

**INFINITY**

*Detroit Nights*

**CATALINA  
DUBOIS**

INFINITY: Detroit Nights

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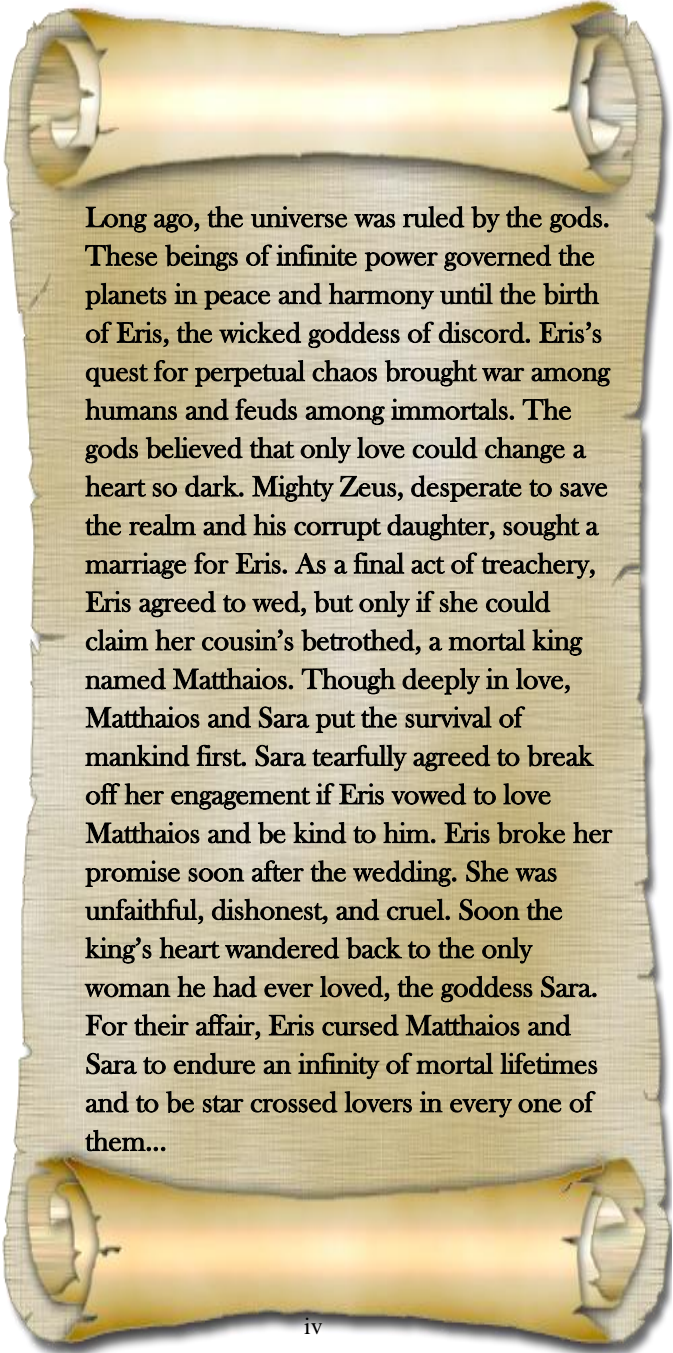
**WARNING: violence, offensive language, and references to human trafficking.**

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## DEDICATION

To my cousin, Milus Robinson, for your integrity  
and kind heart.

Love always,  
Catalina



Long ago, the universe was ruled by the gods. These beings of infinite power governed the planets in peace and harmony until the birth of Eris, the wicked goddess of discord. Eris's quest for perpetual chaos brought war among humans and feuds among immortals. The gods believed that only love could change a heart so dark. Mighty Zeus, desperate to save the realm and his corrupt daughter, sought a marriage for Eris. As a final act of treachery, Eris agreed to wed, but only if she could claim her cousin's betrothed, a mortal king named Matthaios. Though deeply in love, Matthaios and Sara put the survival of mankind first. Sara tearfully agreed to break off her engagement if Eris vowed to love Matthaios and be kind to him. Eris broke her promise soon after the wedding. She was unfaithful, dishonest, and cruel. Soon the king's heart wandered back to the only woman he had ever loved, the goddess Sara. For their affair, Eris cursed Matthaios and Sara to endure an infinity of mortal lifetimes and to be star crossed lovers in every one of them...

## PROLOGUE:

### The Great Depression

**M**atthew still cringed at the memory of men leaping from skyscrapers during the Wall Street Crash, embracing their deaths at the moment they lost everything... the moment America lost everything. Matthew's family was reduced to sharecropping after the economy swirled down the toilet. Sharecropping was barely a step up from slavery and a long staircase down from the affluent life they once had. It was sufficient to keep a moldy shack over their heads but their cupboards were bare.

Like many Louisiana natives, Matthew turned to the river for his dinner. He waded in the cool water, feeling for catfish holes. Noodling was an effective but at times dangerous way of fishing. Some noodlers lost fingers to snapping turtles. Others lost their lives to the alligators that stalked the Louisiana bayous. Matthew's sister, Nicole, cautioned him against it but even at the tender age

of fourteen, he was more concerned with feeding his family than his safety.

During this trip, he'd caught three fish the length of his arm. Matthew threw the fish to his older brother, Jimmy, who cleaned and filleted them right there on the riverbank. Jimmy passed the filets to their sister, Nicole. She rolled them in seasoned cornmeal and deep-fried them over an outdoor flame.

Nicole had never been able to hear or vocalize words but she was a master of reading lips and speaking with her hands. Ignorant people saw her as bizarre and broken despite her breathtaking beauty, kind heart, and intelligence. Matthew never saw Nicole as inferior to the rest of his siblings. She had always been his favorite.

Nicole wagged a finger at two of the neighbor kids who were playing too close to her pot of scalding grease.

"Yes Miss Nicole," they replied in unison.

She wrapped some fish in a paper bag and gave it to the children. The hungry kids thanked her graciously. A furious Jimmy snatched the food from them.

Nicole gasped at his appalling behavior. She began to tell him off with her hands.

"We ain't running no charity! Times is tough!" Jimmy reminded her.

Matthew yelled from the river, "Jimmy if you don't give that food back to them youngins and apologize to Nicole I ain't catching no more fish for you!"

Jimmy grudgingly surrendered the food bundle and hissed at the children, "piss off!"

They fled and he gave the nearest one a kick in the rear.

Nicole shook her head at him and signed, "You're so

grouchy lately.”

“I’m sorry,” Jimmy replied with a sincere grin that reminded her of the brother she looked up to.

Nicole forgave him with the understanding that he hadn’t always been this way. As the oldest of ten children Jimmy had an unbearable amount of responsibility, especially now that their father had passed away.

“Do you think the world will ever turn around?” asked Jimmy.

Nicole picked strips of fish from the sizzling oil. She assembled a po’boy sandwich for Jimmy and silently assured him, “There’ll be jobs again. We just have to weather the storm.”

Jimmy smiled at her optimism and sank his teeth into the sandwich. The well-seasoned crust and flaky interior made him forget all his woes. Nicole assembled a plate for Matthew. Jimmy gave him a shout. She covered the rest to bring home for everyone else.

“Just one more and I’ll get out!” Matthew shouted toward the bank. He shoved his arm in a hole. Adrenaline coursed through his veins when a fish latched onto his hand. This thing had a hell of a bite. Matthew was in for a fight. He gripped the behemoth with both arms and tried to wrestle it to shore.

They splashed and thrashed. It wasn’t long before Matthew realized he was in a losing battle. He hadn’t caught a fish. This monster had caught him and it wasn’t letting go.

“It’s too big!” Jimmy screamed. “Release it before it drowns you!”

“I can’t!” Matthew screamed between gags of water. “It’s got me!”

Jimmy and Nicole dove into the water. They swam as they'd never swam before. The three of them hauled the giant catfish to shore. It was longer than Matthew was tall and had a mouth the size of a dinner plate. Matthew and Jimmy were laughing hysterically and celebrating their victory. Jimmy punched Matthew in his badly bruised arm. There was a howl of pain followed by even more laughter.

Nicole was shaking in horror having nearly watched her brother die. She signed to him, "No more noodling!"

"That fish will feed us for a month," Matthew reasoned with her.

"I don't care," she signed. "Promise to never do this again."

"But Nicole..."

She waved her hands furiously, "I said promise!"

"I promise," Matthew relented and performed his goofy victory dance until the smile returned to her face.

She rustled his wet locks. He pulled her into a headlock and rubbed his knuckles over her head while she squealed in protest. Nicole had a brother who would rather die than see her go hungry. Matthew had a sister who would rather go hungry than see him die.

There was nothing in the world more special than family, but not even the bond of blood could stop the pending catastrophe.

Catching that monster catfish would be the last thing Matthew and Nicole ever did together...



## CHAPTER 1:

### Guns, Games, & Garters

*Detroit, Michigan 1930's*

**T**ony Cafero, a notorious gangster, marched into the warehouse surrounded by his henchmen. The place was filled with ill-gotten barrels of hooch and jugs of moonshine. It smelled of dust and mildew. They swept through the aisles until at last finding their destination.

Tony grinned at an ebony-skinned vixen who was posing triumphantly with one foot on a trunk. She was armed to the teeth and dressed in boyish clothing: pinstriped breeches, suspenders, and a button-down top. Her battle wear did not take away her beauty. She possessed raven hair that bore deep-sea like waves and eyes the color of obsidian.

The woman, named Sarah, thoughtlessly twirled two butterfly knives. They made metallic noises as they opened, closed, and swished about. She wielded these blades with the precision of a surgeon and she was no less

skilled with a pistol. Sarah was a proper warrior in this post-depression world where societal rules didn't apply. The only thing that mattered was survival.

"I take it the heist went well," said Tony.

"That depends on your definition of well," Sarah snarled bitterly and tucked her knives away. "I lost two guys but I retrieved what you sent me for. I hope it was worth it."

Tony felt bad about the losses and would certainly compensate their families but he had accepted long ago that there would always be casualties in a war. That's what this was in the criminal underbelly of Detroit, a war for survival. Every man on his crew, including himself, accepted such risks to keep those they loved from becoming homeless and standing in soup kitchen lines with hungry bellies. Tony knew the degradation of standing in line for eight hours for a bowl of watery soup. Even worse, he knew the feelings of starvation and defeat after waiting all that time just to hear they've run out of soup. Tony vowed to never endure such poverty again.

He accepted the key and unlocked the trunk, while his henchmen salivated in anticipation of the riches that lie within. Tony carefully raised the lid of his precious cargo. Disappointment and fury bounced from one face to the next like someone had tipped a trail of dominoes. There were no jewels nor dirty money, only an unconscious adolescent, who'd been bound and gagged. The hostage wasn't even a well-dressed fellow that might fetch them a hefty ransom. This was a poor boy, in a stained shirt under tattered overalls. How could this pissant be the most valuable thing the Russo clan possessed?

The mobsters started bickering amongst themselves.

Their arguments echoed off the warehouse walls. They were convinced their boss had lost his mind.

Tony was the only one happy with the contents of the trunk. He grinned like Sarah had delivered the holy grail.

Tony whispered to his unconscious hostage, “Hello Matthew. We are going to accomplish great things.”



Within the hour their hostage was up and around but he hadn't spoken since being pulled from the trunk. Matthew's captors had run him a hot bath and provided a feast fit for a king but Matthew wanted nothing from them but his freedom. The room they kept him in was the most luxurious he'd ever seen. He stared out the window of the mansion as armed men paced the perimeter. There was no escape. He felt like a caged animal despite the beauty of this place.

Tony gave a polite knock from the other side of the door. When it went unanswered, he entered cautiously followed by Sarah. Matthew continued to stare out the window as if refusing Tony's company, along with his food and bath.

Tony smiled at the young man who somehow reminded him of himself. “I apologize for the way you were brought here but it was the only way to offer you a job without risking your life. If your boss found out you were meeting with one of his competitors he'd have you fitted for a pair of cement shoes and cast you into the murky depths of the Detroit River but if you were taken against your will no harm would befall you.”

Matthew turned to meet his gaze but refused to speak.

Tony got straight to the point, “My spies have been checking on the competition’s clubs for weeks. Imagine my surprise to hear that the best booze this side of the Mississippi is brewed by an eighteen-year-old kid. Russo pays you slave wages. You can’t even afford to replace your clothes. What were they? Hand-me-downs from an older brother or a father? They’ve been patched and hemmed more times than I can count. At this point, you’re wearing more patches than denim.”

Matthew’s chest rose and fell with furious breaths.

Tony assured him, “I’m not trying to insult you. All I’m saying is you are a mastermind and you have nothing to show for it. I can change that. My people found you with ten dollars to your name and a busted timepiece that doesn’t keep time.”

Tony brandished the dinged up pocket watch. It had belonged to Matthew’s deceased father and he was going to get it back even if he had to rip off Tony’s head. He launched himself at Tony. Sarah spun between them. One of her blades was at Matthew’s throat and the other was at his crotch. Her dark eyes were burning into his, daring him to give her an excuse.

“It’s alright love.” Tony carefully pulled Sarah’s knives away from Matthew, then he passed the beloved trinket to its rightful owner. “I had it fixed for you.”

Matthew thoughtfully gazed at the hands of his watch as they moved for the first time in years. He broke his silent protest to speak, “Thank you, Mr. Cafero.”

Sarah shook her head at the heavy southern drawl, “What Louisiana swamp did they fish you out of?”

This woman had kidnapped him and delivered him to

a mobster. Now she was insulting him!

Matthew was fuming. “Who is this unruly broad!”

Sarah’s revolver was in Matthew’s face before Tony got a chance to contain the situation.

Tony cautiously reached out to lower her weapon as he informed Matthew, “She is my everything and I’ll only ask you once to address her by name. Her name is Sarah.”

Matthew’s eyebrows furrowed with confusion. “That’s a girly name for an assassin. It means princess.”

“I know what the hell it means, hillbilly. I went to school,” she huffed in anger.

Matthew spoke to Tony as if she wasn’t in the room, “Well I’ll be darned, an educated Negress. How on earth did you come by such a creature?”

Sarah gritted her teeth in frustration as Matthew examined her like a specimen in a petri dish. Matthew was the embodiment of everything she hated: southern, a racist, an idiot. She detested the way he addressed Tony every time without speaking to her directly. It was obvious that Matthew did not see her as an equal or even a person. Tony shook his head with amusement as Matthew and Sarah circled each other like a cobra and a mongoose, natural-born enemies ready to strike.

Sarah snarled, “I can’t believe I lost two friends over this little bastard.” She narrowed her eyes on Matthew. “You better be worth it.”

Tony intervened before they killed each other, “We suffered some casualties but that’s hardly the boy’s fault.” He turned to Matthew. “She insults your roots because it takes one to know one. We’re from Louisiana too.”

“Don’t sound like it,” Matthew scoffed.

“We’ve been in Detroit long enough to lose our

accents. That's how I know the best bootleggers are southern boys, like you," Tony explained.

Tony dropped a stack of cash on Matthew's table. It was more money than the country lad had ever seen in his life. Easily enough to buy the land his family worked on so they could reap the fruits of their hard labor.

"You got three choices," said Tony. "Option one, take the cash as an apology for the inconvenience and go back to work for Russo. Option two, take the cash home to Louisiana and forget you ever knew Russo. I won't stand in your way." Matthew was about to grab the cash and flee when Tony went on to say, "or... you can go with option three, take the money as a mere bonus and start working for me. I promise there's much more where that came from and I have an at will policy."

Matthew didn't believe him for a second. "No gangster has an at will policy. Russo said the same thing but once I got to Detroit I was never allowed to leave. I could send my wages and a supervised letter to my family once a month. I remember the day I arrived in the motor city. I stepped off the train with nothing but a suitcase full of blueprints, recipes, and dreams. Michigan Central Station was so grand it could have been a city of its own. Then Russo appeared like a god among men and stole three years of my life."

"I'm not Russo," Tony swore. "You can work for as long as you want and quit when you're ready."

Sarah agreed, "Disgruntled employees are more likely to betray us to a competitor or rat on us for a reduced jail sentence. In a world of guns, games, and garters one unhappy worker could mean the difference between life and death. I prefer to maintain honor

amongst thieves. We never keep a man against his will.”

Tony assured Matthew, “I’ll give you the night to think it over. Sarah will help with your bath.”

Sarah’s eyes bulged in shock. “One moment,” she told Matthew before snatching Tony into the hall. “He’s a big boy. He can bathe alone. If he wanted a bath he would have taken one already.”

Tony explained, “When I tossed Matthew his daddy’s watch and he raised his arm to catch it, he flinched in pain and grabbed his side. You busted his ribs in the tussle. He hasn’t bathed because he’s too proud to admit he can’t get his shirt off.”

“Oh,” Sarah gave an oops expression, “but wouldn’t one of the courtesans be better suited to assist him?”

Tony shook his head no, “This boy is a self-righteous goody goody. I can’t have him finding out we have a brothel until after he’s accepted employment here. I would help him myself but after he’s been strong-armed into servitude and bullied by men it will feel like a violation to be undressed by one. If you help him you will seem repentant for having injured him in the first place.”

Sarah nodded understandably. Tony placed a sweet kiss on her forehead and let her get on with the task. Sarah added hot water to rewarm the bath. She unhooked the straps of his overalls. Matthew kept them from falling off with the arm it didn’t hurt to move. She stood before him wielding a knife but he saw no malice in her eyes, only kindness, a trait he didn’t think she was capable of.

Sarah asked, “Is this shirt a favorite of yours? I can leave it intact but it will hurt like hell to pull it over your head.”

“Go ahead and cut it,” said Matthew.

