tell all these women that they were dreaming if they thought they'd ever see the ten-million bounty. They'd only get the electric chair for murder, and the Heroin King would keep his cash. He was a ruthless criminal.

“Where the hell do you think you're going, inmate?” Hunter Collins stepped in front of Emily, staring down with a stern look.

“Going to eat shit food,” she replied, “and you?”

From the corner of her eye, she saw Collins slide his stun gun from his belt. Before she could react, he pressed it to her shoulder.

A searing pain ripped through her body as she dropped to the floor.

“She’s got a weapon,” Collins yelled.

Someone must’ve hit the alarm because a loud siren went off, and the inmates around her dropped to the floor with their fingers laced behind their heads.

What was he doing? She had this. She had a plan!

Collins hit her again with the stun gun. Her body shook violently before she blacked out.

\*\*\*

Emily groaned and opened her eyes to a white room with chipped paint, a single sink and toilet, and no window. The door was solid steel, and there was a small camera in the corner, encased in a cage.

She rubbed her pounding head. She’d taken three days of beatings at the supermax, and it didn’t compare to the experience of being shocked unconscious. It felt like having a heart attack while being burned alive.

She sat up on the concrete platform that served as her bed. There were claw marks in the white paint on the wall, and the room smelled like bleach.

Oh no. This had to be a kill room. Not that she knew if the prison had an official one, but there was only one reason a room like this would smell so strongly. Collins was making good on his promise to end her since she’d refused his help to get free.

Suddenly, the door creaked open, and Collins appeared. “You all right?”

“No.” She whooshed out a breath. “And I’m guessing it’s about to get worse. Thanks for that electrocution warm-up, though. Shockingly fun.”

“This isn’t a game, Justine.”

“I go by Emily.” She swung her feet to the floor, trying to clear her spinning head. Everything felt fuzzy, including the events after the cafeteria. She remembered someone carrying her and the smell of engine grease. “And I know this isn’t a game. Look at where I am.” Not to mention whom she’d gotten mixed up with.

Collins walked over and sat next to her. “Can I ask you something?”

“No.” Was this part of his routine before offing a person? Nice little friendly chat? Hi, I’m Hunter. I’ll be killing you today. Do you like cheese? What’s your favorite kind of music?

“How did you end up working for Sampson?” he asked. “I’ve read your file. You seem like a nice normal person—no arrests, no history of violence or drugs, lived in a quiet suburb, hosting barbeques. And then one day, you run and resurface in El Paso, working for suite forty-five.”

If he’d read her file, then he had to know about Ed, so the answer to his question was fairly obvious. “Guess I just needed a change of scenery.”

“You sure got one.”

“Prison was the only vacation I could afford,” she said dryly. “And who doesn’t like orange?”

He ignored her quip. “I just don’t understand why you didn’t turn your husband in and then try to rebuild your life. Why go into this business?”

Good question. “Why did you?” Not that she cared.

“Sorry to tell you, but my story is fairly cliché. I enlisted in the military. They trained me to kill, and I was very good at it. After I got out, just made sense to get paid well for my skills. Now your turn.”

“How did I get involved with Sampson? One long string of poor choices, and I’ve been kicking myself ever since, because I’m the kind of person who wants nothing to do with people like you, and even less? Dealing with the people you go after. I want none of it.”

“Thank you. This conversation has been very helpful, Emily.”

“Lovely. Can you get this over with now? And don’t offer me any more help or deals to break out of prison, because I meant what I said about not cooperating with you.”

He stood. “But you already have.” He dipped his head. “It’s been a pleasure meeting you.”

She rubbed the side of her kinked neck. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Sorry, Justine. Only doing my job.” He left the cell, leaving the door open behind him.

“Sorry about wha...” Her voice faded off as a tall man with dark skin, longish black hair, and hazel eyes appeared in front of her. He wore jeans, a white golf shirt, and expensive-looking tennis shoes—the European kind rich men wore to look rich when being casual.

He smiled warmly. “Justine Hays, it is a pleasure to meet you,” he said with a slight Mexican accent.

She stared, feeling like a deer in headlights, unsure of what was happening.

“My name is Elonzo.”

“Okay, Elonzo, what’s going on?”

“The prison needed an AC unit replaced, so we took the opportunity to transport you inside the old one. Took a few bribes, but it got the job done.”

Wait. What? Transported me?

He stepped into the room, leaning his back against the concrete wall, folding his muscled arms over his chest. “And my apologies for the deception, but Collins works for me, not Sampson.”

Her face felt hot suddenly, and her stomach churned. There was a dull ache in her arm, too. I don’t feel so good . Her eyes glided down to a bandage over the crook of her arm. Had they put something in her veins?

“Yes, that,” he said. “We had to drug you. You’ll feel nauseous for a few hours, but it was either that or let you die.” He clapped. “Taking out those guards at Vanderhorst Supermax. Very brave. I also find it fascinating how you attempted to take down your husband, infiltrated suite forty-five, and won the trust of Sampson.” He laughed. “Amazing. All this from a housewife from New Jersey.” The charming smile on his handsome face melted away. “Not to mention you stole my money and managed to kill Dearheart while freeing the man who’s just been awarded the largest contract to ever be placed on my head.”

Oh shit. Oh shit. “You’re the Heroin King.” He was much younger than she’d thought, in his late thirties.

“Such a mundane name for a complex man like myself with ventures all around the world, but the business needs clear roles, and I play the man to fear. Mucho gusto .”

Oh, she was afraid all right. Because behind the handsome face and beautiful eyes was a very vicious man, the kind they made miniseries about. “Where am I?”

He scratched the side of his clean-shaved chin. “My home. One of them.”

No. She swallowed down a lump. This was a kill room. His kill room.

“I bet you’re wondering what happens next,” he said.

He probably planned to gut her like a fish. That or he hoped to use her as a bargaining chip with Charge, the assassin he’d just referred to.

“If you think anyone,” she said, “including the man who’s been given the contract to take you out, cares about me, you’re very mistaken.”

“I believe you. Did you know that Roberts was one of many prison employees on my payroll?”

Roberts works for the Heroin King? She shook her head no.

He went on, “Comes in handy having a network inside the system, given my line of work. Selling illegal products leads to many arrests and opens up the potential for disloyalty. We track our people closely. We weed out rats quickly.”

So they watched their drug dealers even in prison. Not heavy-handed at all.



He continued, “Of course, Vanderhorst is not frequented by cartel members, but as luck just happened to have it, Roberts had been transferred there a few months ago. By the way, she was going to free you, something Sampson did not want.”

He was implying that Charge wanted her to stay in prison, so he’d ordered her to kill Roberts. She found that hard to believe. “I think you meant to say that Roberts planned to kill me. For you.”

He smiled. “I had a standing order that you were not to be touched. At least, not by any of my people, who, by the way, were told that if anything should happen to you before I could manage your release, they would be held responsible.”

But this didn’t make sense. She’d almost died in there. “Is Warden Mitchel one of yours?”

“No. But once Roberts figured out who you were and let us know you’d been located, I did take measures to step in. We almost had you freed—was supposed to be at that party the warden booked you for, but Sampson intervened, and you were moved.”

They’d been planning to crash Charge’s fake sex party. Emily’s head spun. Was this man telling the truth?

“You wanted to make sure I wasn’t harmed? Pfft. You put a ten-million-dollar price on my head.” And for good reason. She’d worked for his enemies and stolen his money.

“True. But with the head attached to the body. Alive.”

“Why?” She wasn’t buying it.

He smirked down at the floor. “I am afraid you have not earned my trust yet, just like

I have not earned yours. Until that happens, my motives are not up for discussion.”

Trust? He was the Heroin King. The fucking Heroin King. The last man anyone should trust.

He went on, “Despite what you believe, Justine, I am not an unreasonable man. All I ask is for a little time to get to know each other and establish trust.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Trust. You know, the thing where you promise not to hurt me, and I promise not to hurt you.”

She stared at him, her heart pumping away. “H-how do you think I could hurt you ?” She was unarmed and being held in a kill room in his home.

“It hurts when people take my money,” he said slowly, his voice filled with irritation. “Not because I can’t make more of it, but because it makes me look weak. Do you know how hard I’ve worked to get where I am?”

She shook her head.

“My entire life. And do you know what I hate most?”

People who steal your cash? “No,” she replied.

“People who make me look weak, because then I’m forced to prove I’m not. Law of the jungle and all that.” He shook his head. “But I do not enjoy killing. Not at all. I enjoy money.”

“So you want your money back. Is that what this is about?”

“That damage is already done and paid for in lives. Long-forgotten history.”

Meaning, he'd executed the men who'd left his money sitting in the back of an SUV, which she stole. “Then what do you want?”

His hazel eyes glittered. “One week of your time.”

What the hell did that mean? A week of fun? A week of torture? A week of deep reflection on how she'd landed in a place worse than prison? “And after one week, what happens?”

“I'll send my man around in an hour. He'll take you upstairs to a private suite. You are to bathe, pick out a dress from the closet, and make yourself presentable for tonight. I am having a party, and some very important people would like to meet you.”

“Me? Why?”

“Do not embarrass me with any rash behavior.”

So, in other words, he wasn't going to tell her anything. He wanted her to go along with whatever he said until he was ready to reveal his reasons. This situation was beyond anything she'd ever been up against.

He turned to leave.

“Wait. I want to know what happens after the week is up, or no deal.” She wasn't playing along if he planned to put a bullet in her head no matter what she did. Might as well put her out of her misery now.

He looked over his shoulder. “If you don't trust me by the end, I will give you your

freedom.”

This sounded like the biggest setup, told by the most corrupt, deadliest man on the continent.

“And if I fail to win your trust?” she asked.

“I wouldn’t recommend it. See you tonight.” He closed the door behind him.

Fuck. She pressed her hands to her throbbing head. This was insanity, but if going along with it bought her time to get out of here, then she had to take it. She had to play the obedient woman to an evil man for a third time in her life. God, so help me, this will be the last time.

### CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Emily couldn't recall the last time she'd put on a dress like this. Expensive, sexy, and formal enough to attend a movie premier or state dinner. This was a dress Justine Hays never got to wear and Emily Wilson never would. The red satin dress with a plunging back and hourglass shape had a French name on the label she didn't recognize, but it smelled dirty.

Not that the dress wasn't pristine, but Emily knew how many innocent people had died to pay for it. She literally felt sick putting it on.

Survival of the prettiest. That's a first. For me, anyway. But so was this entire situation, including every second after she'd left the kill room.

Elonzo's guard had walked her through a concrete tunnel and taken her to a small elevator. After that, they'd walked down several corridors with closed doors.

She had the impression that Elonzo wanted to prevent her from getting her bearings. The guard then offered to send up one of the female servants to help with her hair and makeup, but Emily had declined, so he'd left her to it with a warning that there were cameras all over the suite.

"So you're going to watch me get naked?" she'd asked as they stepped into a large bedroom with minimal decorations—or items that could be used as a weapon. The window didn't have bars on it, but the drop was about three stories straight down onto a patio.

“Just like prison.” He’d left, and she’d had no choice but to strip, shower, and dress knowing she was being watched. “So much for trust.”

She dried her hair, pinning it up into a bun on top of her head to hide most of her red roots since the brown had started growing out a month ago, after she’d saved Charge and taken him to his cabin. Dyeing her hair just hadn’t felt like a priority when a wig could do the trick for short trips into town.

The memory of her arrest began pummeling her mind. Why would Charge have her arrested like that? Why would he put her in prison and then tell her to kill Roberts instead of saying the truth? If Roberts had been working for Elonzo, Charge simply could’ve said so.

So many lies, Charge. Why? And for what? Was she really not worthy of his trust after everything they’d gone through?

On the other hand, their relationship had never made sense. He’d trusted her too quickly and then put her in charge of suite forty-five. She’d told him again and again that it was the stupidest idea, but he always knew what to say: You’re smart. You’re perfect for the role. No one will ever suspect you’re Sampson. You can be trusted to protect the operators at all costs.

Looking back, there’d been dozens of red flags, and when she’d finally been done with all of it, Charge pulled out the big gun and hit her with it. Finding Ed. Making him pay.

I’m such a sucker. And now look at me. Her cheeks were hollow, her skin was too pale, and dark circles under her eyes told the story of many sleepless nights. Deep purple bruises covered her arms and legs from the beatings at Vanderhorst, which the dress revealed like an ad for domestic abuse.

If this is what the master wants to see tonight... Wasn't like any of the other dresses in the closet covered them better.

She applied mascara and red lipstick from the kit left on the vanity, but that was all Elonzo would be getting from her.

Finally done, she stood in front of the long mirror in the corner of the room, taking in her skeletal frame and battered body. "I guess Halloween has come early this year."

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in," she said drably.

Elonzo entered with a friendly smile, which immediately melted away the moment his eyes saw her back. A look of anger washed over his face. "Who did that to you?"

What the hell did he care? And surely he must've noticed some of the bruises on her arms from earlier. Of course, they were nothing compared to what was on her back. The guards had gone to town.

"What's it matter? I did as you asked. I'm dressed. And this is the best I'm going to look tonight." She held up her arms, sucking in the embarrassment of his blatant disgust. Not that she gave one little polite crap what he thought, but no one wanted to be stared at like they were a tidy piece of shit stinking up the room.

Ed used to look at her that way, too, even when she looked perfect, right down to the floral summer dress and matching pink sandals—his favorites.

Elonzo marched toward her with rage in his hazel eyes. "I want names." He pointed at the spot on the floor between them to punctuate his words.

She blinked up at him. “I don’t have any.” Warden Mitchel had ordered it, and his people had carried it out. End of story.

Elonzo began losing his temper—red face, eyes narrowed, twitching lips. “You want to protect those insignificant, pathetic pieces of trash?”

He was genuinely upset that she’d been tortured, but why? He was a thug.

“Are you angry because I was beaten,” she asked, “or because you ordered me not to be hurt and someone disobeyed you?” Did she have to point out the fact that the someones didn’t even work for him? Just because he gave an order didn’t mean the entire world would obey.

“Both, por chingada madre. ”

Emily didn’t know what to say, but she was beginning to see why people feared the man.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t help you,” she said. “The people who did this weren’t exactly giving out their names.”