He watched as Sarah carefully sliced the shirt from his body. She balled up the dingy fabric and discarded it.

She turned around as Matthew dropped the rest of his clothes in a one-arm shimmy and then he climbed into the tub. The water was so heavily saturated with scented creams and bubble bath that it was impossible to see any part of him that was submerged. This made him feel safe.

“You can turn around now,” he assured her.

“Do you still need help?” she offered.

“No, but I could use some company.” Matthew didn’t want her company but he needed to know if she was truly a monster before deciding whether or not to accept employment.

Sarah pulled up an ottoman and sat next to the tub. “Sorry for hurting you. If it’s any consolation you gave me a hell of a fight.”

“And don’t you forget it,” he laughed, though it was painful.

Sarah swallowed her pride and admitted, “If Russo fed you more than a crust of bread and a glass of water a day you might have overpowered me.”

“And what a pity that would be. You would be dead and I’d still be a slave,” Matthew confessed as he soaped up his raven hair. “I don’t know if I’m staying here. All I know is I ain’t going back there.”

“If you don’t stay here what’s your plan?” she asked to gather information. She couldn’t have cared less what his plans were.

“I’ll probably head back to Louisiana and marry a sweet little virgin... a white one of course,” he couldn’t resist the opportunity to take a jab at his kidnapper.

Sarah was more amused by his ignorance than



offended. "I take it you disapprove of Tony and me?"

"It's unnatural," Matthew admitted with a judgmental scrunch of his nose.

"What's unnatural is an obsession with virgins," Sarah smirked.

"And why is that?" he questioned. "Name one man who doesn't desire a perfect woman."

Sarah got down on her knees and placed her forearms on the tub. She whispered just inches from his face, "I was always told that virgins are preferred by little boys who have no confidence in the size of their manhood and no faith in their ability to please. A real man comes into my bedroom with the knowledge that he will do things to my body that will have me forgetting or despising anyone who came before him."

Matthew was in a trance. "What does he do?"

She reached out with two fingers and closed his eyes. Her soft moist lips brushed his ear as she whispered steamy desires that would make a lumberjack blush.

Sarah finished by saying, "He is my warrior."

Matthew's eyes drifted open and he begged to know, "What does one need in a warrior?"

Sarah gave a cute shrug, "For starters, I love a gladiator who can keep his sword up."

"Then allow me to draw my weapon. We'll battle until dawn," he vowed.

Sarah shook her head, "Didn't you say such things were unnatural?"

Matthew slammed his head back in frustration, "You tricked me."

"I merely enlightened you. Now get out of the tub. You're clean enough," she ordered.

“Um... it’ll be a minute,” Matthew covered himself, fearing that she could see evidence of his desire beyond the bubbles.

Sarah handed him a bell and stepped out to grant him privacy. What she did was cruel but so were his implications that she was lesser because she was black and unworthy of marriage because she wasn’t a virgin. Once summoned, she wrapped his ribs, fetched his medicine, and helped him into his pajamas.

Matthew didn’t want to admit that she was still on his mind but he had to know, “Why would you say such things to me?”

“Because it forces you to accept the fact that I am just as human as you. The only other explanation is that you enjoy screwing animals,” Sarah replied.

“So you desired to teach me a lesson in humility,” said Matthew. “Was that your only reason?”

“Of course,” she insisted. “What other reason would I have?”

“The desire to voice what hasn’t been done to you in a long time,” he grinned.

Sarah didn’t confirm nor deny the allegation. “Are you calling me unattractive? Your earlier response says otherwise.”

“We both know it would be a lie if I called you unattractive.” Matthew brushed her hair aside and whispered in her ear, “What I’m saying is that you’re ignored. If you ever get tired of being neglected you know where to find me.”

His words sent tingles down her spine. For the second time, Sarah did not confirm nor deny the accusation. Matthew grinned in triumph. If he wasn’t getting any

sleep neither was she. Sarah slipped out of the room annoyed with herself for allowing Matthew to get in her head. She wasn't surprised to find Tony in the corridor scheming.

“Did you apologize?” asked Tony.

“Yes”

“Did you seduce him?”

“Yes”

“That's my girl,” Tony grinned. “I don't want the boy sleeping with fond dreams of running home to Louisiana. I need him lying there watching the ceiling and stroking himself to thoughts of you.”

“I'm uncomfortable with being dangled like bait,” Sarah snapped.

“Relax,” Tony assured her. “A teenager's heart is fleeting. Matthew's infatuation will dissolve and by the time it does he will stay because he's one of us.”



Across town, Vincent Russo ranted before a table of bruised and battered mobsters. Most men went gray around the ears first but Russo was the opposite. He had a skunk streak down the middle of his shiny black curls.

Russo yelled, “Can someone please tell me what the hell happened tonight!”

“It was Tony's harpy and her henchmen that stole the lad,” one of the gangsters explained as he held a cold raw steak over his black eye.

He flicked a photo of Sarah. It spun across the table to his boss. Russo rose and leaned forward with his fists

on the table. He looked around his den of thieves wondering how he recruited so many failures.

Russo informed them, “We cannot steal the boy back because the harpy will kill us all. We cannot steal Tony and cut off his appendages because the harpy will kill us all. But I’ll tell you what we can steal...” every face was attentive and desperate to know. Russo slammed a knife through the face of Sarah’s picture, “we can steal the damn harpy!”

## CHAPTER 2:

### Bullets & Bloodshed

A month had passed since Matthew accepted Tony's offer. Most of the gang still hadn't learned his name. Tony's crew addressed Matthew as the kid or the new guy. Matthew didn't mind. This was a step up from being called pissant. He could have gone home to Louisiana but he had a large family and there was no way of predicting how long this economic collapse would last. How would they survive if the money ran out before the country recovered? If Matthew was being honest with himself there was a second reason he stayed. He never felt important back home. He was one of ten children, just another mouth to feed in a world where he didn't have a voice. He had floated around those noisy halls like a ghost, unseen and dead inside. Tony had given Matthew so much more than a means to rescue his family. What Tony offered Matthew was a purpose.

Matthew sat on the ground turning a wrench on the still he had designed. The only thing more impressive than his brewing skills were his engineering and architectural abilities. He was the youngest among them but rapidly earning their respect. The only one he locked horns with regularly was Sarah. Tony's prediction was correct. Matthew's attraction wore off and they were right back at each other's throats. Sarah loathed the sight of Matthew and the feeling was mutual.

Matthew felt a tug on his foot and he emerged from beneath the machine. He was happily met by the sweet old lady that managed Tony's books. Matthew wiped the dirt and oil from his hands with a shop rag. Mrs. Haddie, as she was called, held out a warm chocolate chip cookie and a cold glass of milk.

He grinned as he sank his teeth into the buttery sweetness. "Are you trying to fatten me up, Mrs. Haddie?"

"Somebody needs to," she joked.

Matthew was amazed at the way economic collapse pulled the unlikeliest people into the web of a criminal enterprise. Mrs. Haddie was a retired secretary and accountant who had been a law-abiding citizen until her son lost his job. Her husband suffered from dementia and had become a danger to himself. Their son's income had been covering the cost of his care. Then a horrific wave of unemployment washed over America leaving destruction in its wake. Mrs. Haddie, a grandmother of four, found herself in the employ of a mobster.

She explained to Matthew, "The gunmen are in a meeting. I'd normally wait on them but I got a call from the nurse about my husband. I must leave early tonight.

Would you mind escorting me to the brothel to retrieve the last of tonight's cash from Madam Brodeur?

"Of course," Matthew grabbed a revolver from his tool bag and slipped it into the back of his pants.

A young man who had never carried a firearm for reasons beyond hunting was becoming more comfortable with the idea of having one to protect those in his crew. The brothel brought in a large revenue stream. Some desperate fellow who lost it all on the ponies might not think twice about robbing an elderly woman. For this reason, Mrs. Haddie never picked up the cash without a guard. Matthew kept a watchful eye as they made their way through the corridors.

Mrs. Haddie couldn't help but ask, "You already know I'm here to provide care for my husband but what pulled you into all this?"

Matthew answered honestly, "Brewing is part of my heritage. I come from a proud line of brewers. My family owned a successful vineyard and distillery before asinine laws put us out of business. We could no longer afford our property taxes. We lost our chateau and were driven to sharecropping, which is basically..."

"White slavery," Mrs. Haddie filled in the blank, and Matthew nodded in agreement.

He glanced over both shoulders before whispering, "I have never ventured into this brothel nor any other. I'm no saint but I would've turned down the job if I had known about this part of the business. I can justify brewing hooch. Even Jesus turned water into wine but I cannot justify enslaving women."

"That's an honorable way of thinking," said Mrs. Haddie. "Your parents did a good job but what you must

understand is we do not run a brothel. We partner with one.”

Matthew shook his head disapprovingly, “I don’t see a difference.”

“You will,” Mrs. Haddie assured him.

“What I will be doing is quitting,” Matthew confessed. “Tony didn’t warn me about this treachery and I want no part of it.”

While en route, Matthew quietly conceived plans to rescue the victims from the pleasure house. These were someone’s daughters and sisters. Someone out there had to be missing them. Matthew looked away as he passed a large mirror unable to face himself. He feared his reflection had become the hideous portrait of Dorian Gray. *What kind of monsters am I working for?* Matthew questioned as his soul sank into despair. *What kind of monster am I becoming?*



The brothel was like a hotel but fancier. It had spacious rooms, a fully furnished atrium with a bar, and a record player. There were ten photographs of beautiful women on the wall, like a menu at a restaurant. Each one was dressed in a different way to sell a variety of fantasies. Picture one was a sexy maid. Picture two was a naughty nurse. Picture three was a provocative cop and the list went on. The tenth and final photo was of a woman clad in leather who never slept with anyone. She beat the hell out of men for their enjoyment. Sarah couldn’t understand why any man would pay to be physically and



verbally abused by number ten but these fellows paid a lot. There was a stack of flyers at the front desk with descriptions and prices. This pleasure house was like a parallel universe.

Sarah sat on a couch in the atrium of the brothel teaching a very stubborn courtesan how to read. Charlotte was dressed like a buccaneer and had the feisty nature of one. She had long blonde curls and eyes of crystal blue. Charlotte had lost her right leg below the knee but this didn't take away her loveliness. The peg leg further sold the pirate fantasy her customers were after.

Charlotte became frustrated with stumbling over words and slammed the book shut. "My letters are getting jumbled and mixed about. I am never going to get this!"

"You are reading better by the day. You just need more practice," Sarah encouraged her as she reopened the collection of *Arabian Nights* legends.

"I'm a pirate," said Charlotte. "Why would a pirate need to be literate?"

"In preparation of the day she no longer wants to be a pirate," said Sarah. "At the very least, wouldn't you like to know what happens to Sinbad the Voyager?"

Charlotte yearned to know more than anything. Sinbad was her kind of man, lawless and free, much like her dashing boss, Tony Cafero. Charlotte jumped back into the literature, desperate to see what happens.

A knock on the door ceased the night's reading lesson. Charlotte returned to her chambers while Sarah conducted business.

Two heavily armed watchmen swept open the double doors to allow Matthew and Mrs. Haddie to enter. Sarah passed a leather pouch full of cash to the accountant. She

asked a watchman to escort the elderly woman back to her office.

Matthew's jaw dropped at the sight of Sarah. "You are Madam Brodeur?"

Sarah nodded, "I thought that was fairly obvious. I am in charge of the girls."

He shook his head, "Kidnapper by day and madam by night. Is there a terrible thing you haven't done? I think I saw a baby on the way in. If you hurry you can sacrifice it to your heathen gods."

Sarah couldn't believe the nerve of him. "The moment you accepted employment here that was no longer a kidnapping. It became a job offer. Second, I am trying to help these women, you self righteous snob!"

"You expect me to believe you're running a brothel in army fatigues that read Captain Save A Whore! Forgive me if I don't salute you."

Sarah spoke in her own defense, "I bring girls off the streets, educate them, and funnel them into more socially acceptable jobs."

Matthew slammed a flyer in her chest. "How can I believe a word you say when you have women on a damn menu? Tell Tony I'm sorry. I can't be a part of this. I quit."

"Tell him yourself, you coward!" Sarah stormed into her office and slammed the door behind her.

Matthew was about to end his employment when he noticed a young woman dip back into her chamber. She had witnessed the whole argument and Matthew got a nagging feeling that he should talk to her. He would need her help if he had any hope of returning these victims to their families. He jogged to her chamber and knocked.

Charlotte swung open the door, happy to greet such a handsome young fellow, “arr... matey.”

Matthew couldn’t help but laugh, “I have some questions if you don’t mind.”

Charlotte dutifully informed him, “Whether we’re talking or screwing you’re using my time and that will cost you money.”

Matthew pulled a few bills from his wallet. “Will this buy me twenty minutes?”

“It’ll buy you ten.” Charlotte stuffed the money in her corset and allowed him to enter.

Matthew gazed around her chamber in wonder. It was decorated like a seaport in Tortuga. It wasn’t until Charlotte walked over to feed her parrot that he noticed her unique gait and the peg leg that caused it.

He gasped, “What did that horrible madam do to you!”

Charlotte laughed at his naivety, “Sarah Brodeur is my best friend. I owe her my life.”

His eyebrows furrowed with confusion. “Sarah didn’t force you into this?”

“No,” said Charlotte. “Who is feeding you these lies? After the stock market crashed my father became desperate enough to sell me into marriage with a wealthy snake who was known for knocking around his previous wife. I refused to spend the rest of my days getting my ass beat by a raging drunk and raising six snot-nosed brats who weren’t my children. If I was going to sleep with a pig I don’t love for sake of keeping a roof over my head I’d rather get my money upfront.”

Matthew had never heard a woman speak so frankly about such matters. He was rendered speechless.

Charlotte offered him a seat on the lounge and they lowered themselves on the plush cushions. She pulled a silver cigarette case from her garter and offered him a smoke. Matthew politely declined.

“Do you mind if I have one?” she asked.

“By all means,” Matthew assured her.

Charlotte lit up and drew in a few puffs before asking, “Who is she?”

“Who are you referring to,” Matthew asked in confusion.

“The woman,” Charlotte said between puffs of her cigarette, “the woman who has you raging against my profession and seeing evil where there is none.”

Matthew was impressed. “I don’t believe I’ve ever met anyone this good at reading strangers.”

“It’s the most important part of my job,” Charlotte confessed.

Matthew drew in a deep breath and admitted, “there were twelve people in my home. It was a circus that I couldn’t hear my own thoughts in. My parents didn’t talk to us as individuals, nor did they listen. What they did was make announcements to an audience. ‘Announcement: we’re having another kid. Announcement: prohibition laws have put us out of business.’ I felt like I was in a classroom rather than a home, only a teacher might have paid more attention. The only one who seemed to care I was alive was my sister, Nicole. We knew each other’s secrets. I thought we would remain best friends forever. Then my whole world fell apart in one day. We were fishing when the squeal of tires pierced through the natural serenity. Four strangers climbed out of an automobile. Three were men and the fourth was a

beautiful woman in a blue dress. They snatched Nicole. Jimmy and I fought like ravenous wolves to rescue our sister. I flung hot grease on one of the brutes and tortured screams pierced the air. Another thug retaliated by striking me with a bat. I hit the ground with an anguished cry and a broken arm. Jimmy, who was large in stature and a natural brawler, proved too much for the thug he was beating on so they ganged up on him. That witch in the blue dress stabbed my brother four times while Nicole and I screamed in horror. He was left to bleed on the riverbank. I looked up in time to see the kidnappers speeding away with Nicole. I crawled to Jimmy on three appendages like a dog with a hurt paw. I cradled my brother and yelled for help as I tried to stop the bleeding. By some miracle, Jimmy survived but we never saw Nicole again. At first, I couldn't understand why anyone would kidnap a poor girl. Only later did we discover she was forced into the sex trade. Nicole was found days after she was killed by an aggressive customer. Her death got the brothel shut down. The monsters who were running it went to prison but they never caught the brute who ended her life. I will never be comfortable with the concept of buying love. Some things are just too sacred to attach a price tag too."

Charlotte wiped away a tear he hadn't realized he'd shed, "I am so sorry about your sister and everything that happened to your family, but that isn't what's happening here. There were twenty-two of us walking the streets in the dead of winter. We were getting attacked, robbed, and always at risk of death due to exposure to the elements and dangerous men like the scoundrel who hurt your sister. We begged Sarah to take us in and make us part of

the club but she refused. Much like you, she was adamantly opposed to the concept of buying love.”

Matthew questioned, “Why didn’t you ask another night club?”

“You already know that Russo pays slave wages. He was demanding eighty-five percent,” Charlotte explained. “Falconi asked for a little less money but he has no qualms about beating the hell out of a girl if a customer is displeased for any reason. I chose to walk the streets rather than enslave myself to either of them, but in doing so I got a terrible case of frostbite. Those dead toes sent infection circulating through my body. Countless people walked past me and stepped over me as I lied unconscious on the sidewalk. Nobody stopped except Sarah. Nobody considered a lowly whore worth saving except the woman you berated tonight. I woke up in the hospital three days later, with one less foot but one more friend. In my delirium, I heard her promise that if I stayed strong and fought the fever that was killing me she would make sure I always had a home at her club.”

Matthew scratched his head in bewilderment, “But Sarah Brodeur is the worst. We can’t possibly be talking about the same knife twirling cutthroat.”

“I assure you, we are,” said Charlotte. “After seeing me lose my leg, Sarah felt like she was causing more harm than good by standing on principle. She offered me and the others a place that was safe from the elements and had armed watchmen for our protection while only asking for the barest minimum in return, twenty percent, just enough to justify our presence to Tony. Of the twenty-two women Sarah brought under this roof, she’s already coaxed twelve into accepting alternative employment as

waitresses, cleaning staff, and entertainers. It isn't Sarah's fault that the remaining ten of us enjoy our work, love the money, and refuse to do anything else no matter how hard she tries to fix us."