His nostrils flared, and he nodded with jerky motions. “ Bien .” He turned to leave. “I’ll send someone up to help you change.”

“Into what?”

“Something that will make you more comfortable.”

He left the room, closing the door. Immediately, she could hear Elonzo yelling in Spanish outside. She wished she could understand, but it didn’t take a genius to guess that the man wanted heads to roll.



The question was, why? She was his enemy. His prisoner, too.

### CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Emily had been given a chic black pantsuit with a satin lapel and a white blouse to wear. The shoes were your average black flats.

Honestly, she looked more like the servants, but that was fine by her. She had no idea what this dinner party was about or who any of these people were. First off, they all spoke Spanish, so it wasn't like she could eavesdrop. All she knew was that they came from money—nice suits, sparkly cocktail dresses, expensive watches and jewelry. While they mingled and sipped, she sat in the corner with one of Elonzo's armed guards hovering over her.

Where is he, anyway? Probably out chopping heads or handpicking the next batch of children to be trafficked across the border. Disgusting pig.

Her eyes gravitated toward a short bald man with four bodyguards. The moment he entered the small banquet room with gold-leaf trim and expensive-looking abstract art, everyone lined up to shake his hand.

“Who's that?” Emily asked the guard standing next to her, unsure if he spoke English.

“The governor.”

Here? At a narco's house? She thought he looked familiar, like she'd seen him on the news once, but for which Mexican state? It wasn't like she knew exactly where they were. “Of Sonora?”

He frowned. “New Mexico.”

Oh. Oh crap. “Are we in New Mexico right now?”

The guard nodded.

So they weren’t in Mexico-Mexico, and the Heroin King lived in the States. Why was she not surprised?

Charge had always alluded to the fact that the cartels, including the recently ousted Colombian, had powerful backers here in the US. He’d hinted that they sanctioned the use of groups like suite forty-five, as did the local leaders. And with the powerful connections Charge had, there’d been no question in her mind that he knew people inside the FBI, CIA, Homeland, or whichever department. Only a person with government connections could pull off killing “the Meat Grinder,” aka Elonzo’s son, in Juarez and then zipping back to the US in the commuter lane without showing paperwork—a hit job she’d been on as part of her training. It hadn’t gone so smoothly for her, but it had ended in borrowing that SUV and making off with Elonzo’s drug money.

Still don’t buy that he doesn’t want it back .

Either way, now she knew Elonzo had his own powerful allies, which made sense. He’d hired the Warren Group to push out suite forty-five, and that couldn’t have happened without someone giving the green light.

So what does Elonzo want with me? Again, all she could come up with was they planned to use her as a bargaining chip or pump her for information on suite forty-five.

Neither was good. Oh, had she mentioned that the time she’d been taken by the cartel

and tortured, it had been Elonzo's people? The men paid with their lives, but they had not gone easy on her.

While the guests paid attention to the governor, Emily noticed a man with long brown hair and a beard wander in. He was tall, muscular, and...

Gray eyes.

Charge? She couldn't be sure because the guests were blocking her view. It can't be him. He'd never show his face here. Or would he?

She tried to get to her feet for a better look, but the guard pushed her back into her seat. "The boss said you need to wait here until he comes to get you."

"I have to use the bathroom," she whispered. "Whatever they gave me earlier is making me feel sick. Please?"

He drew a breath. "Fine. This way. But like the boss said, don't do anything to embarrass him. Understand?"

She understood that the people in this room might be dressed respectably, but that was as far as it went. They had to know exactly who Elonzo was, which meant they were corrupt and wouldn't give one shit if she stood up on a table and yelled, "Help! I'm being held prisoner."

Then there was the fact that she was now a wanted fugitive. No, she hadn't seen the news, but she could only guess that her picture was plastered on every news site. On top of that, Elonzo had told her that these people wanted to meet her, so her identity couldn't be a secret. In short, they'd be no help in saving her. But if Charge was here, maybe, just maybe he was here to get her out?

Yes, she'd decided to cut ties, and maybe she was ready to die, but not here. Not by the hands of Elonzo.

Her mind spun with all the things he'd said about "Sampson" trying to keep her locked up and away from Elonzo. But why? She didn't know, but even after all of Charge's lies, she still trusted him over the Heroin King.

"The restroom is this way." Elonzo's guard jerked his head toward the right of the room. She got up, and he followed her out into the hall, where he pointed to a door. When she tried it, it was locked.

"I can't wait," she said. "Is there another I can use?" Maybe one closer to the other side of that banquet room where she might have just spotted Charge?

He hesitated.

"I don't want to throw up on my nice outfit." She cupped her hand over her mouth.

He pointed to another door down the long hall running parallel to the banquet room. She rushed toward it, faking gagging sounds while she walked past the second bathroom, trying to get a peek inside the party from a different angle.

She glanced through another doorway, but three people stood in the way.

"It's here," said the guard. "You passed it."

"Oh. Sorry." The next door was locked, too.

She looked at the man with pleading eyes, hoping for another shot, but instead of telling her to wait, he told her they'd have to go upstairs.

“But I am warning you,” he said, “one wrong twitch, and I have instructions to take you back down to the basement. The boss doesn’t like being disobeyed.”

She didn’t want to go upstairs. She wanted to find Charge—if that was even him.

“I’ll behave,” she lied.

The man took her around the corner and led her up a grand staircase. Two hallways later, they arrived at the third bathroom. She rushed into the lavish mirrored space with bright white marble flooring, pretending to throw up in the toilet while simultaneously flushing to hide the fact that she wasn’t.

When she looked up, the guard had closed the door. She went to it and pressed her ear to the smooth wood. She couldn’t hear anyone outside, but the guy couldn’t be far.

Slowly, she cracked open the door.

The man was five steps away, talking to someone on his phone with his back to her. She slid off her flats, took them in her hands, and tiptoed out, closing the door behind her. She rushed down the hall in the opposite direction.

She needed to find her way back to the party and see if the bearded man was Charge.

Heart pounding and sweat beading on her forehead, she turned the corner and skidded to a halt. Elonzo’s booming voice was coming from one of the nearby rooms.

She shut her eyes, attempting to calm her breathing. Okay. Okay. She’d have to tiptoe past the room and pray Elonzo didn’t hear or see her.

Slowly, she crept closer to the first open door. No one was inside, and the lights were

off. One down. She made her way toward the second door.

“Yes, my angel. You are the best little girl in the world,” Elonzo said with a chuckle.

“What about me, Daddy?” said a little girl.

“You are also the best, so I guess it is a tie,” he said.

He was talking to his daughters.

“Now, Daddy has important people waiting downstairs, so you two need to get to sleep. Ring for Clara if you need anything.”

Emily heard him kiss one of the girls with a big, “Mmmuah!”

Go, dumbass. Go! Emily tiptoed past his daughters’ room and headed down the hallway, reaching a corner. She turned and spotted an armed man in the hallway. He was too occupied on his phone to notice her.

Shit. She took off back around the corner toward Elonzo’s daughters’ room. She slipped past it, praying for a miracle, and then ducked inside the empty room next door, hiding behind a small couch. It looked like the girls’ playroom.

Emily smooshed her hand over her mouth to stifle her loud, panicked breaths. Any moment now, the guard would be knocking on that bathroom door. She had to get back there, if that was even possible.

“Taking yourself on a tour?” said a deep voice.

Emily winced. Elonzo had seen her.

“You can come out. I won’t hurt you.” He flipped on the lights.

Yeah. Right. He’d likely just save the punishment until after the guests left.

She stood upright, knowing she had to face him, but what could she say? She wasn’t about to tell him that the man who was paid to kill him might be at his party.

“You know, Emily, I understand why you would try to run.” Elonzo gestured toward the couch. He wore an elegant black suit and a navy-blue shirt with a matching silk tie. His longish black hair was neatly combed back and tucked behind his ears without so much as a hint of product. He looked so civilized, so handsome. She guessed it made it easier to masquerade in public as a human being.

“Please take a seat,” he said.

“But...the governor is waiting downstairs, and I’m sure you’d like to—”

“Sit. Please.”

She nodded and obeyed. He took a small green child’s chair from the crafting table behind him and sat in front of her. It was a sly move, making him seem less threatening, and meant to disarm her, no doubt.

“Your-your children sound sweet. Daddy’s girls. I bet you love them a lot.”

He nodded. “More than they could possibly understand. They are all I have left of their mother.”

“Oh. I’m sorry to hear that.” She wasn’t sure if she meant it, though. If they’d been sitting in a normal person’s house, and he was a normal person, she would definitely mean it. But the Heroin King was not a normal person.



“Thank you, but I have no one but myself to blame.” He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his thighs, lacing his fingers together. “You see, Emily, I wasn’t always this man. A man with so much blood on his hands. Like you, I fell into the role. Like you, I fought the path forced on me.”

Was he trying to garner sympathy? Because it wouldn’t work. “Forced, huh?”

He nodded. “When I was twenty-nine, I thought I could make a difference in my community. I saw the corruption, the violence on the streets, and the rich living above it all. I thought,” he held an index finger in the air, “if we could get an honest person into office, we could change all that.”

“I’m assuming you were met with resistance?”

“A violent, rude awakening. I learned quickly that once you become part of the game, the only escape is death. But first, they will take pieces of you—one slice at a time. The first cut is free. The second cut will take your arm, then your leg. They will keep cutting until there is nothing left.”

She winced. “But you’re still here and apparently intact.”

“Am I? Because the man I used to be is not. That idealist died when my pregnant wife was shot because I tried to push back against the cartels. My daughters almost died too—born two months early—but their mother was lost. And it was on that day that I realized there would be no justice for my Julia unless I delivered it. But I could only do that by being more powerful than the rest. This is an all-or-nothing game, Emily. I did not make the rules. I did not want to play it. But here I am.”

He’d forgotten to mention that the game entailed kidnapping innocent women and children to be sold as sex slaves in the US. He forgot the hundreds of thousands of people being poisoned and dying after taking one small pill at a party—something no

young person, or old, should have to pay for with their lives.

“So now you make the rules,” she said.

“That is an illusion. I influence some, but most everything I do is to protect what I love. If that means I must align with certain powerful individuals or do favors for them, then that is what I do. If I have to pay off officials with tens of millions of dollars to keep what I cherish, then I make those millions the only way I’m allowed to.”

“Illegally.”

He nodded.

She wasn’t about to get into a philosophical debate with the man, considering he was easily triggered and she didn’t know the list of items that set him off. “So you became the Heroin King.”

“Emily,” he said sharply, “if it wasn’t me, it would be someone else. And that is a fact.”

He wasn’t completely wrong. “Why are you telling me all this?”

“Because, like me, you decided to play. You are now part of the game whether you like it or not.”

“So I play to win, or I die.” Got it. Thanks for the life lesson on how to be an evil asshole.

“Or, like me, you must do both.”

He was speaking metaphorically, of course. “I can’t argue with what you’ve said. I mean, the part about your old self dying just to survive, but—”

“Wrong game, Emily. This is not about survival. It is about winning as many hands as you can. Each win buys you another round. Another chance. Another day, month, or year. But ultimately, your time will run out.” He shrugged. “Such is life.”

She nodded, still unsure why he was telling her all this. “Okay.”

“Emily, I invited you here—”

“ Forced me here.”

“ Rescued you from prison because I wanted to give you a chance to decide before the final cut is made. And I am not speaking of your old self. Your life hangs by a very small thread.”

But, according to him, there was no price on her head. “Why do you care what happens to me?”

“I will get into that another time. After our week is over. Just know that I could have had you killed in prison or even this morning. I know you were there the night your team executed my son. I know that they left you behind, and that is why you stole the SUV containing my money. I know you killed Dearheart to save the assassin who is now searching for me. There is no reason to let you live. Not when doing so makes me look weak and killing you would matter to no one.” He paused. “Except me.”

She wanted to ask why, but she knew he wouldn’t tell her. Not until the week was over.

He continued, “But take tonight as another gesture of goodwill.” He stood. “Please do

not disobey me or my men again. It is for your own protection.”

She frowned. “Protection?”

“Do you truly believe Sampson would let me keep one of his prized assassins? By now, he’s placed a price on your head.” He turned to leave. “Just the head, in case you were wondering. Now come, I must introduce you to the governor.”

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:48 am*

### CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Emily never got the chance to see the bearded man up front to determine if those gray eyes belonged to Charge. She also failed to learn why Elonzo had brought her here or why he'd insisted she meet the governor. Elonzo had simply introduced her as "Emily, the woman I told you about" and left it at that.

After the intros, the guard had walked her back to her suite, promising to send up a big green salad and cheeseburger, but she must've dozed off because when she woke, the clock on the wall said it was just past midnight. Elonzo sat next to her bed in an armchair, typing away on his phone. The light from the screen illuminated his stern expression.

"What are you doing here?" she muttered, trying to stay calm. Had he changed his mind about not hurting her?

"Your food was cold, so I ordered you another plate. It will be here in a few moments."

"You came to check on my food?" She rubbed her eyes, realizing she'd just given herself racoon circles since she hadn't bothered to remove her mascara. Oh well. I'm not here to look good for him.

"No. I came to show you something and noticed you'd fallen asleep without eating. I guessed you might be hungry once I woke you, though..." He paused.

"What?"

“Do you wish to eat first?” he asked.

“Why?”

“I find that eating and business do not always mix.”

She could guess why. His business was an ugly one. “Sure. I’ll eat.” She needed to start regaining her strength. “Are the guests still here?”

“They went home an hour ago.”

“Did you get what you needed from me?” She hoped he might tip his hand with regard to the purpose of that intro to the governor.

“I did. Thank you.” He didn’t offer more.

There was a knock at the door, and a large man appeared, carrying a tray. He had a gun clipped to his waistband.

“Set the food there.” Elonzo pointed to the spot beside her on the bed. “And then leave us. Do not enter no matter what you hear.”

Emily’s heart began to accelerate. What was he planning to do to her? Because if he laid a finger on her, it would be the last time he enjoyed ten full fingers. “Why are we going to need privacy?”

Elonzo gave her a stern look. “Do not think me that sort of man.”

The sort who takes what he wants and cares only about himself or his own children, but not about anyone else’s?

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said innocently.