Matthew couldn't believe what he was hearing. He murmured around the foot that was plugging his mouth, "Mrs. Haddie was right. This isn't enslavement. It's an arrangement that Tony had nothing to do with. A partnership that Sarah reluctantly agreed to as the lesser of two evils. I accused Sarah of exploiting girls like my sister. She might have been the one to save Nicole. May I ask you a personal question?"

Charlotte nodded.

He went on to say, "How do you keep such an intimate act from becoming personal?"

Charlotte grinned and shook her head, "Sarah asked me the same the thing. It's impossible to keep your heart separate at all times. We're only human and anyone who tells you different is a liar."

"Has it ever gotten personal for you?"

"Once but I ended it."

"Why?"

"Because I found out he belonged to a woman I admire very much."

"So you sacrificed your heart to prevent breaking hers. That's admirable." Matthew checked his dad's watch. "It looks like my ten minutes are up."

"May I see that," she asked and he passed her the watch. "This is a beautiful engraving."

"It's my family's crest," Matthew explained. "Well, I better clear the air with Sarah... for the sake of remaining in Tony's good graces of course."

Charlotte didn't pretend to believe his explanation. "I know the sight of passion buried beneath the rubble of resentment. Be careful, Matthew."

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"You know exactly what I mean."

Matthew gave Charlotte's hand a gentle squeeze. "Thank you, darling."

"Darling?" She chuckled at his genteel manner. "What Louisiana swamp did they fish you out of?"

Matthew laughed at himself as he fled the chamber. He rushed downstairs to make amends. He was determined to right his wrongs. He needed Sarah to know that her deeds meant everything to the girls under her protection. Matthew knocked on her office door and waited for an answer... but she was gone.

On the way out, Matthew passed the same mirror that had brought him shame. This time he could face his reflection with the knowledge that they were helping these women rather than exploiting them. Matthew noticed a healed cut on his neck. He thoughtfully rubbed the raised skin. It was a mark left by Sarah's blade on the night of his abduction. For some odd reason, it brought a smile to his face. The feisty colored woman left a scar on him in more ways than one.

Matthew strolled along, grinning stupidly, without a clue of the looming storm. Russo had issued a bounty on Sarah so hefty that every goon from coast to coast was lying in wait. Matthew's desperation to intervene would steer him down a path of bullets and bloodshed...



## CHAPTER 3:

### Gangster's Paradise

**T**ony's club, named *Gangster's Paradise*, was a different world during the day. There was no band on stage blaring music for happy couples to dance to. No dice rattling in a fist before flying through the air and bouncing over a craps table. Not even the ching of a slot machine lever being pulled. All the chairs and stools were up on the tables from when the cleaning staff came through. The speakeasy was a quiet haven until the sun went down, and then it roared to life.

Matthew carefully stocked the bar with his creations. He was careful not to break a single bottle. Alcohol was liquid gold during prohibition. Matthew glanced up from his task as Sarah marched into the empty speakeasy.

"Is there a reason I was summoned like a servant?" Sarah asked as she made her way to the bar.

Matthew poured a glass of apple-flavored liquor. "Taste this."

Sarah raised a suspicious brow, “Is this the part where you poison me?”

He raised the glass to his lips as proof that he meant her no harm. She stopped him and retrieved the drink on faith. Her actions surprised them both. There was an unexplainable tug in her soul saying to trust him.

She took a swig and the flavors fluoresced like the colors of a rainbow. “I like this drink. It’s sweet but strong enough to get the job done.”

Matthew agreed, “Those were my exact sentiments, strong enough to knock you on your ass but delicious and irresistible.”

Sarah took another enjoyable sip. “What’s it called, in case I should order it tonight?”

“I’ve named it Sarah,” Matthew confessed.

She looked away as an embarrassed smile emerged on her face. Matthew was stunned that she was capable of embarrassment or a smile. All he had gotten from her up to this point was disdain and mocking.

Matthew explained himself, “I wasn’t trying to summon you like a servant but the club is the only place I can speak to you alone without raising suspicions. I named this drink to apologize for the other night.”

Sarah hopped up on the bar and took a seat, allowing her feet to dangle over the edge.

“It’s fine,” she assured him. “Charlotte told me about your sister, Nicole. I’m very sorry for your loss.”

“I appreciate your condolences. I allowed my grief to blind me. I saw evil where there was none,” he admitted.

Sarah shrugged, “Truth is, I don’t blame you. If I abduct a man I can’t expect him to view me as a saint.”

Matthew brushed off the incident, “It was a job offer,

right?”

She laughed and finished her drink. Despite her giddy protests, Matthew poured her another. Then he poured one for himself and they toasted. Given his background, Sarah knew it couldn't have been easy for Matthew to swallow his pride and apologize to a person of color. Now he was serving her drinks with charm and humility. Was he truly making amends to remain in Tony's favor or was there more to the bootlegger than meets the eye?

“Are you trying to get me drunk?” Sarah giggled as he poured more drinks.

“I don't know,” Matthew gave her a devilish grin. “Is it working?”

They clinked glasses and slammed another round. Sarah disliked the way Matthew went off the other night but she admired his reasons for doing so. His devotion to a lost sister was endearing, as was his sense of morality about love. Charlotte claimed that he used the word sacred. Not many fellows consider pleasures of the flesh to be sacred. Matthew viewed prostitutes as victims in need of rescue rather than objects to be explored, which made him more desirable. Sarah pushed her drink aside. She couldn't afford to see Matthew in a different light. It was safer to go on hating him. She was about to jump down from the bar when Matthew stopped her.

“You've had drinks. You could get hurt,” he cautioned.

Matthew placed his hands around Sarah's waist to assist her. He helped her safely to the ground without difficulty.

She gazed up at him and admitted, “You're stronger than I thought.”

“Y’all feed me better than a crust of bread and a glass of water,” he joked.

It wasn’t until now that Matthew realized his hands were still on her body. He removed them as any gentleman would, but he found it impossible to remove his gaze. Sarah couldn’t tell if it was the booze or adolescent hormones that made Matthew stand before her staring at what didn’t belong to him.

“Am I interrupting?” asked Charlotte as she entered the club with a colorful parrot on her shoulder.

Sarah laughed, “Junior had too many drinks and needs a nap.”

“What he needs is a cold shower,” said the pirate babe.

Her parrot squawked loudly and repeated the words, “cold shower.”

Matthew laughed at the buccaneer and her pestering bird, “Have you come to entertain us with more of your wild theories?”

“I’ve come for rum,” Charlotte happily announced. “We’ve run out in the brothel.”

Matthew supplied Charlotte with two bottles. He watched with disappointment as Sarah walked away with her.

Sarah giggled and chastised Charlotte, “You have a dirty mind. He’s eighteen, practically a boy.”

For some reason, it boiled Matthew’s blood to hear Sarah call him a child. Though mortal enemies, Matthew admired Sarah’s devotion to Tony and the way she defended him with her life. Matthew longed for the day he would fall in love with such a woman.

Sarah might have called Matthew a boy the moment

Charlotte arrived but he refused to believe she was being truthful. The desire in Sarah's eyes told a different story. She never even noticed how long Matthew's hands rested on her waist because she was too distracted by the golden-brown of his eyes. It was disturbing just how undisturbed she was by his touch. Their shared attraction was as deadly as it was undeniable...



It wasn't 10:00pm and Tony's underground club was jumping. Every poker, roulette, and craps table was filled with ecstatic gamblers. The place smelled like a pleasant mixture of perfumes and expensive cigars. The women were in elegant beaded gowns and the men were dressed in expensive suits. Even Sarah shed her boyish clothes for something more elegant: a flowing dress and a shimmering headband adorned with a lovely feather.

Tony had the only joint in Detroit that allowed both white and black patrons to enter; though they sat on separate sides of the club and danced on separate sides of the dance floor. Some of his patrons didn't care for this mixing of the races but tolerated it because they had nowhere else to buy high-quality booze. The distribution and consumption of alcohol had been illegal for over a decade.

There were ways of obtaining alcohol on the streets but it was at your own risk. Illegal hooch was often brewed in someone's bathtub by a novice. It tasted terrible and caused many to go blind. These risks steered consumers to *Gangster's Paradise*, where they would

have a wonderful time and purchase a bottle to enjoy later if it suited them.

Matthew had thrown a huge shindig to promote his greatest creation. Partygoers were bubbling with anticipation for a taste of it. The theme of this party was *The Green Fairy* and the club was decorated with these charming winged creatures. Ladies were given costume wings at the door. It was a mystical evening and it would only get better from here.

Matthew had designed and built distillery equipment that produced alcohol better and faster than anyone else. His fresh recipes and ingenuity brought more wealth and prosperity than anyone could have imagined. Matthew had become a valuable and respected member of their crew. Tony was right all along. Matthew was worth his weight in gold.

A roar of applause rang throughout the club as the phenomenal vocalist, Ella Fitzgerald, stepped up to the microphone. The incredible Duke Ellington sat at the bench of the grand piano. Pretty flapper girls in short shimmering dresses danced on the right side of the stage. Their legs swung from side to side in that strange but enchanting style as Duke and Ella performed a popular hit: *It Don't Mean a Thing if it Ain't Got That Swing*.

Jazz was born in New Orleans and so was Tony's Creole lover. She screamed with glee and leaped into Tony's arms without care that they were in public.

"How did you pull this off!" Sarah could not conceal her excitement. The girl had Jazz in her blood and Tony was always surprising her with the up and coming greats.

A smile lit his handsome olive-toned face. "Are you pleased?"

She didn't have words to say just how pleased she was so she simply nodded. Sarah pulled the expensive fedora from his head and set it on the table. She led him out on the dance floor ignoring the surreptitious glances and whispers about Tony flaunting his "colored broad".

Sarah and her fellow joined the innumerable others, happily dancing in a swinging form as Ella Fitzgerald and Duke Ellington enchanted the masses.

Sarah grinned from ear to ear as Tony swung her and spun her around before pulling her back into his arms. She loved nights like these, times when she saw a glimmer of the orphaned Italian boy her parents took into their home. It hadn't been easy for Tony to grow up in a black neighborhood in the bayou but Sarah was always there to defend him. She was his best friend and by high school they were lovers.

Sarah took a moment to catch her breath from their spirited dance. The master of ceremonies announced that after a brief interlude the next performers to set the club on fire would be Benny Goodman and his orchestra.

"Where's his vocalist," Sarah heard a voice say in a tone so smooth that it made her skin prickle with goosebumps.

She turned to meet the dazzling amber-brown eyes of her arch nemesis, Matthew. He had removed his dress coat and she could see black suspenders glowing in contrast to his white dress shirt. Who would have known a proper amount of food could transform a body into this masterpiece? Matthew had become a work of art, though Sarah would sooner light her hair on fire than admit this.

Sarah instinctively straightened his bow tie, forgetting for just that instant how inappropriate that

would look. Her actions earned them a funny glare from Tony who soon brushed off the possibility. Everyone knew that Sarah and Matthew hated each other's guts.

Matthew snickered, "how is this Goodman fellow going to perform a song entitled *Sing, Sing, Sing* with no vocalist?"

Sarah rolled her eyes. "How can you be from Louisiana and know nothing about jazz? You're a disgrace."

"And you're an unscrupulous assassin but who's judging?" Matthew shot back.

The smile faded from Sarah's face and she walked away. Most days Sarah pretended not to be bothered by the things he said but the truth was she cared what Matthew thought of her.

Tony shook his head at Matthew, "Now you've done it."

Tony was about to go after her when Matthew pleaded, "Boss, please allow me to fix this."

Tony gave a frustrated huff and a hand gesture for Matthew to hop to it. Matthew zig-zagged through the bustling speakeasy. He waded through clouds of cigar smoke and perfume until he found Sarah at the bar.

"I'm not an assassin," Sarah spoke quietly before downing a shot of moonshine. "An assassin is paid to hunt down and murder men, women, and children, regardless of their innocence. I am a guard. I use the force necessary to protect the ones I love and I've only killed in self-defense."

Matthew felt bad for hurting her feelings. That wasn't his intention. "I was only joking, Sarah. You kicked my ass, stabbed me in the neck with a syringe, and rolled my



unconscious body into a trunk but you also rescued me from my enslavement to Russo. I'm beyond lucky to call you friend."

Sarah wasn't human to this man just months ago and now he considered her a friend. He extended an elbow to Sarah. She hooked her graceful arm around his powerful bicep and it felt like a jolt of electricity flowed through them. Matthew dutifully escorted her back to Tony but he took the longest route to get there so he could indulge in the pleasure of her warmth for just a few moments longer.

The smile returned to Sarah's face as they strolled arm in arm. Matthew felt blessed to see her smiling. This was an image he would bring to bed when he was safely alone in his home, the only place on earth Matthew could admit he had a crush on the boss's girl. Matthew respectfully forced his gaze away from Sarah and focused on the stage.

Tony whispered to the naive Matthew, "This song is called *Sing, Sing, Sing* because Mr. Goodman is about to make that horn sing. Watch and learn."

"Somehow I doubt that," Matthew scoffed. "The man has a clarinet. No respectable man plays the clarinet."

Sarah shook her head. Matthew could be so close-minded at times, yet no less loveable. All eyes turned center stage as Benny Goodman pushed his glasses up on his slender nose and put the horn to his lips. Matthew had to eat every word at the revelation of this musician's magnificence. Goodman played with a divinity, capturing the crowd. Every shoe was out on the dance floor as Matthew watched Sarah from the sideline. She and Tony were swinging, spinning, and dancing to the upbeat tune. Matthew had to admit that the boss's girl looked beautiful

when she danced. The jazz loving Sarah was truly in her element.

Though deftly moving their feet Tony and Sarah were just inches apart. She gazed up into his gorgeous green eyes and ran fingers through his hair, which bore the color of wet sand. Her arms snaked around his neck, practically begging him for a kiss like the beautiful embraces they shared long ago. As usual, Tony bypassed her lips and pecked her chastely on the cheek.

Sarah was reminded in that instant what she'd become to him. She was like that rocking chair in the corner of a room that you never touch anymore, but still cannot bring yourself let go. The chair has been in your life for so long that looking at it every day gives you a sense of comfort and stability. To see it makes you feel at home even when all hell is breaking loose around you. Sarah didn't want to be an untouched chair. She yearned to be a lover but Tony would not allow her to move on. He would wreak unspeakable vengeance upon any man who dared to take away his best friend. Sarah was a living breathing security blanket that Tony had outgrown but like a petulant child, he refused to give her up.

Tony excused himself and promised to return briefly.

A handsome black man, who had been chatting with Sarah about a business venture, sauntered over with a swagger so smooth he appeared to be gliding. Folks called him Tobacco Ben. He supplied samples of his cigars a few weeks ago. Tony and the customers praised Ben's product and demanded more. Sarah needed to set up a permanent arrangement and add a few more items to the menu.

She received Ben with a smile, "You just missed Tony but he should return any moment."

“Can we speak outside? It’s a bit loud in here,” Ben suggested.

“It’s raining outside. Let’s go to the office,” Sarah offered.

She stopped a passing server, and asked Ben, “What’s your poison?”

“Bourbon strait up,” he replied.

Sarah informed the server, “I’ll have what he’s having and please tell Mr. Cafero to join us in his office. I prefer not to be shouting business over the music.”

The server nodded understandably and went to fetch their drinks.

Ben was half impressed and half amused. “Isn’t bourbon a little strong for you? I wouldn’t have judged if you ordered something sweet and girly.”

Sarah laughed and shook her head, “Typical male response. Whether it’s your drinks, your jobs, or your voting rights I will always have what you’re having and I’m more than strong enough to handle it.”

Sarah took two glasses from the server’s tray and left a generous tip. She passed a glass to Ben who took one sip and complimented Matthew’s genius.

Ben offered her his elbow, “Shall we?”

Sarah took his arm and they walked to the office, unlocking a series of doors along the way. This place was as fortified as a bunker. She unlocked the office door and turned on the light.

Sarah offered Ben a seat and informed him, “I will require pipe tobacco in addition to cigars and cigarettes.”

“Absolutely.” Ben pulled out a bronze cigarette case and passed it to Sarah.

It was a work of art and she couldn’t help but ask,

“How did you come by this?”

“A friend of mine is an unemployed metal worker,” Ben explained. “He’ll give you fifteen percent of the profits if you sell his cases here.”

“Twenty percent,” said Sarah, “Or it will be unfair to my girls.”

“Sounds great,” he grinned from ear to ear. “I’ll relay the terms.”

Sarah was flying on a cloud of triumph. Tony had been telling her to land this deal for weeks. She was certain he would be satisfied with the terms. Sarah passed Ben a sheet of paper to jot down a price list for his products. As she shuffled around in Tony’s drawer for an ink pen, Ben used that single moment of distraction to pour something into her drink. Sarah didn’t look like much of a fighter but assassins had underestimated her before and ended up dead. Ben would not be repeating their mistakes. He had every intention of collecting this bounty. Ben calmly wrote a price list for his products.

“Shall we toast to our new venture?” He raised a glass with a charming smile.

Sarah grinned with excitement and raised her glass. “To a future of prosperity and to seeing more brothers around this establishment.”

“Amen to that,” he cheered and clinked glasses with her, watching in victory as she consumed every poisoned drop...

## CHAPTER 4:

### The Hitman

**T**obacco Ben placed a glass vial on the desk. It bore an emblem of a skull and crossbones.

Sarah stared with bewilderment. “What is this?”

“You’ve been poisoned,” he spoke plainly. “If you don’t leave this building with me quietly you’ll never get the antidote.”

“I will if I beat it out of you,” she replied.

Ben laughed, “As much as it would amuse me to see you try, the whooping I’d give you would be for naught and you’d still die. My boss has the antidote. The only way you will receive it is by coming with me peacefully.”

“Well I’ll have to think about that,” she spoke calmly, despite her predicament.

“I wouldn’t think too long,” Ben warned her. “The antidote must be administered within the hour.”

“Is that so?” She smirked.

He nodded with a grin, “You will suffer a horrible death unless you come with me right now. You will bleed from the eyes and ears. You will lose control of all nerve function and convulse so hard that you break your own back. It makes for a very unattractive corpse. Think of your mother and do the smart thing.”

Sarah nodded in agreement, “Mothers know best, which is why I listened to mine when she said to always order the same drink as a man so he won’t notice when you’ve swapped glasses with him.”

At that precise moment, a flustered Ben felt the wetness on his cheeks. Bloodstained tears ran from his eyes. Sarah used his panicking to her advantage. She nailed his hand to the desk with a knife. Sarah jumped over the desk and landed on his lap. Her second blade was at his throat.

She ignored his tortured screams and warned him, “You have three more limbs. I will crucify you like Jesus if you don’t tell me who you’re working for.”

Guards barged in at the sound of Ben’s wails of agony. Matthew ran in shortly behind them.

She ordered, “Wring the truth from him and do it fast. He has less than an hour to live.”

Ben released another scream as she ripped her knife out of his hand.

“Are you alright?” asked Matthew.

“I’m fine,” she assured him. “I just feel stupid.”

“You couldn’t have foreseen this. It wasn’t your fault,” Matthew replied.

“It was,” Sarah admitted. “I saw a young black man out here trying to make it and I automatically trusted him. I trusted him so much that I walked off alone with him, a

mistake I never would've made with a man your color. I criticized your prejudices and I'm no better. I feel like such a hypocrite."

Matthew tried to console her, "No one is perfect. The best any of us can do is admit our shortcomings and work on them a little each day."

Sarah agreed to do just that.

"Are you sure you're alright," Matthew insisted.

She assured him, "I'll be fine, but Tony went to the bathroom and hasn't come back. That was a while ago. I'm usually not this paranoid but after what just happened... please make sure he isn't sick or kidnapped."

"Of course."

He left as Tony's goons started beating answers out of Ben. When Matthew returned to the mythical party a legend named Cab Calloway had entranced the audience with a song called *Minnie the Moocher*. Matthew walked the perimeter until he found a row of restrooms. Each bore a different sign: colored women, colored men, white women, and white men. Months ago, Matthew wouldn't have given much thought to these signs. He would've reached for the corresponding door and handled his business. Now the labels seem absurd and they bother him. Matthew didn't know if Sarah's friendship was affecting him this way or if he was merely growing up and seeing the world in a different light. All he knew was that these separations were unjust and utterly ridiculous.

Matthew was about to reach for the door handle of the white men's restroom when a pretty white girl popped out. He recognized her. She was one of their waitresses. They stared awkwardly at each other before she scampered off. He was going to try again when yet

another girl emerged, who was one of their flappers. Girl two made an awkward shuffle past him. She caught up with girl one and they laughed at how stupid Sarah was.

When Matthew walked in, he found Tony fretting over how to remove lipstick stains from his trousers and the makeup from his collar. Matthew was stunned but he leaped into friend mode. He shut off the sink before Tony began to scrub the stains.

Matthew warned him, "It takes a skilled laundress to remove makeup from white clothes. You'll only wet yourself up and still be required to change."

Tony agreed, "I'll slip out of here and switch suits. There's always a spare in my office."

"You can't," Matthew stopped him. "Sarah is in your office conducting business."

"Then fetch it for me," Tony ordered.

Matthew shook his head no, "If I go to retrieve your suit she may insist on bringing it herself. Plus, if you take any longer to return Sarah will come looking for you. She was already concerned that you got sick or taken."

Tony's face scrunched in bewilderment, "Why on earth would she assume that?"

"Might have something to do with the fact that she was nearly killed while you were humping the help." Matthew hadn't intended to make it sound like Tony had failed Sarah in every possible way, but that was the harsh truth.

Rage surged over Tony's body like a river of fire. He stormed to the door with a drawn pistol. Consequences be damned. This injustice could not stand.

Matthew reasoned with him, "It's been taken care of. If you kill the hitman how will we know who sent him?"



Allow the guards to interrogate him and then kill his boss to prevent all future attempts.”

Tony was a little impressed by Matthew’s newfound ruthlessness. “Months ago you never would’ve suggested such a thing.”

“Months ago I didn’t have friends,” Matthew confessed.

The men shuddered at a gentle knock on the door followed by Sarah’s voice. A panicked Tony uttered words to stall her.

Matthew offered a bizarre solution, “our jackets are cut differently but our shirts and pants are the same color. All we have to do is switch shirts and pants. Sarah will never know. No one will care if I leave the restroom looking like I got a little action.”

“Thanks for covering me,” said Tony as they passed clothes back and forth over the top of the bathroom stalls.

“With all due respect, Sir, I ain’t doing this for you,” Matthew replied as he dressed hurriedly.

Tony explained, “I love Sarah and I have every intention of marrying her the moment I find a legal way to do it. I just have to get some things out of my system before taking the plunge. You know how it is.”

They emerged from the stalls and Matthew informed him, “if you got an itch that needs scratching that’s your business, but do you have to shit where you eat? Do you have to shit where I eat? The women you’re nailing work with Sarah. They mock her and laugh at her behind her back. No one deserves to be humiliated like this.”

“You’re right,” Tony agreed in a voice heavy with remorse. “Keep this incident between us and I promise to do better.”

“I hope so,” Matthew replied. “Like it or not, your relationship with this woman affects us all. The last thing any of us need is a scorned Sarah blabbing to the cops.”

Matthew dutifully opened the bathroom door and delivered Tony to his rightful girlfriend. Matthew was about to leave and change suits when Sarah noticed the lipstick on his trousers.

She whispered, careful not to embarrass a friend, “you have makeup on your pants and shirt. You may want to change before your big presentation.”

“Thank you,” Matthew graciously replied.

Sarah’s consideration made him feel even worse for deceiving her.

She grinned happily, “I thought you were unattached. Why didn’t you tell us about this girl? Have her sit with us. We would love to meet her.”

Matthew didn’t have one more lie in him. He just stood there.

Tony spoke up, “Matthew already told me she wasn’t special, just a tramp that won’t be joining us.”

The smile faded from Sarah’s face. It was replaced by a glare of repulsion. Matthew walked away because it hurt too badly to see Sarah looking at him like that.

Tony asked, “Is that judgment I see on your face?”

“It’s shock,” Sarah admitted. “Matthew was such a good guy when he came here. I’d never met a man with such value for women. He went off on me and nearly ended his employment because of his value for women. Now he’s lowered himself to meaningless sex and bragging about it to you. I didn’t expect Matthew to turn into a philandering pig overnight.”

Tony shrugged without care and wrapped an arm

around Sarah's shoulders. "I told you a teenager's heart is fleeting."

Matthew became nauseous as he watched that conversation from a distance. His deaf sister had taught him how to read lips. Matthew wasn't a saint but nor was he a pig. He made an honest effort with any woman he courted. Matthew had never used a girl and just cast her aside in the disgusting manner Tony stated. Now Sarah, a woman Matthew cared for, was disappointed in him for things that weren't his fault and Tony never bothered to defend him. Tony left Matthew wearing dirty clothes and an even filthier reputation.

Matthew had told himself that Tony's infidelities were none of his business. Sarah was Tony's woman, and how he chose to treat her was none of Matthew's business. Matthew and Tony were friends. To betray Tony was unfathomable but no matter how hard Matthew tried he could not ignore the fact that the woman he liked was unappreciated by the man she was beholden to.

As Tony and Sarah cuddled in a booth he couldn't help but ask, "did you spare Ben because he's black?"

She answered honestly, "I trusted him because he was black which was a mistake but I spared him because he's useful. You wanted to execute Ben for what he'd done and that's understandable."

"Then why did you convince me otherwise?" asked Tony. "Why did you have the guards dump Ben near one of Russo's hangouts so he could get the antidote before he died?"

Sarah explained herself, "It was mercy shown to someone who now owes us a favor. Having a pair of eyes in Russo's crew is far more valuable than having another

body on our hands.”

“And that’s the only reason,” Tony questioned.

“Why don’t you just ask if I’m sleeping with him?” she snapped.

“Are you?”

“Of course not!” Sarah pushed him away and stormed off.

Tony went after her. “I’m sorry, please forgive my stupidity. You don’t normally trust men so easily. I just assumed you might have been attracted to him.”

“He’s a handsome man,” Sarah admitted, “but he’s not my man.”

“Forgive me,” Tony pleaded with a kiss of her hands.

“Fine but you are making dinner all week!” she demanded.

They walked back arm in arm. A drunken customer gave a snide remark about the indignity of groveling before a Negro.

Tony swept his jacket open and showed the arsenal of weapons hidden beneath. “What was that you were saying?”

“I was telling my friend what a lovely couple you are,” the man insisted.

Sarah snickered at Tony and chastised him, “You can’t change the world.”

“I know but it feels like someone should try,” he confessed. “I will die trying to change the world for you.”

Tony knew he had no right to be jealous, especially after what he’d done in the bathroom but there was a difference between him being unfaithful and her being unfaithful. Tony fooled around but he always knew where home was. He would never replace Sarah.

If she was two-timing him would she remember where home was or fall in love with the other guy and replace Tony? They had been best friends since before she sprouted tits. He couldn't imagine a life where he didn't see her every day. Of course, he yearned for her happiness but the thought of Sarah leaving made him crazy. He would annihilate any man who threatened their partnership...



Matthew was just out of the shower when his phone rang.

It was Tony, "I need your help."

"I know boss. I'm on my way back to the party now," Matthew replied.

"Take your time. There's no rush," Tony assured him. "What I require assistance with has nothing to do with the club. It's a personal matter."

"How can I help," Matthew asked.

He was under the assumption that Tony needed advice about what gift to buy Sarah to make up for his poor behavior. Matthew could not have been more wrong about Tony's intentions.

Tony confessed, "Sarah disappeared for a couple of hours the other day. When I asked where she had gone she said the orphanage but I noticed a ticket from the picture show in her car."

"Perhaps she saw some girly movie with her friends," Mathew suggested.

"Why would she lie about seeing a movie with other

ladies?” asked Tony.

“Maybe she just forgot to mention it,” Matthew insisted.

“When I mentioned what was playing on the big screen she pretended like she hadn’t seen it,” Tony replied. “I want you to follow her.”

“Boss... um... I’m sure there’s a reasonable explanation. I think you should talk to her,” Matthew insisted.

“I tried that and she lied to me,” said Tony.

“Wouldn’t one of your guards be more qualified to spy on your woman?” asked Matthew.

Tony explained, “My guards are as loyal to her as they are to me. I need someone who doesn’t like Sarah to relay the truth about her.”

Tony hung up before Matthew could respond. The hypocrisy was astounding. Matthew couldn’t believe how jealous and possessive his boss was over a woman he was cheating on.



The bootlegger freshened up, changed clothes, and returned to *Gangster’s Paradise*. The launch of his new drink was spectacular. The crowd applauded the hypnotic green liquid that appeared to be glowing.

Matthew brandished the bottle and spoke into the microphone, “This wonder has been known by many names. Some call it Absinthe, others call it The Green Fairy because it gives you wings, but all agree that it is one of the most spellbinding liquors you will ever

consume. Are any of you pretty little angels ready to get your wings?”

The crowd was cheering so loudly he couldn't be heard. When they quieted Matthew delivered the terms, “Bring your glasses and your fellows so I can bind y'all together with these ribbons. Absinthe has been known to make ladies and gentlemen a little randy. I ain't trying to break up a happy home.”

Laughter erupted from the crowd. Couples began to line up with empty glasses. The pairs ranged from newlyweds in search of a little excitement to longtime partners looking for a spark to reignite passion's flames. Matthew filled their cups, tied their wrists together with a green silk ribbon, and wished them a magical evening. Then he blessed the next couple and the next.

Sarah and Tony were impressed by Matthew's showmanship. His genteel country manner and gorgeous looks had the audience eating out of the palm of his hand. They advanced in line until it was their turn. Tony and Sarah held out their joined hands for Matthew to tie with a ribbon.

Matthew paused. It looked like he'd seen a ghost. He did not want to fill Sarah's glass with a beverage that would have her lusting for a man he just found with two other women, but what choice did he have?

Tony whispered in his ear, “I know what you're thinking. Just pour the damn drinks and relax. I swear I won't touch her.”

Matthew breathed a sigh of relief and poured the glowing beverage. He bound them as one with the optimism that Tony would keep his word and make an honest woman of Sarah.

“Y’all have a magical evening,” said Matthew.

“You do the same,” Sarah replied.

She walked away with Tony while Matthew served his next guests. Matthew hoped that no one else noticed his moment of hesitation before tying Sarah’s wrist to a man who didn’t deserve her.

A guard crossed the room on a mission. He pulled Tony and Sarah aside and informed them, “Ben confessed one more thing during the drive. Russo didn’t hire one hitman. He hired an army...”



## CHAPTER 5:

### The Making of a Mobster

**T**ony decided to pay off his rival rather than go to war. A suitcase full of cash was delivered to Russo and they declared a truce. Now all Matthew had to do was clear Sarah's name so that everyone could return to business as usual. Matthew refused to skulk in the shadows like some creepy stalker. Instead of tracking her like an animal Matthew did what Tony should have.

Sarah kissed Tony's cheek and said that she was on her way to the orphanage. When she left on foot Matthew jogged to catch up with her.

"I see you're headed the same way. Can I walk with you? Safety in numbers, right?" Matthew suggested.

"Sure," Sarah replied.

Matthew was given pause when she took a right where she should have taken a left.

He questioned, "Isn't the orphanage in the other direction?"

“I have a stop to make first,” Sarah explained.

She approached a theater, which bore a sign that said *tickets half price, going out of business*.

Sarah spoke joyfully to the man in the ticket booth, “Mr. Melvin, I do not wish to be waited on by the owner of this fine establishment.”

Mr. Melvin confessed, “I’m all that’s left. During a time when most families are struggling to keep food on the table, many folks can’t afford to go to the picture show. If I don’t sell tickets I can’t afford to pay employees. I had to lay off my whole staff. I’ll probably be surrendering this place to the bank next month.”

“You’re in luck,” said Sarah. “I need tickets for Alice in Wonder Land.”

“How many,” asked Mr. Melvin.

“All of them,” Sarah replied. “Get your employees in here and tell them to get the concession stand running. You’re about to serve a full house.”

The owner of the theater was so overwhelmed by her generosity that tears came to his eyes. He removed his glasses to wipe them away. Mr. Melvin gave her the price for all of the tickets, soda, popcorn, and candy in the house. Sarah promptly paid him and walked away with the giant stack of tickets.

Matthew was rendered speechless by her generosity as they went to deliver those tickets to the orphanage.

Sarah explained, “I do this with a different theater and a different orphanage every month. It helps local businesses keep their doors open while providing a joyful night to less fortunate children. Everyone wins.”

Matthew smiled wistfully at her, “Every time I think I have you all figured out you turn out to have more layers

than an onion. That was very kind of you.”

Sarah jogged up the steps of the orphanage. She shoved the tickets and a cash donation through the mail slot on their door. She rang the doorbell and walked away. Matthew glanced back over his shoulder to find ecstatic children jumping up and down with anticipation.

Sarah laughed at herself, “I’ve purchased more tickets than any person I know and I have never been to the picture show.”

Matthew was astounded, “Why haven’t you gone?”

Sarah admitted, “I always wanted to go when I was a girl but by the time my father could afford such luxuries Tony was living with us.”

Matthew knew the conflict, “the ushers would have taken Tony from y’all and forced him to sit in the white section while everyone else remained in the colored area.”

Sarah nodded, “my father adamantly refused to spend his money at any establishment that wouldn’t seat us as a family. After Tony and I began our courtship we never saw movies for the same reason. No man wants to sit in a different section than his lady.”

“Why help the theaters who shun you,” asked Matthew.

“Because it isn’t always the business owner’s fault. It’s our society,” Sarah explained.

The moment they returned to work, Matthew parted ways with her and explained to Tony, “That ticket you found in Sarah’s car fell loose from a bundle she had delivered to an orphanage. That’s why when you casually brought up the film she didn’t know what you were talking about.”

“She didn’t lie to me,” Tony concluded. “Sarah truly

hadn't seen the movie."

Matthew reasoned with him, "With all due respect, you have an incredible woman. Please try more talking, less stalking, and allow me to get back to my work."



Tony was able to sleep a little easier after declaring the truce with Russo. Tony slept a lot easier after Matthew reported that Sarah was being true.

Sarah, however, could not sleep well at all. Matthew's liquor had put her in a fever dream of days long past. It was twenty years ago that she held her mother's hand on the bustling dock.

"When can we board mamma," questioned eight-year-old Sarah.

Her mom bent down to her level and whispered sweetly, "Sarah baby, they must board all the white people first, and then we can board."

Evan, Sarah's slightly younger brother, huffed impatiently as a large group of white passengers arrived extremely late but were beckoned to the front of the line.

It was Evan's seventh birthday and he was so excited for this trip that before he could catch himself the words flew from his mouth, "What's so special about them?"

Thomas secured a hand over his son's mouth. He politely apologized to the white passersby who were now shooting daggers at them.