“Yes, you do. And I suppose I cannot blame you for thinking such evil things about me.”

She kept staring, waiting for him to say more about this need for privacy.

“Please eat. I insist. Then I will explain.”

She went for the water first and chugged down half the bottle. Then she took a huge bite of the juicy burger, savoring the melted cheese spreading over her tongue. So good . She was starving. She went in for another big bite. Then another.

“My night chef makes the best burger in the world, yes? I hired him after tasting his food at a small restaurant in New York. The only authentic burger place in the entire city, in my opinion—nothing but the finest bacon, grass-fed beef, and aged cheeses. It was better than anything I’d tasted here, so I asked him to work for me.”

She set the burger down, wiping up the dripping grease on the side of her mouth with her napkin. “It’s a great burger.”

He nodded. “Are you done?”

She wasn’t sure. Her stomach was a mess from the drugs, but now she had the added bonus of not knowing what he wanted to show her.

“I think I’ll finish the food later—let my stomach get accustomed to non-prison food.” Not to mention actual food.

He stood, took the tray, and set it on the nightstand.

“Thank you.”

“You are my guest. And I am here to win your trust.”

Bullshit. She blinked at him, bracing for what came next. “What did you want to show me?”

He sat next to her. “Do you remember earlier tonight when I told you that I had to choose my path after Julia died?”

It was only a few hours ago, dude. She nodded.

“By then, I’d already lost so much. It doesn’t have to be that way for you. Not when you have someone on your side.” He showed her his screen. On it was a photo of Warden Mitchel and the guards who’d beaten her. Well, of their heads, anyway.

Emily gasped and covered her mouth. “You only saw my bruises a few hours ago. How did you...”

“Find and execute them so quickly?” He got up and headed for the door. “Earn my trust, Emily, and you will find out. Then you’ll never have to be a victim of people like that again.”

He was almost out the door.

“But what about people like you?” she asked.

“Everyone answers to someone. By the way, you handled that better than I expected, Emily.” He left, and she heard him lock the door behind him.

A strange wave of relief washed over her. Those people would never hurt her or



another inmate again. But had justice really been served? What would keep someone else from filling the warden's spot? Nothing. Because "the game" in that prison was still intact. Only a few players had been removed.

On the other hand, since when had justice truly been served when it came to things like that, where evil people preyed on others with consent from the top? There was no way Warden Mitchel had been hiding his side gig without help from someone higher up.

Jesus, this is messed up.

She grabbed the tray and finished her meal. Tonight she'd sleep with a full belly and let her wounds heal. Tomorrow, she'd figure out how to play the next round. One week.

\*\*\*

Early the next morning, one of Elonzo's female servants came in to wake Emily. She'd slept like a log, but not because she felt safe. Exhaustion had been her elixir. Also, it didn't hurt having a bed to sleep on that wasn't made of cardboard.

"The boss wants you ready in thirty minutes," said the woman.

"For?" Emily slowly lifted her head.

"You have a doctor's appointment. Then he has a function you are to attend."

"What kind of doctor? What function?"

The woman flashed her an annoyed look.

“Okay. Got it. Trust-building time.” Emily got up from the bed slowly, feeling the aches and pains urging her to get back into bed. “Can I have some aspirin?”

“No. You may have water and black coffee. Doctor’s orders. After your exam, you may eat.”

Emily frowned. This sounded like a fasting situation. She’d only done it once after she’d started having heart palpitations. Her doctor thought it might be a blood sugar issue, when it had really been Ed and stress. She’d chickened out telling the doctor the full story.

The servant laid out clothes on the bed—all very nice, new things with the tags still on. Expensive jeans, a green silk blouse, and those same style of expensive tennis shoes Elonzo had worn yesterday, but in black and tan. She hated that she didn’t know the brand, but only because knowing things helped her fit in. Fitting in was a tool that had saved her life more than once.

She bathed, put her hair in one big braid, and dressed. Just as she was about to try the door, it swung open.

Hunter Collins smiled down with his blue eyes. He wore a white dress shirt, black jeans, and a very large gun holstered under his arm.

“I’m not sure if I should be happy to see you or alarmed,” she said.

“Alarmed?” He raised a brow.

“You’re one of his heavy-hitters, right?”

“No. I mean yes. But the boss thought you might appreciate a familiar face after yesterday’s events. It was a lot to deal with.”

Oh, yes. I find the presence of sicarios so comforting. “I’m fine. Can we just get this over with?”

“Whatever makes you happy,” he replied.

“Happy as a shit-eating bug.”

He took her down a back stairwell and into a waiting SUV.

God, I hate these cars. They always led to trouble. Two more men joined them, one of whom drove, but instead of going to a normal doctor’s office or hospital, they took her to a house. Your run-of-the-mill rancher with yellow paint and white shutters in a suburb not too far from Elonzo’s home.

“What kind of doctor is this?” she asked Hunter.

“The kind who won’t tell anyone that you’re a wanted felon.”

“Oh.”

He walked her around back through a side gate and past a gnome garden. They entered what appeared to be the garage but was instead a waiting area complete with pleather chairs and magazines.

The driver and other guard stayed outside, and Hunter went in with her. A woman in a white sweater appeared and let him know the doctor would be along shortly.

“I’d love to know what this is all about,” Emily said.

“The boss didn’t say, but I’m sure he’s just being careful. You’re pretty beat up.”

“Nice of the boss to care.”

He shrugged.

This was driving her insane. “Hunter, I’m not dumb. I know what your boss is and how he does business. If I’m here instead of being dead, it’s because he sees a way to make some money. I just don’t know how.”

He nodded. “Elonzo is a man of many secrets, but you are right. Money is generally his underlying motive for everything.”

“Miss Wilson, the doctor will see you now,” said the nurse.

Hunter got up.

“You’re not coming with me, are you?” Emily asked.

“Just like prison.”

Great. She hoped she wasn’t going to have to strip for this, too.

### CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Elonzo welcomed Emily onto a private jet after the doctor's exam. Emily had a fractured rib, a torn muscle in her lower arm, swelling on two of her disks, and a sprained finger from when she'd tried to defend herself from the beatings. The bruises were what the doctor had called "traumatic contusions" with several hematomas. In other words, she'd had the shit kicked out of her, but she'd live.

The people who'd done this to her were another story.

"I am pleased the doctor said you are free to fly," Elonzo said, gesturing toward a seat beside him in the center of the plane. Several large men in suits were spread out around the cabin in various seats.

"I didn't know the cartel offered free healthcare. I bet the mafia's super jealous."

He laughed. "Well, nothing is free in this life, but we did have a guest die last month during a flight. He had a blood clot after experiencing a rather rigorous workout from a rival. He probably would have lived if we'd had him examined, but he insisted he was well." Elonzo shrugged. "Live and learn."

"Or not?" she muttered.

"Yes, for him, not."

She took a seat, and he ordered drinks from the attendant. Water for Emily. Scotch for him.

“So, are you going to tell me where we’re going, or is this part of the week of trust-building at Summer Camp Elonzo?” she asked.

“We are going to my vacation home in Mexico, near the town where I grew up. I think you will be safer there considering the entire world is hunting you.”

“And will we be chopping wood, practicing our archery, and singing campfire songs?”

He chuckled. “You must be feeling better today. Your humor has returned.”

How would he know? She wasn’t the humorous type. “I just love me a good jamboree. Especially in a foreign country where I don’t speak the language or know my way around. Makes it easier to accept that there’ll be no escape from the fun.” Cartel-style fun.

He sat and sipped his scotch. This whole thing made her feel beyond uneasy, but she had to go along. For the time being. She suspected this was all a show meant to get her guard down, confuse her, or terrify the hell out of her.

Truthfully, though? She was well aware that at any moment they could grab her and slit her throat. These were the sorts of men who didn’t think twice about decapitating a person or chopping off a hand to send to a loved one. She’d seen the news in El Paso. The violence was enough to make a person lose faith in humanity.

“I sense you are about to ask a question, Emily.”

“Nope. You’ve made it clear I am along for the ride, so I’ll leave it to you to talk when you’re ready.”

“Good,” replied Elonzo.

“But can I ask a favor?” she asked. “If you plan to just kill me in the end, would you mind doing it sooner rather than later? I’d appreciate something painless, too, if that’s on the menu. A good old-fashioned bullet in the head is fine. And you can spare me the beatings. They just piss me off now.”

He gave her a strange look.

“Sorry. It’s just that...I really hate my ex, and it just reminds me of him.”

“Ah. Ed. The corrupt FBI agent.”

“That’s the one,” she said.

“He used to beat you?” Elonzo asked.

“It was his favorite pastime. That and making money off the women he kidnapped for trafficking.”

“I would never dream of beating my Julia. A wife is to be protected, just as one’s children are.”

She noticed how he’d said nothing about the trafficking. “We’re all someone’s child.”

“And shame on the parents who do not protect them.”

Wow. Had he just given a backhanded slap to the parents of all his victims? She bit her tongue. The chances of Elonzo saying, “Hey, you know what? You’re right. Forcing people into sexual slavery is wrong. I should stop,” were zero.

“Well, at least I don’t have to worry about Ed anymore.” He was dead or on the run.

Elonzo raised a brow. “So if given the chance, you would have put a bullet in his head?”

“Yes,” she replied without thinking about it. “But I might’ve taken my time with him first. He doesn’t deserve a painless death.”

“But he is someone’s child, Emily. Do you not feel for his parents and their loss?”

Ah. Okay. She saw where this was going. “I do feel for them because he turned out to be a horrible person.”

“Yet, we are all loved by someone. Even the worst of us.”

And his point?

He added, “To the people who love them, it does not matter whether the person killed is good or bad. It’s all the same pain. There is no way around it even if the death is justified in the minds of some.”

“So why even care?” Was that his point?

“Not at all. It just shouldn’t be a factor—whether a person was loved or not, good or not, innocent or not. The only real reason to end a life is because it is in your best interest.” He shrugged.

“To win the game,” she concluded.

He nodded.

She couldn’t believe he really thought like this. It was like saying executing a serial killer was the same as murdering a nun who fed the poor.



She sipped her water and decided not to say more. She was getting too comfortable talking openly. Not a good idea with Elonzo.

“I must make a few phone calls,” he said, getting up from his seat. “If you need anything, ask the attendant.”

“Thank you.” She closed her eyes, mentally preparing for anything when they landed. If she was going by her conversations with Elonzo and from what she’d seen so far, what was coming wouldn’t be nice. Or easy.

\*\*\*

Emily had expected Elonzo’s vacation home to be on some private island, but it was a compound east of Cabo, Mexico, overlooking the ocean. It had high walls with armed guards and cameras everywhere.

“You may go anywhere on the property,” he told her, “but I am afraid there is no beach access. The current on this part of the coast is too strong for swimming anyway.”

She nodded, realizing why he’d brought her here. The illusion of freedom and trust. Really, she was in a five-star prison.

Let the head games begin. Or continue. Whichever.

He told her there would be a dinner at eight and someone would be around to help her dress.

“Another governor?” she asked.

“Better.” He smiled and disappeared inside the massive mansion, with persimmon-

colored stucco, arched doorways, and lush vegetation—a contrast to the surrounding desertscape.

A petite woman with big brown eyes named Nelly showed her to her room, which was incredible—jet tub, waterfall shower, king-size bed, and a closet filled with clothes and shoes. The bar was fully stocked, as were the supplies in the bathroom. The man lived like a king, and he treated his guests like royalty, too.

Around six, Nelly came by. Emily had just finished a long hot shower and some quality time with the deep conditioner.

“I am here to help you with your hair, miss.” She held up a box of red hair dye.

“Oh. That’s okay. I’m fine with my hideous two-tone for now, and I already dried it.”

“Elonzo insists.”

Emily had to pick her battles at this point. “Fine. Sure.”

Forty minutes later, Emily had a deep red much darker than her natural color, which was fine in itself. What bothered her was when she looked in the mirror, the image staring back was someone she desperately wanted to leave in the past: Justine, the weak woman who had no clue that her path to freedom would lead her here.

“Would you like help styling your hair, miss?” Nelly asked.

“Uh, no. I’ll just ponytail it.”

“Word of advice: the boss likes pretty things.”

“I’m not here to be his arm candy,” Emily replied.

She gave Emily a look.

“What are you trying to say?” Emily asked.

“Nothing, miss.”

“No. Tell me.” Emily grabbed Nelly’s thin arm as she tried to leave. “Why am I here?”

The maid shrugged, but Emily knew she was lying.

“You have to tell me. I need to know what’s going to happen to me,” Emily added.

“All I know,” whispered Nelly, “is that he is making a very special effort to impress you. I have never seen him do this.”

“What do you think he wants?”

“I do not know, but it cannot hurt to look nice as a sign of respect.”

Emily’s indignation percolated. She did not want to dress up for this man. On the other hand, she needed to play it smart and buy herself as much time as possible. It wouldn’t hurt to get on the man’s good side.

“Can you do one of those twist things in the back?” Emily asked.

Nelly smiled. “Of course. And might I recommend the black dress?”

That tiny thing she’d seen in the closet would barely cover her breasts. “I’ll stick to something with more coverage, thanks.” Besides, she still looked like an old banana, and she did not want to send the wrong signal. Elonzo was a tall, very attractive man,

but that meant nothing when faced with the sort of violence he was capable of.

Nelly shrugged.

“Thank you,” Emily blurted out. “I appreciate the help. God knows you’re the only one trying.”

### CHAPTER NINETEEN

Emily walked into the dining room to find Elonzo sitting at the head of a long table with an extra setting to his right. Expensive white china, rows of gleaming utensils, and several different wineglasses all sat atop a white tablecloth. There was a bottle of wine chilling on a stand to his left.

She stopped and took it in, trying not to get in her head. There was no one else here. “Is it...just the two of us tonight?”

Elonzo’s gaze darted to her face and then slowly worked its way down. “You look very nice.”

She’d decided to wear a long-sleeve, blue satin blouse that gathered loosely around the wrists with tiny white buttons. The flowing neckline plunged low but could be closed with a simple pearl button at the collarbone, which she’d done. She’d cinched the blouse at the waist with a thin black belt that matched her snug black pants with tapered legs. Strappy black heels completed the ensemble, which said she was trying to look nice but not offering herself up to anyone.