A woman in elegant white gloves and an expensive hat snarled at Tom and his wife before addressing her brother in law, "These Niggers don't train their children

with any respect for decent white folks.”

Sarah was shocked that such ugly words could burst from the mouth of such a proper and beautifully dressed lady. *Is Evan wrong for believing we should be treated the same as everyone else?*

It became obvious that the rude woman’s brother in law wasn’t from the United States when an unfamiliar accent rang from his mouth. He was not in agreement with his sister in law though the rest of their party was. The well-dressed passengers called him Mr. Cafero.

Sarah’s attention shifted to the sandy-haired boy who accompanied him. The child was near her age and his soft green eyes were fixed on her as if studying her. Mr. Cafero gently shuffled the boy forward. A string of friendly sounding words in another language flowed from Mr. Cafero’s mouth and Anthony laughed joyfully. The Caferos boarded the extravagant riverboat and entered the wealthy section. Trailing them was a party of at least a dozen finely dressed men and women.

With their absence, Sarah’s family advanced in line a few feet. Sarah’s mother, Trudy, sighed as she was forced to chastise the headstrong Evan for his safety, telling him that such thoughts of equality were still unsafe for colored folks. Slavery had long ended but this often placed black people in worse danger. Now they possessed no monetary value to their racist counterparts in the post-Civil War south. They were expendable. Another twenty minutes passed before they were finally at the front of the line. Sarah and Evan were bubbling with anticipation.

“What do you mean the price has gone up!”

Sarah looked up at the sound of her father’s agitated voice.

Thomas Brodeur questioned the weasel-faced ticket clerk, "Sir, I've been promising my children for almost a year to take them on the riverboat. When I finally have enough money saved you go and raise the prices. Please be reasonable. It's my little boy's birthday."

"Tom," his wife placed a hand on his shoulder, a sign to end his argument with a white man in public.

The ticket clerk spoke in a friendly voice as if doing them a favor, "you have enough for two tickets. You can send the kids aboard with one of our escorts."

Mrs. Brodeur gave her husband a glare that said HELL NO, but Sarah and Evan were jumping up and down shouting, "Please daddy please!"

Next came the large puppy dog eyes and the quivering bottom lips. Their angelic hands folded in a plea that rendered him unable to say no... as always.

"Who's the escort," Tom questioned.

The clerk pointed and Tom saw it was a nice black woman from church. He gave her a friendly wave and she waved back with a genuine smile.

"I'll have two tickets," Tom spoke in a small voice without looking at his wife, whom he knew was furious.

The clerk ripped the tickets and passed the stubs to Sarah and Evan who lauded their father the best fellow in the world. Tom at last looked at his wife. As expected, her arms were angrily crossed over her chest.

"Honey," Tom spoke meekly. "They'll be gone two hours tops and we know Berta."

"Okay Tom," Trudy agreed after a long silence.

Her heart lightened as she saw the utter happiness in Sarah and Evan's faces. They ran up the ramp, abruptly snatching their escort. With a wave and a grin to their ma

and pa, Sarah and Evan boarded the riverboat. The colored folks' section was not as luxurious but still rather breathtaking. They held the rail as the giant paddle at the back of the ship propelled them out on the water.

Meanwhile, Anthony's section was roomier and the refreshments were better, but for an eight-year-old boy, this cruise was a mind-numbing bore. He was surrounded by aristocrats who sent their kids off to boarding school or left them at home with nannies. Anthony was the only child in the wealthy section. The only passenger who acknowledged his existence was his father. If Anthony wanted children to play with, he would have to sneak off to the economy white section or the colored area. The moment his dad's back was turned, that's exactly what he did. Tony quickly observed that while the rich area had couples, the poor and colored areas had families.

"You talk funny," Sarah sneered as she, Evan, and Anthony sat at a table playing Go Fish.

"I'm from Italia," Anthony laughed. "Do you have any twos?"

"Go Fish," said Evan.

Anthony pulled a card from the stack. Evan granted him his undivided attention from the moment they met. Anthony told the funniest jokes and he generously shared the toys in his pack. Sarah wasn't so sure about him. She didn't like anyone stealing her brother's attention and this mischievous white boy might get them all in trouble by sneaking over here. She found it ironic that Evan chose a card game that was highly dependent on trust to play with a total stranger. In Go Fish, you had to trust your opponents to be honest about the cards they held. How could Sarah trust this funny talking stranger?

Her eyes narrowed on the brother stealing Anthony. “Do you have any tens?”

With a grin and no hesitation, he passed her a card adorned with ten hearts that allowed her to win the game. This earned him an earnest smile from her so beautiful that Anthony concluded the loss was worth it.

Evan laughed at him and shuffled the deck. “If you had lied about having a ten you might have won.”

“I did win,” Anthony spoke to Evan while gazing at Sarah, “she smiled at me.”

Sarah’s cheeks became rosy but she recovered quickly and spat, “You still talk funny.”

Evan laughed and dealt another hand that they never got to play. An explosion shook their world. The boards of their ship tore apart with a tortured scream. What remained of the ship was rapidly sinking. Sarah flailed against the current that was dragging her under. She thrashed about, coughing, and gagging on the water.

Just when she thought all was lost, she was saved from a watery grave by the funny talking boy. His native language rang from his mouth after pulling her from the murky depths. Anthony fought the strong current, towing Sarah as he swam. He repeated the same two lines that she couldn’t understand and yet drew comfort from. Sarah clung to him, a stranger, placing her life in his hands and praying that Evan was alright...

Sarah sprung up in bed screaming, drenched in a cold sweat. Tony bolted from down the hall. He burst into her chamber. Tears were pouring from her eyes. He wrapped her in an embrace, rocking his frightened girlfriend as her tears soaked the naked skin of his chest. He’d run from his bedroom to hers still wearing just his shorts.



He rubbed her back soothingly and placed kisses on the crown of her head. "It's okay."

She clung to him for dear life with the remnants of her nightmare still fresh in her mind. Evan's tiny lifeless body washed ashore that afternoon. Her beloved brother had drowned and Tony had lost his doting father. Tony lit the candle next to her bed casting the room in a soft orange glow. Then he held her agitated hands.

"Kiss me," Sarah spoke in a trembling voice.

She needed a distraction, an escape. She was shaking all over. Tony kissed his frantic lover until the bad images melted away. He wrapped her like a blanket until she was at peace. Tony planted a chaste peck upon Sarah's cheek.

"Are you alright?" He asked.

Tony seemed more like a buddy who had just done her a favor than a lover acting on passion.

She smiled and gave his cheek a friendly peck, nothing seductive. "Thank you."

"Anytime." Tony pulled a deck of cards from her bedside table and dealt them a hand.

A different man might have made love to a scantily clad woman who was giving him passionate kisses but Tony chose to play cards and Sarah had given up on turning Tony into someone else. She and Tony had always been more like best friends than lovers. It was admittedly an odd relationship but it was theirs.

She asked as he dealt the cards, "Your loss that day was even greater than my own. How do you cope?"

The truth was something broke in Tony that day. A seed of darkness was planted. Fate had dealt him so much worse than a shipwreck. It was the making of a mobster.

Tony gingerly brushed Sarah's cheek and told the

half-truth, “I cope by remembering that though I lost my father, I gained a family. My aunt abandoned me the moment she got her claws on my trust fund. Your folks saw me begging on the streets and took me in.”

“It helped my momma and papa heal when they saw Evan’s room occupied again, heard a little boy’s laughter again, but for me, it was like a knife to the heart. I resented you but I’ll never forget what you said.”

“I will never replace your brother but I would like to be your friend,” Tony quoted himself.

Sarah smiled at the thought of Tony remembering the glorious day they became pals. She picked up her cards and he did the same. The two of them engaged in a friendly and honest game of Go Fish.

The moment Sarah was asleep, Tony pulled the blanket up to her chin and kissed her forehead. He tiptoed downstairs to call a number he knew by heart. Tony picked up the shiny black receiver as he spun the rotary dial on its base. The brothel answered and like always he asked for Charlotte. The waitress and the flapper that he humped in the bathroom were poor substitutes for his favorite buccaneer.

“We can’t sleep together anymore,” Charlotte told him bluntly. “Imagine my shame when I found out that my best customer was my best friend’s guy.”

Tony had no excuse for his lies so he told her the only thing he could, “I love you, Charlotte.”

“Then why not end things with Sarah?”

“I love her too,” he confessed. “I don’t expect you to understand but she is one half of my heart and you are the other. I can’t live with half my heart. If I leave Sarah for her best friend she may never speak to me again. Her

parents, which may as well be my parents, will disown me. Would you have me lose my entire family?"

Charlotte closed her eyes to cap her tears. "You're a mess and you're selfish but I love you."

His mouth curved in a satisfied smile. "I know."

She sighed, "How can you be so selfish and face your reflection in the mirror?"

His expression became serious as he pleaded with her, "I wish that I wasn't in love with two women."

"That's where you're wrong, Tony," she replied. "You are in love with me. You are obsessed with Sarah and you're too damn stupid to know the difference."

The phone went dead. He knew there was no point in calling back but this wasn't a defeat. Half the battle was getting Charlotte to admit that she still cared. Neither his feelings nor Charlotte's would change the fact that he had every intention of marrying Sarah. Tony would brutally murder anyone who stood in the way of that goal.

Charlotte lied awake staring at the ceiling. She didn't have time for Tony's mind games. There were more important matters troubling her. She called back and Tony grabbed the phone before the ringing woke Sarah.

He whisper-yelled, "You nearly woke my girl!"

"I didn't call about us," said Charlotte. "There is no us. Consider this a business call from an employee."

Those words hurt badly enough to make his green eyes shimmer with tears, though he was too hardened by life to allow any to fall.

"What do you need?" he asked begrudgingly.

Charlotte told the secret that would not let her rest, "Four years ago, a fancy car pulled over and invited me to climb in. He was a gentleman. He bought me a lovely

dress and took me to the opera. He invited me to a lavish dinner. I felt like a princess. He was a real Prince Charming who yearned to know everything about me. I found myself sharing things I had never told anyone. It was a perfect evening until the ride home. He pulled over on a dark road and attacked me, suddenly and without provocation. As the car shook with violence and his hands squeezed my throat the only thing within view was a beautiful engraving. It was on something shiny that dangled from his rearview mirror. I stared at it until I lost consciousness and I never saw it again until recently.”

“Where did you see it?” Tony insisted. “If there’s a Jack the Ripper stalking the streets of Detroit he must be stopped.”

“I saw that crest on the watch of your new bootlegger,” Charlotte confessed.

“You’re not making sense!” Tony shouted. “It couldn’t have been the same crest.”

“I thought that symbol was going to be the last thing I ever saw! I couldn’t forget it if I tried. It is branded on my mind. As I live and breathe it was the same crest!”

“I want to believe you but four years ago Matthew was a fourteen-year-old kid with a broken arm. He couldn’t have done this.”

“I never said he did,” Charlotte explained. “After Prince Charming thought I was dead he kicked me out of the car. When I regained consciousness one of my earrings was missing. Either I lost it in the struggle or...”

“He takes trophies from his kills,” Tony concluded. “You didn’t see Matthew’s watch that night. You saw something that belonged to another relative... his sister.”

## CHAPTER 6:

### Declaration of War

Sarah shrieked in terror and ran for her life. Matthew dropped his tools and drew his gun. He stalked through the aisles prepared to kill whoever was chasing her but it was just a bee. The creature had smelled the sugary wines and floated into the warehouse.

Matthew couldn't help but laugh as he put his gun away. "I can't believe the fearless Sarah Brodeur is running from a tiny bumblebee."

She heaved breathlessly, "That thing... could kill me... very allergic."

Matthew trapped it in a jar and released it outside. He closed the bay doors.

"My hero," Sarah grinned.

Matthew admitted, "I've heard rumors of such ailments but never met anyone affected by them."

She showed him a syringe. "This miracle drug is extracted from the kidney of a racehorse. If I ever get

stung I have mere seconds to inject myself.”

Matthew was astonished, “I didn’t know horse piss was a medicine.”

“It’s not piss!” Sarah laughed. “It’s something else, begins with an ‘A’. I can’t recall the name of it.”

“That fancy pants doctor is a charlatan who sold you piss,” Matthew chuckled.

Sarah shook her head at him, “Go ahead, laugh it up, but this ‘piss’ is a lifesaver. I got stung when I was a girl. I couldn’t breathe. I thought I would die until the school nurse injected me.”

“And it worked?”

“Like a heart-pounding, thought racing, dream,” Sarah kissed the syringe and put it away.

Matthew stood before her pleasantly stunned. “I can’t believe you have a weakness.”

Sarah teased him, “and what’s your weakness, Mr. Perfect?”

*I thought that was fairly obvious.* Matthew thought to himself as he gazed at her lovely forbidden lips, the delicate lines of her neck, and the delicious curves of her body.

He had two weaknesses but for obvious reasons he could only confess one, “I don’t like small spaces. It makes me feel like I’m in a coffin.”

“Is that why you always take the stairs rather than the lift,” Sarah questioned.

Matthew nodded. He was pleased to know that she watched him as much as he watched her.

“I suppose it’s a blessing that you were unconscious before I stuffed you into that trunk,” she joked.

“I would have lost my mind,” Matthew admitted with

a charming smile.

There it was again, that look he gave her whenever they were alone. Sarah had stayed up many a night contemplating the meaning behind that look. Did Matthew desire her or did he merely enjoy toying with her? Before Sarah could make heads or tails of Matthew's body language, Tony entered the warehouse.

"I need to borrow my lady for a moment," said Tony.

"Of course," Matthew replied.

Sarah called over her shoulder, "By the way, piss comes from the bladder, not the kidney. You are the dumbest smart person I've ever met."

"Was that half a compliment? I'll take it," Matthew yelled after her.

Sarah shook her head with amusement and walked away with Tony. A dark cloud overshadowed her happy mood when she noticed how troubled Tony was. On the way to his office, he confessed what Charlotte had told him. Sarah left to have a chat with her and returned promptly.

Sarah sat in Tony's office and offered up her theory, "I thought about it and I couldn't figure out how Matthew ended up with Russo, to begin with. An unknown country boy would have never been discovered by a Detroit gangster at the opposite end of the country unless that gangster had spoken to someone who knew the boy. Charlotte admitted that Prince Charming was a real smooth talker. He had a way of getting people to open up to him. What if Matthew's sister, Nicole, started bragging about her talented brother? Next thing you know she's dead and Matthew has been recruited."

"You think Russo knows the killer?" asked Tony.

“Worse, I believe the killer is a member of his crew,” Sarah explained. “I showed Charlotte the photo book of our rival’s well-known associates. She identified this man.”

Sarah pushed the open album across his desk.

Tony’s eyes bulged and he released an exasperated breath, “under no circumstances are you to tell Matthew.”

Sarah’s face twisted in anger. It looked like she was sucking on lemons. “How can you even consider withholding this information from him? These people enslaved him and murdered his sister.”

“You don’t even like Matthew,” Tony protested.

“That’s beside the point,” Sarah shrugged. “This is business.”

“And it’s bad for business to give my best brewer information that will enrage him to confront dangerous men,” Tony insisted. “Matthew will get himself killed or go to prison for killing them. That’s the best scenario. The worst and far more likely scenario is that we end up at war with Russo’s clan because we broke the damn treaty. Many will die for the sake of a girl we can’t bring back.”

“Russo doesn’t give a damn about his employees,” Sarah insisted. “He won’t declare war over one guy.”

“This isn’t some random employee,” Tony explained. “It’s Angelo Prince, his favorite nephew.”

Sarah smacked her forehead with her palm. “We’re damned if we do and we’re damned if we don’t. If this information comes to light by other means and Matthew finds out we knew all along, we will lose him forever. He’ll still go after Russo’s nephew, and we’ll still find ourselves in a war. Not to mention, the longer we wait the more women are butchered by this monster. Perhaps I can



go to the police, just this once. They may not like us but they'll want to see a predator off the streets."

"I already spoke to the cops," Tony confessed. "They are unwilling to arrest a prominent citizen on the word of a whore but they assured me if he was to come up missing they wouldn't do much digging into the matter."

Sarah gasped, "They told you to kill him."

"In so many words, yes," Tony nodded. "This life comes at a steep price. We cannot live outside of the law and then expect law enforcement to come to our aid. Russo's nephew kills prostitutes. He's performing a public service as far as the law is concerned."

"Perhaps we can appeal to Russo's human side," Sarah offered. "Russo could have Prince committed to an asylum for the rest of his life. He's clearly a loon."

"Russo doesn't want a disgruntled employee any more than we do. There is such a thing as mutual destruction. If Russo has his nephew committed, the feds will flip him like a pancake. Russo and his entire crew will go to the slammer. Do you believe Russo will risk it all to save a few sex workers?"

"You're right," she agreed. "We're on our own."

Tony took Sarah's hand and guided her around the desk to rest on his lap.

He wrapped his arms around her and explained their predicament, "I love you and I value your opinion above all others. Given that any decision I make will have dire consequences, what would you suggest I do?"

"I am no fan of Matthew," Sarah admitted. "He can be stubborn, rude, and he rushes to judgment but he's also loyal, decent, and protective of others. He has a good heart. I can't imagine what it must be like for him to live

with such questions haunting him. To walk down the street and see Nicole's murderer in the face of every man that passes by. I can't imagine the pain of never trusting anyone, never allowing anyone to get close to you. He smiles but there's sadness behind it. If we will face consequences either way. My suggestion is to give this young man some peace and take a killer off the streets."

Sarah fingered the dragon on Tony's pinky ring. It had two rubies for eyes and it was all that was left of his father.

"Do you think he would have liked me?" she asked.

"I know he would have loved you," Tony swore.

She kissed his treasured ring and left him to think things over.



Later that day, Tiger stadium roared to life. There wasn't an empty seat in the arena. The air bore the scent of freshly clipped grass, buttery popcorn, and mouth-watering hotdogs. Matthew sat beneath a sunny sky with a box of Cracker Jack in one hand and a sack of autographed baseballs in the other.

Tony pulled some strings and got the Detroit Tigers entire team to sign one ball and the New York Yankees entire team to sign another. Matthew would treasure these gifts for all time. He wasn't born in either state so he had no strong allegiance to either team. He just loved baseball and he found himself cheering for both sides.

Matthew finished his sweet popcorn and dug for the prize. He laughed at the sight of a tiny Gladiator with a

raised sword.

“What’s so amusing?” asked Tony.

“Nothing,” Matthew nervously insisted and tucked the figurine into his pocket.

Announcers called out stats as the great Babe Ruth stepped up to the plate. Matthew was on the edge of his seat. His eyes were glued to the diamond.

“STRIKE ONE!” called the umpire after a mighty swing and a miss.

A second pitch flew at the speed of light. The bat struck it like a crack of lightning. He knocked it out of the park. The crowd went wild.

Matthew sprung to his feet cheering so loud he thought he would lose his voice. Tiger fans pelted him with peanuts but it was worth it. He knew they would forgive him the moment he returned to cheering for their all-star, Mickey Cochrane.

They rolled into the seventh inning of this riveting game and now the Tigers were up to bat. As predicted, Cochrane pulverized the ball. Tiger stadium erupted in a cheerful rendition of *Take Me Out to the Ballgame*. Matthew sang along with the crowd. He was unable to believe how quiet and reserved Tony was when it was his idea to see the game.

Tony’s father had always treated him to a game whenever he had serious news. Tony found out that his mother went to heaven at a game. He found out they were moving to America at a game. So it was here at Tiger Stadium that Tony chose to break the news to Matthew.

“We need to talk,” said Tony. “Please know that I didn’t want to hurt you like this.”

Matthew did not care for his sullen tone. “Are we

breaking up? Did you bring me to the ballgame so I wouldn't make a scene? Have you been seeing another brewer?"

Tony laughed despite these dire circumstances. "You know you're the only one for me."

Matthew shook with laughter, "Then what do we need to discuss?"

Tony pulled the photo book from beneath his seat and whispered, "what I'm about to say will raise some emotions but you must remain calm."

Matthew's heart sank. "Is this about Nicole?"

Tony nodded, "Charlotte pointed out a man that tried to kill her in a similar manner that your sister passed away. Before I condemn a man I prefer to make sure he's guilty. Killing does not come easy for me, despite the nasty rumors you might have heard. Sarah is convinced that Russo didn't find you by accident. He found you because your sister bragged about you to one of his men. The same man who beat Charlotte to within an inch of her life and left her for dead. So which one of Russo's butchers came to Louisiana to recruit you?"

Fury in its purest form made the veins on Matthew's temples pulsate. He'd never felt such rage but he bottled it for the greater good. Matthew flipped through the album of grainy pictures, carefully studying each face. He pointed at a photo of Angelo Prince. "That was the guy. He was a real smooth talker."

Tony tried to calm Matthew before he went off the rails, "I know that couldn't have been easy for you but I swear we will get him. Do not act rashly."

"Then what would you have me do!" Matthew shouted loud enough to make the baseball fans turn and

look.

Tony calmly insisted, “We are going to watch the final innings of this game while we think of a plan that won’t leave countless bodies on the ground.” Tony removed his pinky ring and placed it in Matthew’s palm. “It belonged to my father and I don’t part with it lightly. I was hungry living on the streets and I chose to stand in bread lines rather than sell it. I want you to hang onto it until you get justice.”

“I can’t keep your ring,” Matthew insisted.

Tony assured him, “You won’t.”

An usher tapped Tony on the shoulder to inform him he had a phone call. Matthew rose with him. They scooted past the people in their aisle begging pardons along the way. They arrived at the ticket booth and the clerk passed the receiver to Tony.

“Did you think I wouldn’t find out?” said the ominous voice on the phone.

“Who is this?” Tony demanded.

“Vincent Russo,” declared the voice. “I have ears at the police station. It takes a low down dirty rat to try and have my nephew locked in a cage for the rest of his life just to hurt me!”

“That wasn’t personal. Your nephew has serious issues. He’s sick. He needs help or a prison cell,” Tony swore.

Russo didn’t believe a word of it. “As if poaching my bootlegger wasn’t bad enough.”

Tony vowed, “I poached no one. I liberated a slave.”

“Well, he wasn’t your slave! Now you have the nerve to falsely accuse my nephew of murder. So I took your black harlot. Feisty bitch she was. Killed five of my men.”

Matthew watched all the color drain from Tony's face.

"If you hurt Sarah I will consider it a declaration of war," Tony growled.

Russo stopped him mid threat and gave one of his own, "I want my bootlegger back by tomorrow at sundown or the harpy dies."

Matthew and Tony ran to the parking lot and jumped in the car. Matthew had caught enough pieces of the conversation to know all hell was breaking loose.

As they raced down the street he informed Tony, "I understand that you have to give me up."

Tony shook his head no, "Do you believe Sarah would want me after finding out that I sold a man into slavery to free her?"

"She doesn't even like me," Matthew insisted.

"Sarah was the one who convinced me to tell you the truth," Tony confessed. "I didn't want my prized brewer distracted by thoughts of vengeance but she insisted I grant you the peace and justice you deserve. Sarah doesn't have to like a man to respect him and she will cease to respect me if I give you up. You're one of us."

Even under the worst circumstances, it felt good to belong somewhere and be a part of something.

"I'm going with you," Matthew insisted.

"No you're not," said Tony. "I'm going to the safe house to pick up three hitters and I'm leaving you there until this blows over."

The young bootlegger rode quietly with no intention of following this order. Matthew would bring Sarah home or die trying...

## CHAPTER 7:

### For all of Infinity

**M**atthew and Tony arrived at a quaint little ranch outside of the city. Three infamous bank robbers were laying low in Tony's hideout, John Dillinger, Baby Face Nelson, and Pretty Boy Floyd. These bad boys weren't from Michigan but they were masters of the prison break. Tony would need their help if he had any hope of getting Sarah back. Within minutes of a hurried explanation and cash exchanging hands, there was an arsenal laid out on the table, from Thompson submachine guns to grenades.

Dillinger planted a kiss on a beautiful woman whose skin bore a lovely tan. Then he gathered around the table and armed himself for battle. There were a lot of metallic clicks from loading bullets and clips into their weapons.

Dillinger loaded the hundred round drum magazine into his Tommy gun. "Let's wrap up this rescue. I promised Billie we'd visit her people on the Menominee

Reservation.”

Matthew’s jaw dropped, “She’s an Indian? I thought that tan came from Sicily.”

Dillinger laughed, “Spoken like a true southerner. Where are you from?”

“Louisiana, thirty miles outside of Baton Rouge,” Matthew answered.

Dillinger strapped a pistol into his holster and told Matthew, “I bet a country boy like you sees Cafero with a black girl and me with a red girl and it’s confusing. It makes you wonder what the hell is up with gangsters and colored women. To which I say why would men who break every societal rule continue to abide by the most asinine rule of all. We’re all the same, son. It’s next to impossible to find someone you truly connect with and if you pass her by for something as trivial as skin color you do not deserve her.”

“I never thought of it that way. I don’t have much experience with women,” Matthew whispered to avoid looking weak in front of the other gangsters. “Quite frankly, you’re the last man I expected to say such things. I’m shocked you’re involved with someone. I assumed you’d be leaving a trail of broken hearts.”

Dillinger laughed and shook his head, “that’s because you read too many newspapers. Nelson is married. Floyd is married and has a son. I am in a relationship. The world has labeled us public enemies, but everyone is someone else’s monster. Even the founding fathers of this country were monsters to the red men they slaughtered and the black men they enslaved. The press will never tell you that Floyd burns mortgage papers during his bank robberies and he gives money and food to the poor. These truths are



ripped from the narrative because most people would refuse to turn in Robinhood. J. Edgar Hoover and his Bureau of Investigation will never tell you that Nelson has a wife that he loves very much. I have a woman that I love very much. These details are hidden from the narrative and replaced by flirty nicknames like ‘Babyface’ & ‘Pretty Boy’ because your average woman has been scorned at least once in her life and it’s easier to turn in a man who looks like a philandering heartbreaker.”

Matthew looked up to find Floyd and Nelson nodding in agreement.

“We didn’t choose these nicknames,” Floyd declared.

“In fact, we detest them,” Nelson admitted.

Matthew couldn’t believe he was having a conversation about love with unrepentant criminals. These men had robbed banks, broken out of prisons, and sometimes killed the police who were hunting them, yet every one of these notorious men agreed that love was the most powerful force in the world.

Even Tony was in the next room on his knees praying in Latin and crossing himself. Before this moment Matthew never knew his boss was Catholic. The only word Matthew could understand from Tony’s conversation with God was the name Sarah. This prayer was for Sarah.

Matthew was speechless. *How can these monsters be so human?*

Dillinger asked him, “You ever been in love?”

Matthew wasn’t sure. “How would I know if I was, Mr. Dillinger?”

“Because you’d die for her without giving a thought

to her past, her dowry, or what color God painted her.”

Matthew quietly reflected on Dillinger’s words while the others plotted an assault. The hour was drawing close.

The gangsters looked up at the neighing of a horse and the galloping of hooves. They ran to the window as the stallion vanished into a cloud of dust.

Tony and the others rushed outside to catch Matthew before he did something stupid but he’d flattened the tires on all the cars. He’d cut the phone line so they couldn’t dial another ride. They were stranded.

“Did that fool ride off on a white horse?” asked Nelson.

“He’s been a slave since the age of fifteen. He probably never learned how to drive, but every country boy knows how to ride,” Tony explained and plucked a note from under his windshield wiper:

*Dear Tony,*

*I don’t know which of Sarah’s captors is the greater threat to her life, the scorned mob boss or the rapist who beats women to a pulp. If Sarah suffers Nicole’s fate because I did nothing to stop it I won’t be able to live with myself. I am aware that you were storming into battle to prevent such an outcome but please understand that I don’t want y’all dying in a shootout. A bullet has no one’s name on it. If Sarah was harmed by a ricochet I’m not sure what I’d do. I’m no fan of her. She’s mouthy, stubborn, and doesn’t know her place but as you mentioned I don’t have to like a woman to respect her. Thank you for your friendship and please forgive me.*

*-Matthew*

Matthew galloped through the city as storm clouds darkened the sky. Drivers stomped their brakes and spun their heads to look at him. He was mounted on a steed like a knight of old racing to save a woman whose name meant princess. This was a twisted fairytale and somehow it felt normal and familiar like he'd done it before.

Of all the times he envisioned his end it was never like this: dropping dead after fifty years of enslavement because he traded his life for a colored girl. Even the most imaginative poets could not have perceived such a fate but there he was.

Matthew was pelted with stinging drops of rain but it didn't slow the stride of his horse. Danger heightened his senses. Every sound, sight, and smell was magnified tenfold. Rivers formed at each side of the road and flowed into the gutters. Lightning split the sky. Thunder rumbled beneath the hooves of his horse, but he rode onward. Matthew trotted up an abandoned road.

He dismounted the stallion and cautiously approached with his hands up. "I don't want trouble. I'm here to trade myself for the girl."

Russo's goons patted Matthew down and stripped him of his weapons. Rain streamed down his face as he waited for Sarah to appear. They pulled a blindfolded Sarah out of the car at the opposite end of the street.

Russo instructed her, "Walk fifty paces straight ahead. My men will put you in an automobile. There you will wait five minutes for everyone to leave before removing your blindfold and driving away. If you take off your blindfold too soon you will see our faces and I'll

have to kill you. Then Tony will retaliate and I'll have to kill him. Do you understand?"

Sarah knew it would not be in her best interest to tell Russo that she already had an entire photo book full of their faces. She complied with his commands and began her walk.

A shove in the back told Matthew to start stepping. The prisoners were about to pass each other when Sarah lost her footing in a pothole. Matthew's arms launched out to catch her. When she was stable she felt the dragon ring on his pinky.

"Tony?" Sarah exclaimed with tears soaking her blindfold.

Before Matthew could tell her otherwise, she had snatched him into a kiss that was like a star exploding into a nebula. It was beautiful and infinite. Matthew reciprocated her passion without guilt. If he was bound to a life of slavery and no love, then damn it he was going to enjoy one kiss. It was a stolen embrace under false pretenses but he couldn't care about that as his tongue danced in her mouth. She placed his hands on her voluptuous body and he indulged her with tender caresses. Sarah gave as good as she got so Matthew refused to feel shame for an act committed with shared enjoyment and fiery passion.

Russo's men pulled them away from each other. Matthew knew that reaching into his pocket would certainly get him shot so he asked one of the thugs to retrieve the figurine. They stuffed Sarah into an empty vehicle and placed the gladiator in her hands. Then they sped off in another car with Matthew.

Russo shook his head with amusement, "Was that

Cafero's girl you were playing tonsil hockey with?"

Matthew defended himself, "She assumed I was Tony and kissed me."

"You didn't put up much of a fight," Russo scoffed.

"There were a lot of men aiming guns at us. I certainly wasn't going to make any sudden moves or protests that could get us shot," Matthew explained. "I caused no harm by kissing a woman I will never see again."

"On that last part you are correct," said Russo. "You won't be seeing her again because you are facing the firing squad at dawn."

Matthew was horrified and stunned by the death sentence. "I did what you asked of me."

Russo, unburdened by the prospect of murdering an innocent man, explained, "three of my best whores felt emboldened to run off after you left. An example must be made. I'll bet you wish you knew the conditions of your surrender before throwing your life away for a spade."

"Knowing would have changed nothing. I would have done so anyway." Matthew watched two raindrops race each other down the window as he rode to his death.

They brought Matthew to an abandoned factory that wreaked of dead animals and bat droppings. A haven that once served as a means for men to provide for their families now served as a refuge for scurrying rats and cooing pigeons. More of the windows were broken than not. Sky vermin flew back and forth in an aerial ballet, dropping poop and sometimes eggs along the way. Every few minutes the rats would peek out of the shadows to see if he was dead so they could feast on his remains.

Matthew stamped his foot to scare them away. "You can't have me yet!"

That outburst sent the pigeons at his feet fluttering away. Matthew replaced these terrible images with thoughts of Sarah. He recalled her soft curves, the taste of her kiss, what he would do to her with a little more privacy, and a lot more time. It was wrong to think of a friend's lady naked, to envision rolling around in the sheets with her, to wonder what might have happened if Charlotte hadn't interrupted at the bar. These fantasies were traitorous but Matthew was dying. He'd never be able to act on them so was he hurting anyone?

Angelo Prince floated into the factory with the gait of true royalty. His hair was the color of sunshine. His eyes were as gray as a storm hovering over the sea. He told his uncle's henchmen to scam. They marched out obediently.

Prince spoke kindly to Matthew, "Is there a note you want delivered to your mother?"

Matthew snarled like an angry pitbull, "I don't want you near my family."

"I could mail it," Prince offered politely.

"Which would give you their new address and enable you to recruit one of my brothers to replace me. I'm not an idiot," Matthew snapped.

"I'm just trying to be decent, Matthew."

"You don't know the meaning of the word."

"Says the scoundrel who laid a lip lock on Cafero's girl," Prince taunted him. "That's messed up. I thought you were friends."

The shame that Matthew had managed to suppress thus far manifested into a single tear that trickled down his cheek.

Prince continued to humiliate him, as if a death

sentence wasn't bad enough, "If you were curious about colored snatch why didn't you take your prick to the brothel?"

Matthew looked away in disgrace with a damning silence that spoke volumes.

"Holy smokes!" An amused grin emerged on Prince's face. "You didn't kiss her out of curiosity. You did it for the same reason you gave yourself up. You're in love with her." Prince cackled like a hyena for so long pain stabbed at his sides and tears of amusement filled his eyes. "I have half a mind to beg Uncle Rus to let you go. You're about to get yourself killed anyway."

"Are you done!" Matthew snapped.

"I came to offer you a blindfold for tomorrow so you won't piss your pants when you're staring at the wrong end of twelve rifles," Prince insisted.

"Sorry to disappoint you but I will be staring at your treacherous face as you pull the trigger. If you're gonna kill me you'll have to face me."

"I like you, Matthew. Your death will trouble me. I won't be taking part in it," Prince swore.

Matthew rolled his eyes, "Of course you won't. Using a rifle from yards away isn't personal enough. Your preference is killing with your bare hands. You get your jollies squeezing her throat as you smell her, and rape her, and watch the light go out in her eyes!"

Prince was shaken by Matthew's words. "I don't know what it is you think you know about me."

"I know what you are," Matthew bore into him with an arctic stare. "More importantly, Tony knows what you are and he's coming for you. Russo believes three of his prostitutes ran away because of me, but you and I know

the truth. You killed those women and you're too cowardly to admit it so I must die for your crimes.”

Prince backed away so frantically that he tripped over a dead raccoon and went sprawling to the ground. He picked himself up and hurried out the door.

Matthew was left alone for the next few hours with nothing but his regrets. He couldn't draw comfort from thoughts of Sarah after Prince made him feel so ashamed, so unworthy of her love, and so undeserving of Tony's friendship.



## CHAPTER 8: The Standoff

**T**ony sat by his office phone praying for Russo to call with ransom demands. Tony gave Matthew's note to Sarah as proof that he did not sacrifice the boy.