“Thank you,” she said. “Whoever picked out these clothes guessed my size pretty well.”

He stood as she approached the table, and helped her into her seat before retaking his place. “There was no guessing involved whatsoever.”

“No?” She tilted her head just an inch.

“I had you measured.”

What? “When?”

“While you were passed out in my basement. Couldn’t have you walking around in those orange pajamas all day, now could we?”

It gave her the creeps to think someone had been measuring her bust while she’d been drugged.

“Thank you, Elonzo,” she squeezed out.

He snapped his fingers, and a man in a crisp white shirt, bowtie, and black slacks appeared.

“Bring a black napkin for the lady,” Elonzo said.

“Oh. No,” Emily said. “The white one is—”

“I insist,” Elonzo said. “Would not want white lint on your lovely outfit.”

“I highly doubt there’s one speck of lint to be found anywhere in this house.”

He smiled. “I do enjoy a tidy home.”

“Me too, but only if I’m not the one doing the tidying.” Housework sucked.

“Agreed.”

The servant returned with her napkin and offered her wine. It was white with a French label. Looked expensive, though she didn’t know her grapes beyond the

basics like cab or chardonnay.

“So, who was it you wanted me to meet tonight?” she asked, taking a sip of the ice-cold sweet wine. It wasn’t bad.

“I did not say you would be meeting anyone. I simply said we would have dinner.”

“Ah.” This was actually a welcome surprise. No crowds. No hordes of bodyguards.

“I thought it would be nice to get to know one another.”

Nice for who? “What would you like to know?” she asked.

“Actually, I thought you might like to ask me some questions. The truth is,” he sipped his wine, “I know a lot about you—how you were raised by your aunt, you lost your father to a fishing accident, and your mother abandoned you when you were just a baby.”

Ouch. This man did not hold back.

He added, “Surprisingly, we had almost the exact same experience as children. My mother ran off, my father was killed in a car accident, and I was raised by his sister. Though, there were five of us. All boys. It is probably why my aunt died young, too.”

Was he trying to convince her they were the same? “And how did you end up in your current line of work?”

“We were poor, and a cousin began selling mota —or weed as you call it. He got some of my brothers to join him.”

“So you sold weed and rose through the ranks?” Hard to believe.

“No.” He laughed. “I was—how can I say—too much of a pussy to break the law. But I was good with math and numbers. I loved to read and learn. So my cousin and brothers pulled their money together and got me into a private school. From there, I earned a scholarship to Yale and got my degree in business.”

“That is quite the story.” It explained how he was so connected.

“It is, but after I graduated—early, I might add—I saw how my brothers and cousin were still risking their lives every day to sell drugs while the bosses kept all the profits. I vowed to find a way to get them out of that business and make our own money. Clean money.”

“Did you?”

“I did. We started a logistics company, and it was very successful. For a while. Then the cartels began pressuring us to transport their drugs. Cocaine from Colombia. We refused, and they put a bullet in my oldest brother’s head. He had a son, who I adopted.”

So the Meat Grinder had been Elonzo’s nephew? It was a shockingly kind thing to do, adopting him.

He went on, “That was when I decided to get involved in politics. The rest, you know.”

She knew that the cartel in power at the time also shot his pregnant wife, which could only mean one thing. “Did the Colombian kill your brother and your wife?” she asked. “Is that why you wanted to take over his business?”

He nodded. “You are very smart, Emily.”



“So it was personal for you.”

“As I said before, if someone takes from you, you take back. I have already taken everything I can from Bernardo Castillo, but,” his jaw pulsed, “not all the people responsible for killing my family members have paid. They have eluded me all these years and, more recently, took my son.”

Her stomach rolled with dread. Suite forty-five had killed his adopted son, and if the same people killed his wife and older brother, then... “So Sampson was responsible.” Ordered by Bernardo the Colombian.

“His men pulled the trigger, yes. We caught the ones who murdered my brother long ago. More recently, we executed the people who killed my son—the couple you were with that night—but the assassin who took my wife’s life is still free. He calls himself Charge—the same man who now hunts me. Your ex-boss.”

Oh shit. Olivia and Flint were dead? But Olivia had been pregnant. And why would Charge shoot a pregnant woman? It didn’t sound like him at all. She must’ve gotten in the way. An accident.

Emily’s heart sank, and she held back her tears.

“You look surprised,” he said.

“I-I...I just don’t know what to say.” Elonzo was lying, or there was more to the story.

“It is like I told you before. A life only matters to the ones who loved them.”

“I’m sorry that happened to her. I meant it, Elonzo.” She took her wineglass and sipped, hiding her quivering lower lip. The thing was, she knew for a fact that

innocent people were caught in the crossfire of these cartel wars all the time. Kids, pregnant women, babies. It disturbed her to no end. What was the matter with these people?

She set her glass down. "I am guessing the reason I'm here is because you want Charge."

Elonzo was silent for a moment. "I do not."

She blinked at him, waiting for an explanation. Just then, the servant came in carrying two plates.

"I hope you like Caesar salad. It is the chef's family recipe," Elonzo said.

Emily couldn't take this anymore. The games. The sad violence circling her like hungry sharks. "I'm not feeling well. I think I'll go lie down." She stood up.

"You will sit!" Elonzo roared.

And there he is, the violent thug . She slowly lowered herself back into her chair, avoiding eye contact.

"I asked you to trust me," he seethed. "And if I say I will not use you to go after Charge, then I mean what I say."

"Then stop the games," she snarled in a low voice, "and tell me what you want. Because when the most ruthless criminal in the Western Hemisphere tells me he's not after revenge for his dead wife, I find it a little hard to believe."

His hazel eyes narrowed.

“You said,” she added, “that I could leave after one week if you haven’t gained my trust. And since you’re doing absolutely nothing to move the needle, I can only assume what you said is bullshit. So, then, why don’t you tell me what you want. Or kill me. Or torture me. Or whatever the hell you’re planning. But I can’t help you get to Sampson or Charge or—”

“I know Charge is Sampson,” he said.

She pulled on a blank expression, saying nothing.

“The operator you call Flint told us before we killed him. He confessed that Charge was really Sampson and that you were being groomed to take over suite forty-five. So why don’t you stop the bullshit ?”

Dammit. Why had she told Flint all that? It had happened when Dearheart was holding Charge prisoner. At the time, she’d been desperate to get Flint and Olivia’s help, and disclosing the truth had felt like the only way out. She’d been trying to make them see that more had been at stake than just one operator’s life. Sampson, aka Charge, was the brains of the operation.

What’s done is done. Now she had to figure out her next move. It would likely dictate if she left this place alive or got fed to the sharks.

She was about to speak, but Elonzo cut her off.

“I caution you, Emily, not to break my trust with lies. I know more than you think.”

“I don’t know what you’re asking, so I haven’t been given the opportunity to lie.”

“I am asking you to trust me. Think I made that clear.”

“Why?” she snapped.

He pounded a fist on the table. “Our deal still stands. I will tell you at the end of the week.”

Screw him. “Pound that table all you want, but stop wasting my time. Tell me why I’m here.”

“Not until I have earned your trust.”

“It’s not going to happen.” She glared back with equal measures of displeasure.

He removed his napkin, folded it neatly, and placed it by his plate. “By the end of the week, your precious Charge will try to kill you. And me. He will not succeed, but he will try. After that, I will tell you what I want.”

“He would never hurt me.”

Elonzo flashed a sly smile. “I wish I were wrong, but I am not. And I am betting my entire kingdom on it.”

Betting his kingdom? How? Fuck this guy! He was crazy. Charge wouldn’t kill her.

“Now, I hope you enjoy Wagyu beef. I had it flown in from Japan just for you.”

“Feeding me expensive steak is a waste, Elonzo. Just like these clothes. Just like bringing me here to your lovely estate. Because they won’t make me trust you.”

He inhaled sharply, a wash of rage on his red face. “You will change your mind after you see I’m telling the truth, and you’re still standing.”

### CHAPTER TWENTY

Emily hated how Elonzo was so sure of himself. Especially because he wasn't a man who went into situations by licking a finger and sticking it up in the air. Not that she knew him, but one did not become the most powerful narco in the world by winging it, even if risk was the nature of the game. In short, there was a chance he'd told the truth about Charge, even if her heart struggled to believe it.

"Shit!" She threw her heels at the bed and began pulling the pins from her hair. No, no. Don't fall for it. Charge cares about you. As much as a man who killed for a living could.

But was that true?

He'd had her locked up, claiming it was for her own protection. Insane! Then he told her to kill Roberts, a guard who worked for Elonzo and intended to break her out of prison.

Okay, so...Charge didn't want me falling into Elonzo's hands. Made sense. But then why lie? Why not try to break her out of prison himself? Why put her in there in the first place? Why the games?

He never trusted me. He'd never let her into his tent of secrets. But did a man like Charge ever let anyone in?

She sat on the bed, scrubbing her face with her hands. This entire thing felt like a puzzle that kept shifting shapes. Impossible to solve.

And at the end of it all, regardless of whether Charge wanted her dead, it didn't explain what Elonzo planned to do with her. She was useless for information at this point. Suite forty-five was in the wind by now, setting up camp elsewhere. She couldn't tell Elonzo where to find the operators or Charge. She had no pull, communication, or influence.

So what does he want?

Her mind flashed to the end of the dinner tonight. After she'd had two bites of steak, she rose from the table and told Elonzo he was wasting his time with her.

"Am I?" A flicker of lust had glittered in his eyes and sent her scrambling to her room.

I might have to kill him. If he tried anything with her, there'd be no other choice. If she died in the process, it would be worth it. He was a poison apple. Gorgeous and shiny on the outside but toxic on the inside.

There was a knock at her door, and she froze. Please don't be him. Please...

"Come in."

Nelly appeared and handed Emily a note.

Emily,

Sorry for losing my patience. I will earn your trust.

Be ready at ten a.m. tomorrow. A day of fun. No agendas. You may choose to stay in your room and hide if you like. But what sort of life is that for people like us?

– Elonzo

People like what?

Emily handed the note back to Nelly. “Tell him okay. I’ll be ready.”

“Do you need anything to help you rest? The boss wanted me to make sure you had a good night’s sleep.”

Got a phone so I can call a hit man? She wanted to hear Charge say it with his own two lips: She wasn’t a target.

Before, when Elonzo said that Sampson wouldn’t let her live, she’d dismissed it. After all, Sampson wasn’t even real. But Elonzo had disclosed that he knew Charge and Sampson were the same person? It gave weight to his words.

Poor Flint. She could only imagine the hell he’d gone through before they ended his life to gain that information. He was no angel, but he’d come through for her when no one else would. I wonder if he chose Olivia in the end. Maybe that was how Elonzo got to them both. After finding out she was pregnant, Olivia’d fled for a safer life, unsure if Flint would join her.

I hope they found peace together. Them and the baby who’d never be born. Poor little thing. It was like Olivia had once said: this wasn’t a life for anyone with a soul or the capacity to truly love—or something like that.

“Miss?” said Nelly, asking again if Emily needed something to help her sleep.

“No, thank you. But if you don’t mind, could you find out what he wants me to wear tomorrow and leave a note under the door?”

She couldn't believe she was having to do this again in order to stay safe. She'd promised herself that she would never dress for a man again, like she'd had to do with Ed.

"Yes, miss. Good night."

\*\*\*

The next morning, Elonzo didn't join her for breakfast. He also wasn't in the SUV with the armed bodyguards waiting to take her to an unknown destination. She hoped it might be somewhere outdoors.

It was a warm day, filled with gentle ocean breezes and plenty of sunshine, just perfect for swimming at the beach. Or dying. It could go either way today.

She'd been advised to wear something cool and comfortable, so she'd picked a linen, cobalt blue summer dress and white sandals. Big hat. Red hair in a braid down her back.

She'd debated five times about prying the blade from her razor in the shower and hiding it in her clothes, but it was a dumb idea. So far, Elonzo had made it a point to stay arm's reach away, and there were always armed men lurking. She'd have better luck trying to slip away when one of his men was distracted.

After twenty minutes of skirting the coastline with breathtaking views of the deep blue ocean, the SUV turned down a dirt driveway lined with cacti. The house ahead wasn't anything extravagant, but it did look old—arched doorways and windows, red clay plastered over adobe brick, and weathered wooden beams sticking straight out from under the clay tile roofline. Plastic, multicolored flags with lacelike cutouts hung over the huge rustic wooden front door, where a group of people in their Sunday bests chatted and hugged. Some held gifts with bows.



“What is this?” Emily asked the guard to her side.

“A birthday party.”

“For who?” Emily asked.

“Elonzo’s niece.”

This was a family function? Why in the world would Elonzo bring a prisoner to this?

“And I didn’t even bring a gift.” Bad hostage.

“You’re Elonzo’s guest. It is not necessary.”

They parked, and she was let out of the SUV. With two men trailing her, she made her way toward the porch. How should she introduce herself to these people? Hi, I’m Emily—fugitive from prison, Elonzo’s unwilling guest, and I used to work for a group of hit men who killed a ton of his people. Nice to meet you!

Suddenly, a red convertible sports car pulled up with three SUVs trailing it. It was Elonzo.

Guess he’s not too terrified of the contract on his head. Because his head was sticking right out of the car for anyone to see. His dark skin and thick black hair contrasted his white linen shirt. His mirrored sunglasses gave him the air of a man out enjoying life and soaking up the sun. If she didn’t know him, he was the type of man she’d look at twice.

He parked alongside the row of cars and hopped out. “Sorry I am late. Needed to pick up my niece’s gift.” He grabbed a big pink box with a white bow from the trunk and approached her. He suddenly leaned in, taking her off guard, and planted a kiss on her cheek.

She sucked in a breath, stiffening her body, and he noticed.

“Do not worry. It is simply a custom,” he whispered in her ear. “Now smile and relax. I will introduce you to a few people.”

She turned to face him, their noses only inches apart. “Why am I here, Elonzo? This is a birthday party for family.”

He flashed a charming smile. “Well, as powerful as I am, even I cannot change birthdays. And what would you have me do, ignore my niece or leave you isolated at my house all day?” He tsked. “Besides, I know you will be on your best behavior.” He leaned in to whisper again. “There are armed men circling the property. You will be perfectly safe.”