Sarah sat in Charlotte's room clutching the gladiator toy and reading Matthew's letter over and over. Sarah hoped that some small clue in the letter would lead to Matthew, but all she saw was a goodbye.

"That boy has got it bad," Charlotte warned as she sat next to Sarah. "If you ever see him again you should fire him for his own good."

Sarah reminded her, "Matthew insulted me three times in one paragraph. He called me mouthy, stubborn, and claimed I didn't know my place. From the moment we met, he was very clear about his preference for white girls who are virgins. I am neither."

"And despite all that, he galloped through a storm like

a knight and sacrificed himself for you,” Charlotte replied.

“He isn’t in love with me. He is loyal to the crew. We don’t repay loyalty by firing a man while the country is in a recession,” Sarah explained. “I am beyond grateful for his loyalty. Matthew had admirable courage to do what he did. I must figure out what Russo has done with him.”

Charlotte was already ranting love conspiracies so Sarah didn’t mention the accidental kiss. Sarah had yet to figure out if Matthew tolerated that kiss to keep the gunmen calm or if he enjoyed it. Then there was the gladiator. What was that about? Was it a lewd joke to cheer up a friend or a vow to be her warrior for all of infinity? Either way, Sarah would not let her mind go to such a forbidden place.

Charlotte insisted, “I’m not saying that you shouldn’t save the boy. If anyone deserves a rescue it’s Matthew. All I’m asking you to do is ship him home to Louisiana.”

“There’s no work in Louisiana, which is how Matthew, Tony, and I ended up here. Now relax Charlotte.” Sarah waved Matthew’s letter in her face and insisted, “No man expresses love through insults.”

“Has it occurred to you that Matthew may have insulted you because he knew Tony would be the first to read this letter? If you care for a woman the last thing you want to do is make her possessive, criminal, boyfriend suspicious of her.”

Sarah recalled the time she and Matthew were flirting at the bar. She brushed him off and called him a child the moment Charlotte arrived. Then Sarah remembered the time she and Matthew were flirting in the warehouse and she called him dumb when Tony walked in. Had Matthew

been doing the same thing?

Charlotte went on to say, “When you fancy someone the easiest way to negate the suspicions of others is to insult the object of your affection.”

“Good point,” Sarah was forced to admit. “I will keep my distance but I cannot fire Matthew right away. As you so eloquently stated, I have a possessive, criminal, boyfriend. To get rid of an asset with loyalty and talent for no apparent reason would cause even greater suspicion. Tony would arrive at the same conclusion you did... or worse and all hell would break loose.”

“Good point,” Charlotte admitted.

“Tobacco Ben claims they never brought Matthew back to the distillery, so where is he?” Sarah questioned.

Charlotte went over the grim possibilities, “They won’t place a young man in the brothel. They can’t make him a guard because they don’t trust him enough to arm him. They won’t have him work in the club for fear that he will cause a commotion and run away under the cover of chaos. If they’re not going to put Matthew to work and they won’t ransom him they intend to kill him...”



Sarah called a meeting with Ben and the crew to decide the best course of action. Tony, Sarah, Charlotte, and others surrounded a table and watched Ben draw a map of Matthew’s location. Ben pointed to the most vulnerable places to breach.

Tony glared at him with skepticism, “How do we know you’re not leading us to slaughter?”

Tobacco Ben pulled a photo from his wallet. His large muscular arms were wrapped around a beautiful girl who was showing off an engagement ring.

Ben explained, "We were going to be married before Russo took her." Ben pulled out a flyer from Russo's brothel with the same girl in a group photo with prostitutes. "Her name is Elaine and she's been devalued to no more than a number on a brothel door, number six. Now I'm sorry I went after Sarah but I needed that bounty to buy Elaine's freedom."

Tony nodded understandably and pulled out his wallet, "How much do I owe you for this information?"

Ben insisted, "I require no payment, Mr. Cafero. I'm only asking for assistance in liberating the brothel. If you're going to war anyway why not free these women?"

Tony confessed, "I have every intention of avoiding war to preserve lives but I will personally buy your lady's freedom."

"Thank you, Mr. Cafero," said Ben.

Tony addressed his crew, "Your lives matter to me. Your opinions matter to me but bear in mind that Matthew's liquor keeps food on your children's plates at a time when the rest of the country is struggling. Russo intends to chop the head off our golden goose. If Russo forces my hand and refuses to give up Matthew shall we go to battle?"

Nods of agreement bounced from one head to the next. They strapped on their weapons and prepared for war...



First morning's light shined through the busted windows of the factory. It warmed Matthew's face and his eyes blinked open. He couldn't recall when he fell asleep but he was grateful to have spent one less hour fearing the painful slaughter to come.

Hard soled shoes stomped over the floor as Russo's gunmen marched in to retrieve him. It was time to face the fire. Matthew, defiant to the end, refused to give them the satisfaction of watching him cry and beg. He was determined to face his end like a warrior. The pain of being shot to death would be excruciating but at least it would be brief. He kept his head up. This would all be over soon.

The abandoned factory formed a 'u' with two other buildings. Matthew took his final march down the center of that 'u', or as Russo's forced laborers called it: The Valley of the Shadow of Death. There was a tower to his left and one to his right. Matthew saw terrified faces looking down from the windows of each building. They wept for him and pleaded for Russo to show mercy. Every one of these people were strong-armed into working for Russo and never allowed to leave, just as Ben and Matthew had been.

The male workers pleaded that Matthew was kidnapped and this wasn't his fault. The female workers cried out that he was just a boy and deserved a second chance. Russo turned a deaf ear to everyone. He ordered his henchmen to stand Matthew against the wall, a dead-

end from which there was no escape. Matthew's mouth went dry. He could hear his own heart pounding. Nerves made vomit rise to the back of his throat, threatening to spew. Matthew fought the urge to spill his last meal. These monsters were taking his life. He'd be damned if they robbed him of his dignity too.

Russo whispered to Matthew, "This isn't personal kid. It's just business. Do you have any last words?"

"Yes, but they would only pose a risk to the woman I love so I'll keep them to myself," Matthew replied.

The execution squad got into military formation with rifles at the ready. They awaited Russo's signal.

A voice echoed from above, "I'm here for the boy, just the boy. Nobody has to die."

All eyes and rifles turned toward the rooftops. Tony and his gunmen were perched on all three buildings with guns aimed at Russo's men.

Russo and his crew refused to lay down arms despite their disadvantage. They started firing on Tony's men who retaliated by raining grenades from the rooftops.

Matthew hit the deck. Blood and dismembered body parts rained from the sky. Matthew slithered through the muck and grabbed discarded weapons. He came up blasting at the hitters who were shooting at him.

"Into the sewer, Matthew!" Tony ordered and laid down fire on his enemies to cover him.

Matthew pried up the heavy metal disk that covered the sewer entrance. He jumped inside before the spray of bullets took him down.

Sarah punched, knifed, and shot her way through a flood of henchmen charging onto the roof. She moved with the speed of an arrow and the agility of an acrobat.

Many fell before her blades.

Tony blasted through his opponents with a pump-action shotgun. Once it was spent he jabbed a guy in the gut with it and batted him off the roof. Tony retrieved a submachine gun and released rapid fire, shredding his enemies.

Dillinger, Floyd, and Nelson were mowing down henchmen on top of another building. Their tactical skills and marksmanship had not been exaggerated by the press. They were proper warriors.

Tony instructed Sarah, “Ben said that tunnel lets out on Groesbeck Highway, three blocks from here. Go pick up Matthew.”

“We’re in the middle of a battle!” Sarah shouted as she continued to slice, stab, and maim. “I’m not leaving you! Matthew can hide until we are both free to retrieve him.”

“That’s an order!” Tony shouted. “I didn’t get you back just to watch you die on a rooftop! Please do as I ask!”

Sarah nodded with tears in her eyes. Tony covered her journey as she fled down the fire escape.



Ben was beating the daylights out of Russo’s soldiers and launching them out the windows. Charlotte marched at his side laying down fire and slicing people with her sword. What customers had assumed was just a prop for her pirate costume, was actually a deadly weapon that Charlotte had become quite skilled in wielding. She and

Ben left a trail of dead and dying as they liberated the brothel. They got the women out safely and Ben returned to the loving arms of his precious Elaine. They were barely in the getaway vehicle before he placed the ring back on her finger to reclaim her.

Elaine wept, “We can no longer wed. You don’t know what I’ve had to do.”

“No worse than what I had to do to bring you back to me,” Ben kissed her and held her close, determined to never lose sight of her again. “You are mine and I am yours.”



Matthew trudged and splashed through a foot of God knows what. He hugged a filthy wall as his pursuers fired upon him. The darkened tunnel lit up with muzzle flair. Matthew was lucky to not have been taken out by a direct hit or a ricochet. When the henchmen paused to reload Matthew seized the opportunity. He spun out of hiding and unleashed a flood of bullets that found their mark.

When Sarah noticed the sewer cover beginning to wiggle she dropped to her knees and assisted Matthew in prying it off. She yanked him out of the hole as gunshots rang around his dangling feet. They leaped into the car and sped off.

Out of nowhere, a police cruiser opened fire on them.

“The cops are shooting at us!” Matthew shouted.

“Then shoot back before they kill us!” Sarah screamed.

Matthew hesitated.



Sarah hollered at him, “I don’t have time for one of your moral dilemmas! I cannot drive and shoot! Those policemen are in Russo’s pocket! How do you think they arrived so fast? How do you think Russo found out Tony tried to have Prince thrown in the slammer? Now stop looking at them as heroes and see them for what they are, bad guys with badges!”

Matthew began to fire back through the passenger window as they engaged in a highspeed chase down Groesbeck Highway.

Sarah assured him, “You don’t have to kill them just slow them down.”

Matthew nodded and fired shots at their vehicle to disable it and provide a significant gap to get away. After achieving adequate space, Sarah lured them down a path where reinforcements waited. Sarah’s girls rolled a metal belt across the highway that was covered in spikes. The cop car rolled over it. The tires popped and the policemen spun into a ditch.

The remainder of the ride to the safe house was fairly calm. With the rush of the battle fading, Sarah and Matthew began to feel crushed beneath the weight of the elephant in the room.

As Sarah pulled into the driveway she told Matthew, “I know your grievance against colored folks and white folks being intimate. It couldn’t have been easy for you to tolerate that kiss but you did to keep the gunmen calm. Thank you.”

*I didn’t tolerate your kiss, Sarah. I enjoyed it.* Matthew thought to himself as he struggled to find a more appropriate response. “It’s not a problem. I know who you mistook me for and I know you would never want to kiss

me on purpose.”

*I do want to kiss you more than I've ever wanted to kiss anyone.* Of course, she couldn't say this to a man who had previously declared it unnatural to even look at her.

Matthew added, “I know that giving you that gladiator was in poor taste but I figured we'd never see each other again and I thought it would make you smile.”

“Thank you, and I did smile.” Sarah buried her feelings and extended a hand to him, “friends.”

Matthew nodded in agreement and shook her hand, knowing it was for the best. Tony was her man and he had saved both their lives today. Neither Matthew nor Sarah desired to betray their rescuer.

They freshened up. Changed clothes and burned their ruined outfits. Sarah jumped up with relief as Charlotte and Ben arrived with a caravan of traumatized young women.

“Are you in charge of the girls?” asked a terrified young lady.

“I am,” Sarah assured her. “You're safe here.”

Sarah and Charlotte cleaned up the young women and got them fed. They collected as much information as they could to return them to their families. Sarah would prepare the empty rooms in the brothel for the girls who insisted on working for her.

Once the ladies were squared away, Sarah walked outside. The safehouse was too crowded to hear her own thoughts and she was starting to worry about Tony.

Matthew followed behind her and said, “You don't always have to be everyone's beacon of strength and solidarity. I'm worried about Tony too.”

He gave her a comforting embrace as they waited on

pins and needles to hear from the others. Sarah and Matthew hoped for the best but feared the worst.

Had Tony and the crew come out of that fight alive? Only time would tell...



## CHAPTER 9:

### The Motor City

**T**ony and Sarah held a celebratory gathering. Their people had suffered injuries but no fatalities. The crew members who were well enough to attend enjoyed fine wine and even better food. Matthew didn't understand why they would party in a warehouse when they had a perfectly adequate club but he was soon to find out.

Tony spoke cheerfully to the crowd, "Matthew stormed into the lion's den to save my woman. Let's hear it for the man of the hour!"

Applause and happy whistles sounded off. Matthew was embarrassed when Tony pulled him in front of the whole crew and lauded him. Sarah looked on with admiration and gratitude.

Tony happily announced, "After so fearless a stunt the entire crew was in agreement on one thing."

"What's that," Matthew questioned with amusement.

Tony admitted, “We all agreed that you live in the Motor City now. It’s time you learned how to drive.”

Everyone had a good laugh. Matthew laughed until his sides ached and hilarious tears formed in his eyes.

Tony removed the tarp from Matthew’s new car and informed him, “Everyone pitched in.”

“It’s a masterpiece,” Matthew admitted with an overwhelming sense of gratitude.

The crew gathered around to embrace him. The men shook his hand and the women hugged him.

Matthew couldn’t remember having a better moment than this one, especially as Sarah threw her arms around him and whispered, “Thank you for saving my life. You’re my hero.”

*I’d rather be your gladiator.* Matthew shook off the naughty thought in search of more appropriate words, “Teach me how to drive and we’ll call it even.”

Sarah happily agreed. She gathered Matthew, Tony, Dillinger, Nelson, and Floyd around the gleaming new automobile. The out of town gangsters were leaving tonight and she wanted a picture of the men together. They posed on Matthew’s car. She captured this moment in history to treasure for the rest of her days.

“I want a copy of that,” Matthew called out.

“Sure thing,” Sarah replied.

She hid the fact that his amazing kiss was still on her mind. He’d left a scar on her without ever wielding a blade...



The smoke hadn't cleared the air before Russo felt pressured to reinstate the truce. He called Tony and laid out the terms.

"This is a trap," Tony declared over the phone. "Do you think I'm stupid? I launched a battle on your territory and ran off with your whores. You would normally be out for vengeance, not peace."

Russo explained, "You might have been justified in going to the police in the first place. If that's the case, then you didn't break the truce and my abduction of your lover was unjustified, which makes the resulting battle and loss of property my fault."

"Prince must have confessed," Tony gathered.

"He didn't need to," said Russo. "The battle had taken a turn. I ran home for reinforcements. I needed all hands on deck. That's when I saw Angelo through his bedroom window hovering over a trunk full of worthless trinkets like a witch over a cauldron: a stray stocking, an abandoned garter. There were a few pieces of jewelry but none of it had enough value to justify such coveting and secrecy. I needed any other explanation. I hoped he was a faggot or a crossdresser. These couldn't be trophies from kills. They just couldn't."

Tony confessed, "Matthew said you were going to execute him by firing squad because three prostitutes followed his lead and fled to greener pastures. You're no longer certain they ran away."

"It's hard for me to even consider such a terrible conclusion but I have to be sure. Please allow me to speak to the whore," Russo insisted.

Tony rushed to his office door and poked his head into the corridor. He ordered a gunman, "Retrieve Charlotte."

“I believe she’s with a customer,” the guard protested.

“I don’t give a damn! Make him roll over,” Tony demanded.

The guard took off to do his bidding and returned with Charlotte ten minutes later.

Tony covered the receiver with his palm and whispered, “Russo has some questions for you.”

Her eyes bulged and she swallowed hard, “I can’t do this.”

“Yes you can,” Tony encouraged her.

“Mr. Russo,” she spoke into the receiver. “It’s Charlotte. I’m a courtesan in the employ of the Madam Sarah Brodeur.”

“Did you service my nephew?” Russo questioned.

“Yes Sir, I believe I did,” she confessed.

“How was your evening?”

“Splendid up to the point when he tried to kill me.”

“Did you lose something that evening?” Russo asked as he shuffled through his nephew’s trunk. “It could be something as trivial as a hair ribbon.”

Charlotte forced her breathing to calm and her voice to steady as she recalled moments from the worst night of her life, “He treated me to places worthy of a lady. He made me forget for the briefest of moments that I wasn’t one. For the first time, I felt worthy to put on my mother’s earrings. They weren’t worth much money but they were all I had left of her.”

Russo started removing earrings from the chest. Each one was half a pair. He could only hope the matching pieces weren’t attached to the ears of corpses.

Russo’s heart ached to do so but he instructed her, “Describe the earring.”



“An opal stone hanging from a tiny black ribbon. For your sake, I hope I’m wrong, but if my mother’s earring is there I’d be abundantly grateful to have it back.”

Russo found himself without breath as he spotted Charlotte’s jewelry but he still hoped that this was some kind of mistake, that his nephew was merely a client and Charlotte was mixing him up with someone else.

Charlotte went on to plead, “If your nephew is the man I believe he is, I must also implore you to return a silver locket with a fancy engraving on it. At least I think it was a locket. It would mean a lot to my friend Matthew.”

Russo saw a ray of hope when he couldn’t find the locket. Perhaps his nephew had gotten a little rough with Charlotte but she was alive and well. Matthew’s sister was dead but her trinket was not among these treasures.

Russo informed her with utter relief, “The dead girl’s locket isn’t here.”

Charlotte dutifully informed him, “That’s because it hangs from his rearview mirror.”

Russo reluctantly pulled a photo from his wallet of Prince in his car and a shiny object dangling from his mirror. Russo had heard enough. He had seen enough. He asked to speak to Tony.

“Did you find the answer you wanted?” asked Tony.

“No, but I got the answer I needed,” Russo replied.

The rivals ended the call like gentlemen as if bullets weren’t zipping through the air last week.