She was more worried about escaping.

Elonzo took her hand and showed her inside. “The house belonged to my grandparents. It is over one hundred years old.” He pointed to a black-and-white photo on the wall of a young couple dressed in white, standing on the same porch she’d just passed. They weren’t smiling.

“So much history here,” she said.

“You wouldn’t believe the secrets this house holds. They say it was built on land once occupied by the Pericúes king—the pre-Hispanic people who once occupied the Baja peninsula.”

“Well, it’s beautiful.” In that creepy museum kind of way.

He showed her to the kitchen, which had modern appliances but old white-and-blue hand-painted Mexican tiles on the counters. A woman in a yellow cotton dress with

white flowers embroidered on the hem stood cutting limes.

“Angela, this is Emily,” he said. “She is staying with me a few days. Perhaps longer. Would you show her around and introduce her to Natalia and Candi? Keep her away from Rodrigo.

“Rodrigo is one of my brothers,” he said to Emily. “He thinks he is the best looking, but of course, he is wrong.” Elonzo winked.

Why was this man winking? Watching him act playful was throwing her off, not to mention making her feel more uneasy.

“Are your children here?” she asked. After all, it was a family function.

“I did not want to take the risk, given the situation.”

She stared for a second, working it out. “You mean Charge coming after you?”

“Us,” he corrected.

But they were surrounded by his family, and he didn’t seem too worried about them. Then again, Elonzo had made it clear that he cared about his daughters more than anything.

Elonzo finally dropped her hand. It was as if he wanted everyone to think they were a couple. “I must discuss some business with my brother. I won’t be long.” He left the room.

Angela smiled warmly at Emily. “Welcome to our home.”

Just then, four women came from the door behind Angela.

“Ladies, this is Emily. Elonzo’s date ,” said Angela, with a smirk.

They all stared like they were seeing a ghost.

“Oh. No,” Emily corrected. “I’m not his date. He just asked me to come to the party with...him...” Shit. I’m his date. She cleared her throat. “We, uh, sort of work together, that’s all.” If you could call being on opposing teams and being Elonzo’s prisoner work .

Angela smiled. “Well, we’ve never seen him bring anyone to a family gathering. Not since his wife passed, so you are a breath of fresh air.”

“She’s too skinny. We need to feed her,” said a short woman with a caramel brown bob. “Let me show you where all the food is.”

### CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

It killed Emily that everyone was treating her like part of the family, and that she'd had to go along with this charade— Pretending I'm his date and acting like he's not some ruthless narco.

They all had to know what Elonzo did for a living because his brothers were in on it. If they weren't directly involved in the Heroin King's enterprise, then they were at least aware.

The hard part was that they seemed like normal, kind people who adored the army of children attending the party. Whether the guests were all related to Elonzo, she didn't know, but the feeling of family saturated the food, music, and easy laughter floating in the warm salty air.

Emily had stayed near Angela, helping to replenish the piles of disappearing food set out on a big table: homemade tortillas, grilled marinated meats, fresh salsa, cheeses, and every kind of crunchy sweet snack imaginable. And tons of beer with lime wedges.

Elonzo was never far, always facing her and catching glances even if he was on the other side of the massive, covered patio, surrounded by men who all wanted a minute of his time.

What a different world from suite forty-five. If she had to put it in simple words, this felt like a way of life, whereas Charge's group felt like a job. The operators were there for the money, at the end of the day.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” Elonzo came up from behind, giving her a start.

She jumped. “Where’d you come from?”

“I snuck to the kitchen for an extra slice of cake.” He smiled. “Tres leches is my favorite.”

“That was good cake. What did you get your niece?”

“A new gun. In pink.”

Emily’s eyes went wide.

“I am joking. It was a soccer ball autographed by her favorite team, the Chivas.”

“I don’t watch the sport. Are they any good?”

He laughed. “I’m a Tigres fan, but don’t tell anyone. My brothers like the Chivas.”

Just then, someone turned up the music and began blaring salsa music. “Do you dance?” Elonzo asked.

“Nope. I mean, I can, but I haven’t in a long time.”

He held out his hand, but she didn’t take it. This wasn’t a date. He wasn’t a nice man.

“You’re not going to reject me in front of a hundred of my closest friends and family, are you, Emily?”

She stared defiantly, only to give in and take his hand. At this point, it wouldn’t help her cause to snub the man.

He walked her to a spot on the patio nearest the big speakers. The entire party ground to a halt to watch them dance. He pulled her gently into his tall frame and began moving his hips. She followed, grabbing the rhythm quickly.

“Very good, Emily. You know, it is not every day you meet a woman who can dance as well as she kills, fights, and spies.”

“And takes a punch,” she added.

“That, too.”

He spun her around and pulled her back into him, their eyes locking. She didn’t know what he was thinking, but her thoughts were more solid than ever. This relaxing afternoon had given her time to pull the pieces together.

“I know why I’m here,” she whispered in his ear.

“Do you now?” he said, sounding amused.

“This is all a test. You’re putting me in different situations to see how I’ll handle them—it’s never been about earning trust.”

“How so?”

“Everything’s happened in a controlled environment. Even this party. There are babies, mothers, and small children here. And since Hunter Collins mentioned there is a detailed file on me, it means you’ve done your homework. You know I wouldn’t do anything reckless around innocent people because I’m not a psychopath. That means bringing me here is an attempt to make me believe you’re letting me into your inner sanctum.” Just like Charge had. He’d made it feel like she was inside his tent, when really, it was just a tent like any other.

“And what am I testing you for?” he asked.

“I think you want to find out how easily manipulated I can be and if my soft-heartedness toward certain people is a liability. You want to find out my weaknesses.”

He didn’t respond, so she looked at him directly. “Well? Am I right?”

He nodded. “I suppose.”

“The only thing I don’t know is the purpose of vetting me. I mean, I get that it signifies you have a use for me, but for what?”

“The week is not up yet.” He pulled her closer, and a shiver crawled up her back. His move felt overtly sexual.

She wanted to push him away. She wanted to tell him to get his hands off her. But that wasn’t the way to deal with a dangerous man like Elonzo.

“Another test?” She gently pulled away to meet his gaze. “I don’t like men who get handsy with me. It shows a lack of respect, so please don’t do that test again. Also, my rib is cracked, so ouch.”

He laughed. “My apologies. I simply find it hard to resist you. I am a sucker for strong women.” He leaned in, touching his lips to her ear. “Not many people are willing to stand up to a powerful man like me. You pretend to be compliant, but you can only contain your true nature for so long. Eventually, the real Justine comes out.”

Justine. Justine. “Why did you call me that?”

He gave her a pitying look. “Because you are Justine Hays, and you may continue



running from her like you do from your past, but I guarantee—as a man who has faced the worst life has to offer—that embracing the events that formed you is the only way to become whole. You want to be free from men like me, men like Charge, or your cruel Ed? Then stop lying to yourself. Justine Hays is not dead. She is simply waiting for you to forgive her mistakes so that you may fully learn from them and use your pain to make you wiser. Once you do, all your doubts about who you are and your purpose in this world will fade away.”

How had he turned such a casual conversation into a moment of raw, painful honesty? Because he wasn’t wrong. She felt guilty and weak every time someone said her true name. She hated that she did, but it was true.

I hate that he knows how to get under my skin. It reminded her of Ed.

“I’d like to go now, if you don’t mind?” she said. “My ribs hurt, and my back needs ice.”

He bowed his head and took her hand, kissing the top of it. “I am sorry if I upset you, but—”

“But what, Elonzo? You needed to test me? See how I tick? Because if your charm doesn’t work, you plan to break me when the week is over to get me to talk? I already told you I can’t give you anything meaningful on suite forty-five, so let’s just get this over with and kill me. Stop pretending you’re some nice, kind, wonderful man who cares about me. You’re not, and you don’t.”

“I know,” he whispered, “exactly who I am and what I do. I am not the one hiding behind another name or a group of hit men who claim they are the good. You are in denial. Not me. It is like I told you before; you are part of the game now. There is no leaving. There is only winning the next hand so that you may live to fight another day. But no one leaves with clean hands, Justine. Not even you.”

Yeah. She got that. Her hands were plenty dirty, but at least she hadn't crossed certain lines. She hadn't killed for money or power. She hadn't sold poisoned fake drugs that have killed more young people than World War II. She didn't make money from sex slavery.

Jesus, this guy would not quit with the mind games. "If it's no difference to you, I'd prefer to find out on my own how this ends." So far, she'd beaten the odds.

"I will let my men know we are departing. Please say goodbye to my sisters-in-law. They took a liking to you, Emily. Not many show up to a cartel birthday party and insist on helping with the food or cleaning up like part of the family."

"Well, I'm not one to sit around while others do all the work or clean up after me. Seems rude."

He smiled. "Yes, I know."

\*\*\*

Emily thanked Angela and the other sisters for a lovely time before she left. It actually had been nice up until she lost her patience with Elonzo. Still, she couldn't remember ever going to a birthday party like this, filled with so much family and happiness. Her family had been just her and her aunt most of the time. Later, after she'd married Ed, he'd invite his friends and brother over, who'd bring their wives and kids, but it never took long before the men ended up drinking too much beer and getting out the poker table. Meanwhile, the women complained about their shitty husbands. Nothing joyous about the occasions except for when it ended with Ed passed out on the couch.

Elonzo walked her to his red convertible and opened the passenger door.

“Are you sure it’s safe?” she asked.

“You think I wish to die today? Of course it’s safe.”

He’d left his daughters at home. How sure was he? “You might be one of those men who thinks he’ll never die.”

“I am very aware of my mortality.” He jerked his head, urging her to get in. “Also, my people have been patrolling the route home all day. It is safe.”

So arrogant. She inhaled slowly and slid in.

He revved the engine to life and put on his sunglasses even though the sun was almost completely down. “Do you like to go fast?”

“Depends on what I’m running from.”

He laughed and floored it down the long dirt driveway.

With the salty evening wind whipping through her hair, they hit the two-lane road back, skirting the coastline. Small homes and little shops dotted the route, with the occasional beachside fortress like Elonzo’s. She tried to imagine such a deadly man growing up in a calm, beautiful beach town like this. Nice weather, ocean, a big, loving family. Why hadn’t this been enough for him and his brothers? She would’ve given anything to grow up here.

At least I’m here now. “Thank you,” she said, over the roar of the engines.

“For what?”

“For giving me one good day before I die.”

“Enough.” Elonzo flashed an angry look. “I am not going to kill you.”

Suddenly, a flash of light hit his sunglasses, and he swerved onto the dirt shoulder. The car skidded to a halt under a plume of dust.

“Get down!” He threw himself over her as loud pops exploded in the air. His body jerked above her, and he grunted, as if taking hits.

She screamed in horror, the sound of more pops filling the air. Gunfire.

Emily couldn’t breathe. She wasn’t hit, but the weight of his large body left her gasping for air.

After a few long moments, someone pulled Elonzo off her. She wasn’t sure if it was the person shooting at them or his men.

She slowly cracked open one eye, finding a furious Elonzo yelling at his security detail. It went on for a solid minute, so she guessed the shooter was on the run.

Elonzo stormed toward the red convertible and slid behind the wheel.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Ye-yes. Are you?”

He threw the car into first, skidding out onto the pavement. “Bulletproof vest.”

Holy shit . What just happened? And even if he wore a vest, that had to hurt like hell. The man had to be running on pure adrenaline right now.

“Who shot at you?” she asked.

“Not me. Us. ”

Her heart drummed against her ribcage. “Who, Elonzo?”

“Your boyfriend. Who else?”

Charge? That was Charge just now? “He’s not my boyfriend.”

“But he is like a jealous lover who will stop at nothing to keep you from being with anyone else,” he said.

“It was never like that between us.”

He pushed the gas, sending the car close to one hundred miles an hour. “Tell that to the back of my fucking shirt!”

If the war between suite forty-five and the Heroin King had been bloody and ruthless before, things were about to get uglier.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Elonzo disappeared after their return to his compound, so she'd eaten alone in her room. A salad to wash down the eight tacos and cake she'd scarfed through the course of the party. Nelly said he'd been detained by important business, which meant heads were probably rolling over today's failed assassination.

Elonzo also had to be upset about the egg on his face. He had bragged to her about how safe it was, only to be shot at moments later.

What messed with her head was that he'd thrown himself on top of her to protect her. He couldn't have known what sort of bullets those were or how good the shooter's aim was. Plenty of guns could pierce a vest. Most could pierce a skull.

He risked his life to save me. It genuinely blew her away. She was no one to him. Yet he'd broken her out of prison, which saved her life given she'd killed a guard at the supermax and payback was inevitable. He'd had her checked out by a doctor to ensure her injuries weren't fatal after that beating. Thoughtful . He'd brought her here, claiming she had a price on her head, and thought it would be safer. He was wrong . But then he'd put his life on the line for her today after introducing her to his family.

God, I'm so confused. This man was not turning out to be the ruthless criminal she thought. He loved his children, his family, and he'd do anything for them. Yet when he got up for work each day, he was the Heroin King, running what was likely a multibillion-dollar enterprise. He employed a massive group of sicarios —assassins—who'd taken over the border communities and wreaked havoc on their

citizens. He had no interest in saving lives beyond those he cared for.

Charge, on the other hand, only cared about saving strangers, even if it cost him those he cared for.

Charge and Elonzo were opposite sides of the same coin. Both did their jobs and offered no apologies for it. They were both indifferent to the downsides of their chosen professions.

But Charge was a man who could change and adapt. He was a realist. He knew that his job was only as good as his planning and execution. He understood that someday he'd have to be replaced.

She was beginning to wonder if—and it might sound completely crazy—if Elonzo thought the same way? If so, she might be able to convince Elonzo to change course. She wasn't dumb enough to hope he'd leave his business, not when some other money-hungry thug would simply take his place. But he might comprehend the need to adapt.

What if she could convince him that the way forward was to let go of the fent, the sex trafficking, and the violence inflicted along the border? It would mean less trouble to operate, fewer people to oversee, and fewer palms to grease. But would he be happy with the money he earned through only selling narcotics? Not that she approved, but it was like Charge had once told her; until people in the US stopped asking, someone would always be selling.

Before the week was up, she could broach the subject. The worse that could happen was that he'd laugh in her face. Or put a bullet in my head.

The next morning there was a light knock at the door.

“Yes?” she said, having just woken up in her pink pajamas.

Elonzo appeared in the doorway. He looked tired—dark circles under his puffy eyes, his hair disheveled, and a wrinkled shirt that looked slept in.

“Are you...all right?” she asked, suddenly noticing his bloody, raw knuckles. “Or should I be asking about the other guy?”

“The other guy is wishing for better days, and I could not sleep. My bruises are deep, and I do not take painkillers or any sort of drugs.”

How was that for ironic?

“By the way,” she said, “I want to thank you for saving me yesterday. With all the commotion, I forgot to say something.”

“I brought you here, and you are under my protection. What choice did I have?”

Okay, tough guy . “You could’ve let me die.”

“That would not serve my interests. Speaking of, I have decided to cut our week short. We must return to New Mexico this afternoon. A meeting has been called by my stakeholders for this evening.”

“Stakeholders?” She arched a brow.

“Everyone answers to someone. But before we leave, there is some personal business you and I must take care of. I had been saving it for later, but plans change.”

“What sort of personal business?” she asked.



“Yesterday, you stated that I brought you here as part of a vetting process, and you wished to know for what. I am prepared to tell you. Today. After which you may decide to leave or accompany me home. With one caveat. We must have trust, and since you claim this will never happen, I have found an alternative.”

He wasn't making much sense. “Okay?”

“Be downstairs in thirty minutes. Nelly will help you prepare.” He left, closing the door behind him.

So this was it, the big moment when he put his cards on the table, when she would have to decide to trust him or not. Whatever came next, she had no doubt that her life was coming to a fork in the road.

\*\*\*

“You are to wear this dress and these shoes.” Nelly placed a sundress with pink-and-yellow daisies and spaghetti straps on the bed, alongside a pair of pink sandals.

Emily swallowed hard. “Wha-what’s this?” It was an outfit the old her would have worn for Ed.

“The boss said you must trust him,” Nelly replied, seeming agitated. Not a good sign.

So why this outfit? Did Elonzo know she used to wear stuff like this to please the man who'd tormented her for years? Maybe it was a coincidence.

“You don't want to be late. The boss is on a tight schedule today,” Nelly urged.

Yeah, she's acting weird.

Wanting to get this over with, Emily put on the dress. She dried her hair and pulled it back into a ponytail. She put on a little lip gloss, but that was it.

Why does Elonzo want me to show these? She stared in the mirror, looking at the deep bruises on her arms and legs. The other night, he'd seen her skin and flipped out. He'd beheaded a bunch of people—the warden and the guards who hurt her.

The memory of the photo on his phone was a sharp reminder of who she was truly dealing with. Don't let your guard down, Emily.

She followed Nelly downstairs. Emily thought they were going to the large dining room for breakfast, but Nelly went through the kitchen, where several staff members were cleaning.

“He is waiting for you down there,” she said, pointing to a dark staircase.

“The basement?” Emily's stomach churned.

Nelly nodded. “Do not keep him waiting. The boss is in a very, very bad mood today.”

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. What did this psycho have planned? Was this the end? The torture session she'd been dreading? If so, where could she go? She was trapped in this place, completely surrounded by armed men.

Knees shaking, she slowly descended the staircase. When she got to the bottom, a pair of familiar eyes stared back through a curtain of blood covering his face. A face almost unrecognizable.

“Holy shit,” she muttered and looked at Elonzo, who stood to the side, holding a bloody baseball bat, his white shirt spattered with red.

Elonzo held out the bat. “Welcome to your final test, Justine. Now take the fucking bat and prove who you really are.”

### CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Some moments you reacted to, and it just might save your life. Like jumping out of the way of a speeding car when trying to cross the street. Life was filled with moments of lifesaving split-second decisions. This was not one of them.

First, it was too easy, too perfectly tempting. Like being offered fresh-out-of-the-oven cookies from the devil when you hadn't eaten for days. Not many would say no.

Second, she knew there were cameras here, even if she couldn't see them. The entire estate was wired just like her room had been.

Third, Elonzo was a shrewd businessman. He didn't do anything without a motive. Again, she didn't know him, but she knew his type. Greedy. Thirsty for power. Calculating. Also, a determined survivor. Like her.

So this was more than a test. It had to be, and her money was on this being some sort of insurance. Something to hold over her head. It was a shrewd choice, but a good move for Elonzo.

"You're playing the mutual destruction card, huh?" She folded her arms over her chest. "Explains why you wanted me to wear the outfit." It was symbolic.

Panting with exertion, Elonzo continued holding out the blood-covered bat. "Take it, Justine. It has my prints. My DNA. My blood, too." He showed her his other hand.

So that was why he had bloody knuckles. He'd spent the night using them.

She turned her head toward the whimpering mess, to the man who'd lured her down a path she'd been too naïve, too young, and too lonely to say no to. The blame lay on her shoulders for her past choices, because if she was ever going to move on, she had to own every piece of it.

Ed. You shit. Can't you just die? She'd gone to prison for killing him—sort of. She'd endured hell to be free of him. She'd paid with her soul to stay that way. How the fuck was he still alive?

She cleared her throat, netting in her emotions. This was the game. And, yes, she was absolutely playing now. Knee deep.

"If I say no?" she asked Elonzo.

"It's him or you, Justine. Do you really think he's worth more than you?"

No, but this was the sort of killing that would cross a line she'd sworn to never step over: killing for revenge and hate.

She looked at Elonzo again, frozen with conflict.

"Perhaps," he said, "you'd like to know how I found him to begin with."

She didn't really care because time was running out. There was too much blood on the floor. Death was near for her husband. She always called him her "ex" because that was who he was in her heart. Legally, though, they were still married. It meant that Elonzo was asking her to kill a man she'd sworn before God to love and care for. In sickness and health. Until death do they part. He never deserved the vows, but she'd given them, nonetheless. There would be a price on her soul for killing him, even if she wanted to do it.

“Death is too easy. He belongs in prison,” she said firmly.

“The man is a monster. You said so yourself.”

She chuckled bitterly. “He sure is, but he’s not even the biggest monster in this room.”

“So you think that I am the one who makes money from children and women being raped for money. But what if I told you that the people who run these operations live in plain sight and do it as a service to their powerful friends? They hide behind their money, their political power, and allies.”

She would believe him. Recently, there’d been the case of the millionaire influence peddler with his secret child sex island. The man had been arrested, only to “commit suicide” in his cell. No one believed it given the circumstances. There were hundreds of photos of rich and powerful people hanging out on that island, posing with the victims. Totally sick.

Elonzo continued, “At the end of the day, they demand we allow them to operate. It’s a bidding war, Justine. The one who makes the best offer to those who are truly in control wins the job. We are just their contractors.”

No. That couldn’t be right. Yet the facts supported it. The Colombian had operated for over a decade with the support of suite forty-five, who were funded by local governments and people higher up the food chain. Emily had seen Charge’s influence and reach with her own eyes. He’d helped the biggest cocaine dealer in the world sell his drugs, and the border communities had enjoyed relative peace.

Then things had changed. Demand for different products perhaps. That was when Elonzo took over.

“It is my burden to carry for the life I chose.” Elonzo turned his head toward the bloodied face zip-tied to the chair. “But he is only one of hundreds, Justine. I have nothing to gain from these monsters other than I get to live another day, hoping something will change and that the demand will stop. Meanwhile, I do what I can to keep my family alive, my daughters breathing. The money means nothing to me. Power is my only shield.” He looked at the sobbing half-conscious man. “Power can be yours, too. So choose. Him or you.”

“Justine, I’m so sorry,” Ed sobbed. “I love you...”

Emily tried not to choke on her own bile. She’d dreamed of killing him a million times, but seeing him so helpless and in pain tugged at her heart. As bad as things got sometimes, she always saw the man who smiled at her in that café where they first met. He was the first person in the world to say he needed her, that she was pretty. She’d had him between her thighs, wishing for a baby during those first years. She’d made him dinners just to see his eyes light up after a hard day. They’d laughed together. They’d dreamed of a great life and of growing old together.

You were my first taste of something better... Her eyes teared, the memories flooding back. Memories that had held her hostage during their time together.

“I ca-can’t do it,” she said.

Elonzo hit the bat on the cement floor. “Woman! Grow a fucking pair. He beat you. Every day for years. He would trade your life for a dollar. Kill him.”

Her hand twitched. Her heart begged for closure. The rage inside demanded she do it. But who would she be if she crossed that line?

Not Emily. Not Justine. Just another killer.

She forced her gaze to Elonzo's and approached him, taking his free hand. Tears streamed down her cheeks, and she could hardly breathe. "I'm not who you think, Elonzo. As bad as he is, as big a monster, I can't kill a man just because of that. He deserves punishment, but it's not up to me to give it."

"So you'd just let this piece of shit live, even if it will cost your life?" Elonzo asked, seething with disgust.

"As long as he's no threat to me or anyone else, yes," she replied.

"Emily," Ed sobbed with bloody spurts. "Save me. I love you."

Elonzo looked at him and then her.

She looked away from them both. "Can I go now, or are you going to kill me?"

Elonzo walked up close, and she shut her eyes. But instead of hitting her, he placed the bat in her hand. He twisted the base in her fingers and then pressed her thumb into the drying blood.

Elonzo wanted her prints and DNA on the murder weapon alongside his. Insurance. If she ever turned on him, they'd go down together.

She opened her eyes and pressed her mouth to his, kissing him hard.

Elonzo didn't kiss her back, but that was fine. This wasn't a romantic gesture.

"We're in this game together now, Elonzo, so tell me what you want." She pushed the bat into his stained shirt.

"First, you must decide what to do with him," Elonzo said. "And, no, I cannot turn



him over to the authorities.”

She looked at Ed, sneering with disgust. “In that case, if it were up to me, I’d sentence him to live out his days like the women he drugged and made money from.”

Elonzo nodded. “Done. My gift to you, Justine.”

He’d said her true name again, and it was the first time she hadn’t felt revolted. The kind young woman who’d existed before Ed was still here. She wasn’t weak or useless, like he’d tried to make her believe. She wasn’t a victim. She was a person, like so many in this world, who’d been faced with difficult situations. But now she knew there was no shame in who she was. Justine Hays was the reason Emily Wilson had not turned into a monster while living among them.

“Goodbye, Ed,” she said. “I don’t know how long you’ll live, but you should spend the time preparing for hell.”

She left the basement.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Emily didn't say a word as the plane departed for New Mexico. She'd been too wrecked to form a coherent sentence.

She'd thought Ed had died, but it had just been another of Charge's elaborate lies. A setup. To see Ed again had been a shock to the system. To find him on death's doorstep in Elonzo's basement had left her wordless. Now, he was either dead for real or wishing he were.

All that aside, what had Elonzo really hoped to get out of presenting Ed like a gift? Her allegiance? Her gratitude?

"So, you said you'd tell me why I'm really here. Unless I didn't pass your final test." She looked at Elonzo, who sat across the aisle.

"You passed."

Yeah, she'd figured. Otherwise, she'd probably be at the bottom of the ocean right now. "What will happen to Ed?" she asked.

"Do you really care?"

"No. Just as long as he never gets free."

"He will not," Elonzo said.

She hoped to God he was telling the truth. “So?”

Elonzo bit his lower lip and checked his phone before setting it upside down on the seat beside him. “You know me as the Heroin King, but that is a front.”

She tried not to laugh. “So you’re not a narco.”

“I am, but the role is not so dissimilar to Sampson’s. It is a position, and I am merely the CEO of a company—one that doesn’t exist on paper and never will. I am run by a board, like any other company. I answer to investors and stakeholders. I have power, but it is not a question of how many guns my men own, how deep my political reach is, or how much money I have in the bank. My power comes from being one of the few people capable of delivering results. Makes me difficult to replace.”

She blinked, waiting for more.

He went on, “Which is why succession planning is something my stakeholders demand. Continuity of supply, of money, of the operation.”

What was he getting at?

He added, “We have been screening individuals to help run various parts of the operation. Some are for immediate backfill. Some are part of the succession planning.”

“This entire thing has been some sort of job interview? You have to be kidding.” Yet it felt oddly familiar. Charge had done the exact same thing when she began working for him. Most of the situations he’d put her in had been staged to test her tolerance for stress, her ability to think under pressure, and her commitment to seeing things through even when faced with death. It was all just one big interview.

Elonzo replied, “The Colombian lost his hold on the border because he failed to recognize the world keeps evolving. Faster by the day. And this is a global business, bigger than semiconductors, social media, or rare metals. Drugs, sex, and anything illegal has been and always will be a lucrative business used to fuel elections, control governments, and influence powerful people. One could say this position makes me the most powerful man in the world, but at the end of the day, it is still just a business, and we are all replaceable—as it should be when dealing with an operation of this magnitude.” He gazed out the window. “I want you to take over part of the operation.”

“What?” What would make him think she’d want to join a crime syndicate? What made him think she’d be any good at it? Was he crazy? “I’m not interested, Elonzo. I’m surprised you’d even ask.”

“You’re perfect to run suite forty-five.”

Her jaw dropped. That wasn’t his to manage, so...

“I can tell by your expression that you haven’t connected the dots yet.”

“No,” she replied.

“Controlled opposition. Those in power, like the governors along the border, must appear they are fighting the cartels and trying to keep evil at bay. That is why suite forty-five was created, to make local leaders believe something was being done behind the scenes. Then the group went rogue after Bernardo Castillo, the Colombian, was ousted, and they tried to take us down for real. They never had a chance.”

She stared ahead. So there was just an illusion of good and bad, a show put on for the sake of local leaders?

Emily felt like the floor had dropped out. “I don’t believe you.”

“You do not have to, but your fate will be voted on by the board tonight.”

“Elonzo, I don’t know if you’re telling the truth, but if there is a drop of kindness in that cold heart of yours, you will help me disappear. I don’t want anything to do with your world or suite forty-five’s. I just want to live—free from you and from them. Haven’t I been through enough? Please, I’m begging you. Tell them I drowned or escaped or anything they’ll believe. But I am not the woman for this job. I am not a killer, and today you saw it with your own eyes. I didn’t have what it took to murder the one man who’d hurt me most in this world.”

He stared ahead for a long moment.

Meanwhile, the dam broke inside her heart. “Please,” she sobbed, “I don’t want this. I’d rather die than kill for a living.”

He drew a breath. “That is what makes you a good fit. We have no interest in cultivating an unstable organization run by cutthroats and criminals, though they do have their place among the lower ranks—those who are unaware of how things are really structured. We need trustworthy, solid individuals who understand the business and treat it as such—a business. We need individuals who have a certain reputation that lends authenticity and credibility on the street.”

So they wanted her because she could pull off the role of Sampson while being an obedient little soldier behind the scenes? “No. I won’t do it.”

“Did you know,” he said, “that you were thrown in the pot with Charge and the other operators to be eliminated? But I intervened after I read your profile. I saw myself in you, a survivor. A loyal, practical person capable of leading a business that is violent by nature and very few can handle. It is why you are still alive and the rest of the

operators are either dead or will be soon.”

It suddenly dawned on her that he’d known all along Charge was Sampson. He hadn’t had to torture Flint or Olivia for the information. They were going to die either way.

“Elonzo, please...I don’t want this.”

He stared into her eyes. “Everyone answers to someone, Justine. Even me. It is out of my hands now.”

“Then kill me. Here. Now. Because I’m done. I’m out.”

He shook his head. “Just like you, I have lines. Admittedly, mine are few, but I do not kill without it serving a purpose.”

She scrubbed her face with her hands. “I’m dead either way, Elonzo, because I won’t go along.”

“There is one other option,” he said after a long moment.

“What?”

“You can work on this side of the line. With me. By my side. As my wife.”

She froze, unable to understand.

He continued, “It would be for appearances’ sake so that those in the lower rungs of the organization, who are unaware of the true structure, will trust you. But know that accepting the position would put you directly in line to succeed me should anything happen. You would be expected to learn the operation. There would be no way out, no turning back. The world will know you only as my wife, the wife of the world’s

biggest trafficker.” He leaned back into his seat. “The upside is that you will have power and influence to make certain elements of the business disappear.”

She frowned. “What...?”

He gave her a knowing look. “The stakeholders don’t know everything that goes on, Justine. It’s by design. And if you, say, decided to eliminate the people who are driving undesirable, less lucrative parts of the business, no one will complain as long as profits continue growing in other spaces. Black-market pharmaceuticals, especially in the cosmetics space, are doing quite well.”

“You mean shitcan the sex trafficking?”

He shrugged.

Ohmygod . Her mind began clicking away, the pieces of the past few days sliding into place. “You knew I’d turn down suite forty-five, didn’t you? That’s really why you brought me to meet your family.”

“You didn’t grab the role of Sampson after Charge was captured. So, yes, I figured you’d turn it down. Many years ago, I did the same because I knew, like you do, that there is a good chance you will die in this business. Why accept a role with so little influence when the risk is so high? I aimed higher. Risk versus reward.

“And yes, I took you to meet my family because I wanted to see how you’d fit into my life.” He closed his eyes, as if preparing to take a nap, like this was no big deal. “They do not know how things are run, so you had to be a believable match for me. You passed. They loved you.”

She sat there speechless. Getting deeper was the opposite of what she wanted. It meant the door would close on any possibility of escaping this life. She would be

linked to more crimes than she could count, which meant the people in power would own her. Of course, she would be in a position to collect dirt on them, too.

“Or,” he added calmly, still relaxing in his seat, “you can take the role of controlled opposition, lead suite forty-five, and after a while, try your hand at disappearing. Of course, things here will continue as they are since I would have no motivation to rock the boat.”

So get in the game and take power—make changes—or get out and live on the run. Only, there was no way out. There never had been. If she tried to walk away, they’d eventually find her and kill her. If she turned down these roles, they’d kill her.

And it wasn’t like these people lacked the resources to track her down. It was why Charge had put her in the only place they wouldn’t look: prison. Under her real name, which they couldn’t connect to Emily. Charge had meant what he said when he’d claimed that hiding from these people wasn’t easy.

But why would he attempt to kill her? Was he afraid of this very scenario? She still couldn’t believe he’d taken a shot.

“What kind of marriage will it be?” she asked.

Elonzo opened his eyes. “I loved my wife. For me, there will be no other.”

“So purely a business arrangement.”

“I never said that.”

“Why don’t you try being explicit for once?” she said.

“We must put on the appearance of a happy couple. And I must also think of my



daughters. They need a mother.”

Oh. Oh...

“We will live, sleep, and eat together,” he added. “No one on the outside can suspect that we are not in love.”

“What about...sex?”

“I will leave that up to you—I’m not one to turn down a pretty woman. But if you are unfaithful in any way, even the appearance of it, I will have you killed.”

She stared at him.

“Nothing personal,” he said, “but I cannot protect what I love by appearing weak, and you will lose the respect of my men. They will never follow you.”

End of succession plan.

She nodded slowly. “I understand.”

“So you accept?”

“I need time to think about it.”

He looked at his watch. “You have four hours.”

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The meeting was set to be held about an hour from Elonzo's house just outside Albuquerque. Elonzo told her they'd arrive separately since he had "matters to attend to," giving her the opportunity to change into something more appropriate for a meeting where one's fate would be decided. The black pantsuit again.

During the quiet drive to the meeting, she thought of Ed. She thought about how she used to see him as this indestructible monster who couldn't be slain. She used to tell herself there was no escape because he worked for the FBI and would use his power to hunt her down.

Little had she known that Ed was just a tiny, insignificant crumb of a much bigger pie. In the end, he'd tried to run, and they'd found him. A fucking FBI agent who supposedly knew the ins and outs of how people got caught.

In short, if he could be found, then they could find anyone. The only out was death, and the only alternative to that was joining these monsters with the hope of putting a stop to some of the worst, most horrific parts of their operation. Was it really possible?

Only if you have a seat at the table , she told herself. But to get a seat, she'd have to become Elonzo's wife. She would share her life with a man who might put a bullet in her head if she jeopardized what he loved.

Yet he had a softer side that would make daily life tolerable. He enjoyed dancing and loved his children. He spent time with his family and shielded them from the ugly

world he lived in. He would never treat her like Ed had, which was incredibly ironic. The Heroin King didn't believe in hitting his wife. In short, her life wouldn't be a violent horror show. At least, not on the surface. Behind the scenes, it would be the most difficult thing she'd ever faced.

Alternatively, there was the option to become Sampson and rebuild the group. Her daily life would consist of planning hits under the direction of the people who oversaw the Heroin King. What sort of people would be targets? People who got in their way? People who deserved it? Because she knew who wouldn't be on the list: anyone important to running Elonzo's operation.

She sighed. There were no good choices here.

The car pulled up, and a valet opened the door. "Miss Hays, they are waiting for you outside on the veranda."

"Thanks." She strolled inside the lavish house with soaring ceilings and expensive art. Whoever lived here made a lot of money. One of the servants guided her to a side door leading to the backyard, where people in suits and nice dresses mingled with cocktails in hand. The scent of cigars perfumed the air, mixing with the smoke from the outdoor firepit. Waiters in black vests circled with trays of appetizers on small plates.

She tried to imagine herself living in this world of extreme wealth, extravagance, and violence. Could she stomach it?

"I see you made it." Elonzo appeared by her side.

"Haven't run yet, but the night's still young."

He chuckled. "Have you made up your mind?"

She nodded and faced him. “Yeah, I think so. When does this vote take place, anyway?”

“It already has,” he whispered in her ear. “You were given unanimous support.”

She blinked at him. “For what?”

He smiled, and she took that to mean the role of his wife. “I didn’t say yes to anything yet.”

“You are no fool, Justine, which means you’ve realized there is only one rational choice.” He held out his hand. “Isn’t that right, wife?”

Just then a light on the roof caught her eye. She looked up.

“Do not worry. They are there for our protection,” Elonzo said.

“The last time you told me not to worry, someone took a shot...” Her voice faded as a tall, muscular figure on the roof pointed a rifle toward them. A red beam of light danced across Elonzo’s shoulder.

“Run!” she yelled.

Emily turned toward the house to take cover, catching a glimpse of the man on the roof. She expected him to be still aiming at Elonzo, but the red dot was on her. In an instant, she realized she’d been set up. They’d made their choice to kill her.

A loud pop sounded in the air, followed by screams and more gunfire.

She felt something hot burn through her chest. When she looked down, she saw a hole in her jacket, followed by the sensation of warm liquid saturating her blouse.

She felt her knees buckle before she reached the house.

“Someone call an ambulance,” said Elonzo, who was dragging her inside. “Do not die, Justine. Hang in there...” His voice faded, drowned out by voices, yelling, and more gunfire.

\*\*\*

“Welcome back from the dead,” said a deep, familiar voice.

Justine slowly opened her eyes, finding a blurry scene that looked like wood-paneled walls, antique trapping gear, and plaid curtains. Charge’s cabin.

“What the fuck...” She groaned, finding it hard to breathe.

“I’m sorry about the pain, but you moved to the right, and I had to take the shot.”

She tried to focus on Charge’s face. He had a shorter beard now, and his nose was almost completely healed. “You shot me?”

“Yes.”

“Why aren’t I dead?” she asked, noticing an IV bag hang beside her.

“You are. Well, as far as they’re concerned.”

She tried to sit up.

“No. Do not move. You’re being held together with sutures, tape, and fucking damned good luck. I missed your lung by a millimeter.”

“Great. Thanks.”

“You were dead anyway. It was worth the risk,” he said.

So it hadn’t been Elonzo or his “board of directors” who’d shot her. “He didn’t want to kill me. He wanted to marry me.”

Charge was silent for a long moment. “A different kind of death.”

“Why, Charge? Why did you do this to me?” she whispered.

He placed an ice pack on her chest. “Rest. We’ll talk after you feel better. I’m just in the other room if you need anything.”

She closed her eyes, feeling a wave of sleepiness take hold. Painkillers no doubt.

“Oh, and by the way, someone dug up your money. We’ll have to come up with a plan to fund your new life.”

She couldn’t understand a word he’d just said.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Three weeks later, five doctor house calls, and more pills than she could count, Emily was up and around, going for short walks outside around the porch for fresh air. It was embarrassing having to be taken care of by Charge—fed, bathed, and, yes, all that other bathroom stuff. When she'd complained, he'd pointed out that she'd done the same for him once, and that the humiliation would motivate her to heal faster.

But now he'd seen all of her, yet she felt further away from him than ever. Every time she tried to bring up the shooting or the situation with Elonzo, he would change the subject or tell her there'd be time to talk later, after she regained her strength.

She came in from the porch, finding Charge on his laptop, sitting on the big, overstuffed couch.

"Any interesting news?" she asked.

"They buried your ex today. Small funeral. No one showed up."

Sad. Also, not a surprise. He'd been in bad shape when she saw him last. She wondered if he'd been given a true taste of the misery he'd inflicted on his victims before his demise.

"Well, I hope he's enjoying hell. He won't be missed." She sat next to Charge, carefully lowering herself.

"Still sore?" he asked.

“It feels tight more than anything. Like if I breathe too hard, something might split open.”

“It won’t, but you need a few more months until you can start up your morning runs.”

“I think I’m done with those. Might take up yoga or Zumba instead.”

“Sounds fun.” He went back to his laptop.

She reached over and closed it. “Charge, you can’t keep avoiding me forever. We need to talk.”

“Yes, I can avoid you forever because you’re dead. Remember?”

“Don’t be cute. Doesn’t work for you.”

His intense gray eyes met hers.

“Why didn’t you tell me that the people now backing the Heroin King are the same ones who backed suite forty-five?” she asked.

“It was irrelevant.”

“Not when we were trying to stop him and there wasn’t a chance in hell of ever doing it.”

“That is not true.” He pushed his fingers through his thick dark hair. “I still have allies on the board, Emily.”

“Justine.”



He gave her a look, and she shrugged.

“I’ve decided to give her another chance,” she explained. Really, she’d made peace with her past. Charge? Not so much. He’d betrayed her big time. “And these allies are planning what?”

“Emil—I mean, Justine, none of this concerns you anymore. You’re out. Just like you wanted.”

“Don’t play games, Charge. No one leaves.”

“They think you’re dead. You can have a fresh start and a new life.”

“And you?” she asked.

“I’m in this ’til the end.”

She wanted to roll her eyes. “What’s the objective? Because if you take out Elonzo, they’ll just replace him. And don’t tell me it’s not my concern. My life will never be the same after this. Neither will I.” Her very DNA had been altered.

“My plan is to break their business into pieces and then slowly dismantle them, piece by piece. Death by a thousand cuts.”

“How would you manage that?”

“Cause chaos and disruption. Plant distrust among the various leaders,” he said. “After they begin picking sides, we pick them off.”

She took it in, knowing this was likely a half truth.

They sat in silence for a long, awkward moment.

“Did he really ask you to marry him?” Charge blurted out.

“Yes. A business arrangement.”

“Would you have gone through with it?”

“I wouldn’t have had a choice if I wanted to live another day.” Just like Elonzo had said. That was the game. You play one hand at a time, and you play to win. The prize, however, is just another round.

“Then it’s a good thing I got to you when I did.”

She turned to face him. “Why shoot me, Charge? Why lock me up? Why turn on me when I failed to kill Roberts? Why won’t you ever be able to trust me?”

“Do you really want to know?”

“Yes. I really want to know why the most powerful narco in the world trusted me enough to allow me in the same house with his daughters, to introduce me to his family, and to learn the inner workings of his organization when all he had to go on was my profile. Maybe he didn’t give me the keys to his kingdom or pledge his undying allegiance, but he trusted me more than you ever have. Why, Charge? Why all the lies and games when I have been nothing but loyal to you?” She shook her head with frustration. “I mean, as big a monster as Elonzo is, at least he never said he loved me so he could blindside me. He was honest about everything.” Including the fact he would kill her in a heartbeat if she fucked with him or jeopardized his family’s safety.

Charge looked down at his hand, the one that still had a bandage. “Broken bones take

a long time to heal,” he said. “But trust takes longer.”

“I never broke your trust.”

“No, you haven’t. But I’ve been in this too long,” he said. “I’ve witnessed sons kill their fathers. Fathers rape their daughters. Priests, teachers, bankers, and the ice-cream man betray the very people who trust them. I’ve watched husbands beat their wives as some kind of deranged stress relief. I have executed some of the most violent, disgusting human beings on the planet, but not before learning everything about them to ensure their deaths were warranted.”

She swallowed hard, knowing that comment about husbands was for her.

He continued, “All the while, families are being slaughtered along the border, kids barely in high school are dropping dead from poison, and the rich and powerful who make money from it all just look the other way. I am no longer capable of trust, Justine. I’ve seen the most sacred of trusts broken over and over again.” He exhaled with a sorrowful woosh. “It’s my lack of trust that makes me good at what I do. I expect every person involved in every job I do to fuck it up, stab me in the back, or just be plain sloppy. When everything goes fine, which it often does, I’m relieved, but I never—not for one second—believe that the people around me wouldn’t sell me out or put a bullet in my head for the right price.”

She slid her hand over his. In the saddest, weirdest way, she admired him for everything he’d just said. Instead of throwing himself a pity party, he’d turned his cynical view of the world into an advantage.

He added, “Still, I never thought you would fail me, Justine.”

“Fail you?”

“When you didn’t kill Roberts, I was furious. Not at you, but because I’d let my guard down when it counted most. I said to myself that there is no way Emily won’t complete this job. She is the one person who always pulls through. When you didn’t, I had no backup.”

“Charge, why ask me to kill her at all?”

“After your identity was exposed, she stood to cash in if you were delivered safely to the Heroin King. I knew she’d attempt to break you out, and I wanted to keep you away from the cartel.”

He could’ve just told her that.

He added, “I was close to getting something into place to free you myself, but then you were transferred, and I wasn’t ready. I had to start over, figure out a new plan.”

“I wouldn’t have gone along with it anyway. Elonzo sent in a man named Hunter Collins, who said he worked for you. I turned him down.”

“He used to work for suite forty-five. He left when Elonzo was making his move to take the border. He was probably next in line for Sampson if you turned down the role.”

“How did you know they offered it to me?”

“Just a guess. Why else would they jump through hoops to take you alive? You have just enough experience to look legit, and you’re dependable. They want people like you.”

Justine inhaled, letting it all sink in. So Charge knew way more than he’d ever let on. “Elonzo said all the operators are dead or on the run.”

“Yes. But we’ve been here before. This isn’t even close to over.”

She nodded, biting down on her lip. “So what’s the plan for me?”

“You? I need to come up with some cash. Once I do, and you’re feeling strong enough, you disappear. I have a town picked out in Alaska. New identity waiting, too.”

She gave him a look. “Or…”

“Or what?” he said.

“Or we could leave together. Start over.”

He frowned.

“That’s what I thought.” She looked away, unsure why she’d even opened her mouth. He’d never run. Wasn’t in his DNA.

“Justine…” he grumbled, as if asking her to be reasonable.

“Charge.”

“Justine…”

“Fine. I’ll leave and disappear, but only if you tell me honestly. Do you, or did you, ever love me, or was that just another lie?”

He exhaled. “It was the truth. Despite the hole in your chest.”

“Prove it.”

“How?” he asked.

Good question. How could a man like him, one who’d lied a thousand times, convince her that she wasn’t a fool for caring about him? That she wasn’t a complete idiot for wanting to trust everything he was saying right now?

Why does it even matter? At the end of the day, this thing between them was over. Still, she knew in her heart she’d never be able to let it go. Not until she had the truth. Was there ever something more, or was he playing her?

Her eyes floated down to his groin. Maybe his lips could lie, but could his body?

“Justine, no.”

“Then you’re lying. You feel nothing for me,” she said.

“I do.”

“Then show me.”

He shook his head. “It won’t change anything.”

“Maybe not, but at least I’ll walk away knowing if you told the truth for once.”

He slowly stood and held out his hand. She took it and got to her feet, gazing into those killer gray eyes.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

She'd already become familiar with the contours of Charge's strong frame from when she'd nursed him back to health. She knew every scar, the shape of his strong ass, and the way the thick, bristly hairs on his lower stomach tapered into a narrow trail leading to his cock. She knew what that looked like, too. And now she knew how good he felt inside her, how his voice dropped two octaves when he came, and how he didn't mind one little bit when she rode him like a fuck-horse. After all, she had fresh wounds on her chest, and he outweighed her by a hundred pounds.

Not that she thought he'd complain if she never let him be on top. He'd seemed to enjoy gripping her hips with his strong hands, rocking his hard shaft into her as she came.

After they were done, he brought her a glass of water and stretched out beside her on his bed.

She snuggled up to his broad chest, listening to his fierce heartbeat. "This was long overdue." They'd come close dozens of times, but he'd never once made a move. "How come you never tried to have sex with me before?" she asked.

"I don't know. I guess I didn't want to complicate your already complicated life."

"Ah. Thank you for saving me," she said jokingly. "Because that incredible sex definitely made things harder."

"Ha ha. So, did I convince you?" he asked.

“You mean, did your big dick make me believe your heart belongs to me?” She laughed and swung her feet to the floor. She winced from the tenderness in her chest. “No.”

He pushed himself up on his elbows. “Do you need me to show you again? Give me ten minutes.”

She smiled. “As much as I’d love that,” her eyes drifted down to his penis, “because that is a very fine piece of equipment, I have somewhere to be.”

He frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“Like I said, I have somewhere to be.” She went to the bathroom and started the shower.

Charge was right behind her. “Justine, what is this?”

“This? This is me accepting reality and taking control of my own life.”

“And?”

“And I can’t stay dead any more than you can quit leading suite forty-five so we can run off together.”

“So you’re punishing me for not leaving things unfinished with the Heroin King?”

She pushed herself up onto her toes and kissed his beautiful, plump lips. “I am making a choice to not waste my life, hiding away in some tiny, winter village when I could use whatever time I get on this earth to change things. I’m going back to Elonzo.”



“Emily.”

“Justine,” she corrected.

He grabbed her wrist. “What are you doing? They think you’re dead, and they won’t make that mistake twice. If you leave here, it’s over for you. You’re in until you’re dead.”

“Charge, you may find this hard to believe, but I love you. I think I have from the beginning, because while I was wrong about you never hurting me, I always knew you would do whatever it took to protect me. And you have. So now, you must trust that I’ll do the same. I’ll always be looking out for you; even if my gun is pointed directly at your chest, you’ll know what I’m really thinking. And when I kiss my new husband on the lips at our wedding, know I’ll be imagining you.”

“You can’t be serious. You’re going to marry him? How will you explain where you’ve been?”

She shrugged. “I’ll tell him the truth. You shot me and made it look like I died. I woke up half dead, and you pumped me for information while telling me how much you loved me. I’ll tell him that you didn’t mean it, and I knew because when you kissed me, I could feel how little you cared. I’ll tell him that I don’t trust you and never will, so now, I’m making a choice to play the game, and I’m taking the best position I can get.”

He stared at her.

“Don’t worry, I’ll leave out the part where we fucked and you could hardly look at me after. Almost like the guilt was too much.” She stepped into the shower.

“Justine, that’s not true. I care about you.”

“I know. Just like I know that’s as close to love as a man like you can get. Not because you don’t want to, but because you’ve been in this for too long—like you said. But I do love you, Charge. I really do. And this is where our path together ends. Just know, I’m not like you. I’m not like Elonzo either. I actually care about what happens to everyone around me, especially all the people caught up in this sick, dirty business. That’s why I’m going to change things.” I’m in it to win.

“He won’t trust you if you just show up out of thin air. He’ll think you’re setting him up.”

She tipped her head to one side. “Then help me convince him, Charge.”

\*\*\*

“Justine? Where is Charge?” Justine lay tied to the bed in the cabin, hungry, thirsty, and in agony.

“Elonzo?” she muttered. “How did you find me?”

“Where is Charge?” he demanded.

“I-I don’t know.”

“Why is there so much blood in the living room?” he asked.

She blinked, trying to focus. She’d been without water or food for three days. The mattress beneath her was a rancid cesspool.

“I stabbed him,” she whimpered. “He’s been holding me prisoner and pointing his gun in my face, playing roulette with me. I got hold of a knife. I stabbed him, and then he tied me up again. He was bleeding badly when he left.” There was blood all

over the side of the bed and her sheets. The trail led out to an enormous puddle in the living room.

“Do you know where he went?” Elonzo asked.

She shook her head. “No, but I got him pretty good in the stomach.”

It had taken over a month to collect the blood from Charge, enough to make it look like he’d been mortally wounded. If Elonzo’s men decided to test the crimson puddles, they would conclude it all belonged to Charge. They’d know because he’d left a sample of his DNA under the couch. One of his guns in a briefcase along with some cash. If they decided not to confirm it, they’d still be left speculating about his fate.

“I thought—I thought you were dead,” Elonzo said, brushing her hair from her face.

“Me too. But you were right about Charge. He’s crazy. He said if he couldn’t have me, no one else could. He said he was coming for you and wouldn’t miss next time.” She drew a shaky breath while Elonzo untied her. “How did you even find me?”

“Hunter Collins. He was tracking Charge for me and found the cabin. Apparently, the deed is in your name.”

“Mine?” So that was what Charge had meant before he’d left. He’d said he would make it look like she’d been hidden in the last place they’d look.

Elonzo shrugged. “He hid you in prison under your legal name. Now he hid you in your own cabin. Smart. Such a shame he’s a dead man.”

“Promise me if he’s not dead already, that you’ll let me see him one last time. He needs to look down the barrel of my gun, like he made me do with him.”

“We both know you’re not a killer, Justine.”

“But I could be. I really could be after this,” she sobbed.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Emily Fernandez. With the help of her sister-in-law, she removed her wedding gown and changed into her white reception dress with a lace neckline and pearl buttons down the back. It was just as beautiful as the wedding gown. No expense had been spared by Elonzo, including renting out an entire resort on the Mexican Riviera. Lots of security. Lots of important guests. Which was why Elonzo had called in some favors to have her record wiped clean under both identities. Though, she'd had to keep the Emily name because explaining "Justine" to his family, who knew her as Emily, would raise eyebrows.

Honestly, it was fine by her. As long as she knew who she was.

"You look fantastic. How do you feel?" Angela asked.

Terrified. But ready. This was going to be the toughest job she'd ever done, and she was in it alone. No backup, no team of greedy, sketchy, eccentric hit men with big hearts and enough baggage to fill an entire airport. No hard-ass, secretive boss to push her to keep going when self-doubt crept in, which it would. There were no guarantees this marriage would change a thing for the better. Either way, she was all in now. No going back.

"So happy." Emily sighed. "Can I just have a moment alone to soak it all in? Tell my husband I'll be out in a second." Really, she needed to rest a second. There were photos to take and hands to shake. She'd have to wear a smile all night long to sell her blushing-bride story.

“Sure.” Angela left, and Emily stared in the mirror. “Hello, Mrs. Heroin King,” she said to herself.

“The name doesn’t suit you,” said a deep voice.

She looked over her shoulder toward the door leading out to a private garden. “Charge?” she whispered. “What the hell are you doing here? You’ll get us both killed.”

“Don’t worry. I did my homework and found an easy way in. These people are always so sloppy—Elonzo’s men spend too much time watching porn on their phones. Also, the power just went out momentarily in the security booth and took the cameras offline. I have a few minutes before they reboot.”

“Nice to know, but why the hell are you here?” she repeated.

“I had to see you again.”

Always the protector. “Okay. You saw me. I’m fine. But you’re not supposed to be; they think you’re dead. Go before someone comes in here to get me.” She started pushing him back. “I mean it. I’ve come too far to have you fuck this up.”

He gripped her hips and bent his head, kissing her lips. It took a moment to register how good his lips felt. Familiar, warm, safe. But all that was an illusion.

She pulled away. “Please go.”

“Are you going to sleep with him?”

“What business is that of yours?” she asked.

“Are you? Answer me, and I’ll leave.”

“I-I haven’t decided.”

“Well, don’t. I changed my mind. I don’t want to go to bed every night knowing you’re with him.”

“Charge, what the hell...?” He couldn’t be serious. “I just married the man, and you know why.”

“It’s not a real marriage. It’s not a real relationship. But what you and I have is. Come with me.”

Leave? He wanted her to leave? Now? “Nice try, but I have to think about all the people whose lives are a mess because of this business.”

“‘ This business ’ is not going to end. Not the way you have it planned. And my plan to pick them apart is just as na?ve. We can’t stop them like that.”

She exhaled sharply. She wanted to hear him out, but not here. Not now. It was too dangerous. “You need to get the hell out of here,” she whispered.

“You said you loved me,” Charge pushed. “So prove it. Let’s go. We only have a few seconds.”

She looked at the door leading out to the reception and then at him. Her heart felt torn. Neither path would result in a long happy life. “I can’t just leave. I can’t turn my back on this chance to change things.”

“I’m restarting suite forty-five. I can’t do it without you, Justine. I can’t. I need you, and to prove I’m telling the truth, I won’t leave here without you.”

So first he said he’d leave if she answered him, and now he wouldn’t leave unless she went with him? Always the manipulator. “They’ll kill you.”

“Then they kill me,” he shrugged, “but the only way my plan works is with you. Being with me . You are the only person I trust.”

Dammit. Hearing him say those words and back them up with his life meant more to her than it should. It meant everything. Maybe because Charge was the only one she trusted, too.

Sort of trust. (A) She wasn’t stupid, and (B) Charge was a hit man. His secrecy habits would be hard to break.

She stared for a long moment, searching her gut for the right answer. “Do you have a plan?”

“And ten backups.”

“He won’t stop hunting me if I go with you.” It would be beyond personal for Elonzo if she publicly humiliated him like this.

Charge flashed a charming smile. “No one’s caught you yet. And we’ll be ready.”

She stared into those steely gray eyes, knowing that if she had one real weakness in this world, it was being unable to say no to him.

“Screw it.” She took his hand.

\*\*\*

“This place is perfect.” Lita pivoted in her tennis shoes in the center of the small office and then smiled at the real estate agent. “You take cash?”

THE PAUSE