Matthew and Tony sat on a cliff in hiking gear. They watched the fishing hole below. Majestic eagles swooped overhead while deer and rabbits frolicked in the woods. It was a peaceful getaway but they weren't there for relaxation. This was business. Tony passed Matthew the binoculars so he could watch the fishing boat. Russo and Prince were bonding as they cast their lines into the lake.

Matthew questioned, "This is all very touching but I fail to see why we're spying on a fishing trip."

Tony explained, "Russo called me out here and demanded I bring you. I can only assume that Russo is like me and prefers to take a man somewhere pleasant before crushing him with painful news."

Matthew nodded understandably, "Fishing is Russo's baseball field. He yearned to give Prince one last good day before hauling him off to the loony bin. I can't wait to see the look on Prince's face when he finds out he will never see the light of day."

Matthew watched as Russo nudged Prince and pointed at a breathtaking rainbow arched over the waterfall. Prince gazed at its magnificence with a peaceful smile. That's when the shot sounded off. The blast echoed through the forest and sent a drove of birds flying from the trees. Prince slumped over in the boat dead. Blood splattered Russo rowed them ashore.

A stunned Matthew pulled the binoculars from his eyes with a trembling hand. He slowly turned to find Tony completely unaffected by the execution.

"It's over," Tony spoke with a supportive hand on Matthew's shoulder.

Matthew, still a little shaken up, stammered words of thanks and returned Tony's ring as promised.

Matthew followed Tony down the cliff where the cars were parked. Russo met them with tears pouring down his face and blood on his hands. Russo reached into Prince's car and grabbed Nicole's locket. He passed it to Matthew along with Charlotte's missing earring.

"I can't do this life anymore," Russo declared moments before clutching his chest and falling to his knees.

What remained of his guards rushed him to the hospital. The execution of Prince literally and figuratively broke Russo's heart. He remained in the hospital for a month. Upon his release, he sold his two nightclubs to Tony and never looked back.



Matthew lied awake in bed staring at the ceiling. Thoughts of Sarah had robbed him of his sleep for the third time this week. He couldn't stop wondering if Sarah dreamed about their kiss in the same way he did or if she dismissed it as an accident. He called his oldest brother for advice. Jimmy picked up on the third ring.

Matthew asked him, "Have you ever fancied someone you shouldn't?"

Jimmy huffed angrily, "I swear to God if you're trying to tell me you're a fairy I will organize a biblical stoning and be the first to throw a rock."

"I forgot how tolerant and accepting you are," Matthew shamed him. "Who a man chooses to love is his own business. Even if its another man and the penalty shouldn't be death."

A befuddled Jimmy scratched his head. "This don't sound like you. Is your crew full of faggots?"

"No Jimmy," Matthew insisted. "I don't have to personally know someone to respect their humanity."

Jimmy breathed a sigh of relief that his brother wasn't a sodomite and asked, "Who is she?"

"The most incredible girl in the world," Matthew confessed. "She so smart and beautiful. She's thoughtful of others and one of the bravest people I've ever met. She's my warrior princess."

"Then what's the problem," asked Jimmy.

"She's my boss's Negro girlfriend," Matthew explained.

Jimmy couldn't believe his ears. "You can't possibly be talking about that colored wench who kidnapped you."

Matthew replied, "I know that Sarah isn't what we were raised to believe the ideal woman should be, but she is amazing once you get to know her."

Jimmy warned him, "You must forget about her. If Tony doesn't kill you the Ku Klux Klan will."

"I know," said Matthew. "How do I get past this?"

Jimmy suggested, "The fastest way to get over a woman is to climb on top of another. I know the perfect girl for you. Her name is Willa. She's a wealthy heiress of a vast estate. If you marry her our money troubles are over and you never have to work alongside Sarah again. You could move back home and avoid the temptation."

"I'm not sure I could marry a stranger," Matthew admitted.

Jimmy insisted, "Think about what's best for Sarah. If you fancy her she likely wants you too. She will eventually end up in your bed."

Matthew could feel his cheeks grow warm with a blush. He was unable to deny the possibility. He knew it wouldn't be right to allow his desires to pose a risk to Sarah's life.

Matthew relented, "Tell me more about Willa."

Jimmy gladly filled him in, "Willa is your color and your age, a submissive, Godfearing, saint of a girl. She knows her place as a woman and she's happy with it, unlike Sarah who will go to the grave fighting for her seat at the table. No man will ever be able to extinguish the fight in Sarah. Some horses are too wild to be broken."

Matthew sighed, "but that turbulent spirit makes her the horse I wanna ride the most."

Jimmy laughed at the crude remark. "Trust me when I say you will fall head over hills in love with Willa and forget Sarah ever existed. Give me a week to set things up."

By week's end, Matthew and Willa were talking on the phone. They wrote letters back and forth. He ran to the mailbox every day hoping to open a scented note folded over her lovely photos. Matthew was smitten with Willa's down-home ways and breathtaking beauty. She reminded him of everything he missed about home. Three months from the day of their first phone call, Matthew drafted his resignation letter.

Tony read Matthew's words silently with mixed emotions. He needed his bootlegger more than ever but Tony refused to be a slaver like Russo and keep a young man against his will.

Sarah questioned, "What does it say?"

Tony regretfully relayed the message, "Matthew says he's quitting the crew and moving away because he's

found the perfect woman.”

Sarah felt like she was being crushed beneath the weight of the world. She could hardly breathe. She left the office for fear of crying in front of Tony. She ran back to the brothel flinging tears from her eyes with the backs of her hands. Sarah burst through those elegant double doors and threw herself into Charlotte’s arms.

“What is wrong with me?” Sarah tearfully asked.

“You are human,” Charlotte insisted. “It’s reasonable to miss a friend. Yesterday Matthew told me he would resign. Given your state, I can only assume that he went through with it. Everyone will miss him.”

The brothel phone rang and Sarah was in no condition to talk. Charlotte answered for her.

It was Tony, “Is Sarah around? She left my office rather abruptly. I’m just making sure she’s alright.”

Charlotte wasn’t buying it, “You are making sure Sarah isn’t upset over a young man we are all upset over.”

“Did she say something about Matthew,” Tony questioned.

“No, she didn’t,” Charlotte snapped. “Even if Sarah had run here crying her eyes out, it isn’t a crime to miss a friend.”

Charlotte ended the call rather annoyed by Tony’s blatant hypocrisy. He was humping everything that walked but couldn’t stand the thought of Sarah being with another man.

Sarah thanked Charlotte for her discretion and retreated to her office to process the painful blow Matthew had given. Sarah had yet to see the full extent of Tony’s jealousy and the deadly rage that came with it...

## CHAPTER 10: The Perfect Woman

**M**atthew lived for brewing. The smell of hot metal, the whirring of machines, and the pleasure of creation would be sorely missed but he was engaged to the perfect woman and sacrifices had to be made.

Matthew wiped the sweat from his brow as he trained his replacements. One of the trainees tapped him on the shoulder and he looked up from his task. Sarah beckoned him from the doorway of the distillery.

Matthew wiped the dirt from his hands and walked over. “How can I help you?”

“By being honest with me,” she spoke quietly. “It isn’t easy for me to come to you like this but my relationship is more important than my pride. Tony and I can’t legally wed but he’s found a priest who will give us a commitment ceremony.”

“I know I should be congratulating you but I can’t,”

Matthew admitted.

“Because it’s unnatural?” Sarah huffed and rolled her eyes.

“Because he doesn’t touch you,” Matthew boldly replied. “Go ahead, deny it.”

“I can’t,” Sarah confessed and it felt like the weight of the world lifted from her shoulders. “You were right from the very beginning. In many ways, you are closer to Tony than I ever was. Do you know why he won’t touch me?”

“Yes,” Matthew admitted.

“Is it his fault or mine?” she asked with concern.

“Neither of you are to blame. It just is,” said Matthew. “I doubt Tony even understands why he won’t bed you.”

“Then explain it to us,” Sarah pleaded.

“I would if y’all were ready to hear it,” Matthew explained. “I have no desire to invoke your rage or his on my way out the door. I want to part on good terms.”

“That’s understandable,” Sarah agreed.

She turned to leave and he caught her hand. A zip of electricity surged through them as he begged, “Please don’t marry him by legal means or any other. It would be a mistake.”

The sight of Matthew holding her hand and begging her not to marry another man was enough to steal Sarah’s breath but Matthew was on a set course to wed the perfect lily-white virgin and Sarah was anything but.

“Given that we’ll never speak after this day, I wish you happiness with your perfect woman,” said Sarah.

“I’ll keep in contact,” Matthew promised.

“No respectable girl would allow you to,” Sarah warned.



With a tender kiss of his cheek and tears in her eyes, Sarah left the distillery. Matthew fought every primitive urge to grab that horse by the reins and ride her into the sunset. Ride her until she succumbed to his prowess and became his for infinity.

If Matthew did not pack up and drive to his betrothed right away he risked committing unspeakable acts with his friend's lady. Matthew didn't want to hurt Tony, nor did he feel it would be fair to take advantage of a love-starved Sarah, but it was becoming harder to ignore his feelings.

*Am I truly taking advantage if Sarah wants me? Matthew asked himself. Her hand was in mine for far longer than she should have allowed and the thought of never hearing from me again brought tears to her eyes. How can what we feel be wrong?*



Matthew did the honorable thing and fled to Louisiana. He knew he had crossed a line by begging Sarah not to marry Tony. Matthew could only hope that Jimmy was right and returning home would remind him of his traditional views of the perfect woman. Jimmy was convinced that Matthew would fall for the lovely Willa, they would marry, and Matthew would forget that wretched colored girl.

Matthew sat across the table from Willa in her beautiful dining room. Black staff members tended to their every need. She was breathtaking, ivory skin curtained by gorgeous mahogany tresses, and a figure to

die for.

The southern belle blessed him with a dazzling smile, “Matt.”

“It’s Matthew if you don’t mind. Matt is what they called my daddy, God rest him,” he explained.

“So sorry to hear that,” she spoke sweetly.

“It’s alright,” Matthew assured her and changed the subject, “So... who did you vote for in the last election?”

He was trying to lighten the mood but she looked repulsed by the question.

Willa shook her head disapprovingly, “Any woman out there voting is undeserving of a husband.”

Matthew was confused. “I fail to see what one has to do with the other.”

Willa explained, “She has no faith in her husband’s abilities to lead a household and make the right decisions for the family. Her voting is an affront to his manhood. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Um... uh... I don’t know what to say,” Matthew was flabbergasted.

“A woman should know her place or she ain’t in line with God’s teachings,” she spoke with a cheerful smile.

Matthew moved on to ask, “What do you like to do for fun? Do you enjoy the picture show or trying new restaurants? Perhaps you like to travel.”

“I like church, singing in the choir, and teaching Sunday school. I’m on the planning committee for the upcoming social,” Willa bragged.

“That’s wonderful,” said Matthew.

Pity filled her eyes as she said, “It must be awful for a Christian like you to be surrounded by such depravity.”

Matthew explained, “I know my crew must seem like

terrible people but they are just trying to survive like everyone else. Times are tough.”

“I heard Mr. Cafero traded you to a mobster to save a colored woman,” the very thought of it perplexed Willa. “I will marry you if you agree to never speak to Tony or that horrible black woman again.”

“That isn’t entirely true,” Matthew confessed. “I gave myself up because I consider Sarah a friend. If you give Tony a chance, I believe you would like him. He’s a Christian, believe it or not. He sang in an all boys’ choir and served as an altar boy. The man prays in Latin. Y’all would have lots to talk about.”

Willa shook her head no, “You can’t seriously be considering maintaining contact with these terrible people. He beds a Negress and flaunts the disgusting affair in the open. Tony has no shame, no humility. What kind of so-called Christian does that?”

“Um... a Catholic,” Matthew stammered in shock.

She laughed, “Bless your heart. Catholics aren’t Christians. They are beacons of idolatry.”

“I am Catholic,” Mathew spoke quietly, fighting to conceal his anger.

She assured him, “Don’t worry about that. I’ll bring you to a proper Baptist church where you can convert before the wedding.”

Matthew was trying to give her a chance but he didn’t want to be fixed or changed into a person he wasn’t.

He reasoned with her, “I would prefer to continue going to Mass on Sundays and taking communion.”

Willa gasped like she had discovered him kneeling over a corpse with a bloody knife.

She shook her head in horror and disbelief, “How can

you even consider taking communion during prohibition? The Catholic church refuses to abide by the laws of this land. They remain loyal to the Pope and continue to serve wine for communion. They are the reason that prohibition laws can never fully steer this nation down the path of righteousness. Catholics are ruining the country. Please convert from their wicked ways.”

Matthew explained, “What you must understand is that communion is a holy sacrament for Catholics. That wine symbolizes the blood of Christ. For almost 2,000 years a king wasn’t considered legitimate unless he was blessed by the Catholic Church so why would we listen to some shit for brains lawmaker in a country that ain’t even 200 years old? Willa, our differences don’t have to divide us. We love the same wonderful God, right? There’s no need for either of us to convert?”

Willa looked like she was going to cry.

Matthew reached out to hold her hand and promised, “We’ll have the wedding at your church and take turns with holidays. Please meet me halfway.”

She finally nodded but she had every intention of convincing him to convert. “Fine, but I won’t subject our eight innocent children to Catholic school.”

“Whoa back up the train, Doll,” Matthew chuckled. “I was thinking of one or two kids.”

“God said to be fruitful and multiply,” Willa reminded him.

“He said that when there were only two people on earth. I think he would agree that we have plenty of folks now.” Matthew confessed, “I was raised in a large household. It was a zoo. I hated it.”

She reached out for his hand this time. “Please meet

me halfway.”

It would be easier to budge on this issue if she wanted to birth eight children because of her overwhelming love for him and not merely to fulfill a religious obligation.

He questioned, “Do you desire a large family for our happiness or to appease your church?”

“Can’t it be both?”

A flutter of her big blue eyes and a pretty smile rendered him putty in her hands.

“We’ll revisit the issue,” Matthew promised. “I’ll keep an open mind for you.”

Willa confessed, “Jimmy told me about your predicament and the good Lord spoke to my heart to deliver you from Tony Cafero and his blood money.”

“And how exactly did your family come into such wealth?” asked Matthew. “You claim to be from ‘old money’. In a post-Confederate state, the term ‘old money’ means your folks made their fortune on the backs of slaves, profited from their suffering and misery. Your family betrayed their own country and killed American soldiers in a failed effort to continue their human trafficking. Your money is no less bloody than Tony’s, mine, or anyone else’s.”

Willa was aghast, “How can you think of comparing the labor of nonhumans to what Tony does? By your account, my grandfather should have paid our oxen and donkeys too.”

Matthew apprehensively glanced around the room at the bitter black men and women who were serving the food. He suddenly cringed at the thought of what may have been done to his meal. He pushed his plate aside even though he was still quite hungry. He examined the

consistency of his tea before deciding not to take another sip.

Matthew couldn't believe Willa equated her family's former slaves to beasts of burden. What was even less believable was the fact that a year ago he might have agreed with her. That thought frightened him more than Russo's firing squad. The idea of marrying a woman who would teach these ideologies to his children was unthinkable. Wedding her would require Matthew to squeeze back into a skin he had outgrown and shed, a skin that looked slimy and revolting to him now.

He knew he could never wear that skin again. "You are perfect, Willa... perfect for the boy I was when I left this state, but the man I am today longs for something you don't have."

She was stunned, "I am a virgin, a Christian. I'm wealthy and well connected. I fail to see what I lack."

"Fight," said Matthew. "I need a woman with fight, a woman who votes and understands that her place is anywhere she sets her sights. I need a woman who stands up for the less fortunate rather than justifying their systematic oppression. I need a strong role model for my future daughters. I need a woman who is like Sarah and Nicole, not a girl like you."

Willa ran after him pleading, "but Matt."

"Please don't call me Matt," he sighed and walked out the door.

Matthew climbed in his car and drove to the nearest phone booth. He kept the door of the booth wide open so he wouldn't feel like he was encased in a glass coffin. Matthew put the receiver to his ear, placed a coin into the slot, and cranked out the number on the rotary dial. He

was ecstatic that Sarah answered.

“I never expected to hear your voice again,” Sarah admitted and he could tell she was relieved. “I figured a good girl like Willa wouldn’t let you associate with degenerates like Tony and me. How’s life with the perfect woman?”

“Awful,” Matthew grumbled.

Sarah spoke with the deepest sincerity, “I’m sorry to hear that. I suppose she turned out not to be a virgin.”

“She turned out to be a harpy,” Matthew snapped. “I don’t give a damn if she’s a virgin because I am a warrior. I don’t require some girl with no experience to make me feel like a man. She didn’t even have the commonsense to curb her bigotry in front of her servants. I won’t spend the rest of my life consuming the spit of disgruntled employees!”

Sarah couldn’t believe her ears. Matthew was not the same boy she met a year ago. Somewhere between the bullets and the bloodshed he had grown into a man. She was rooting for his happiness with Willa but it was clear that wasn’t going to happen.

“It’s her loss,” Sarah assured him.

“Thank you,” he replied. “There’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you. This buddy of mine fell in love with a girl but he knows that admitting the truth would put her in danger. Don’t you think it would be selfish for him to profess his love to her?”

“I think it would be selfish for him not to,” said Sarah.

Matthew was taken by surprise. “How so?”

“Because he isn’t treating her like an equal who is capable of making her own decisions,” Sarah explained. “Telling her doesn’t put her life in danger. Her choice to

act on those feelings does but it is still her choice.”

“Thank you very much. I will let him know,” said Matthew.

“I’m glad I could help,” Sarah smiled naively.

Matthew was grateful that Sarah was not as keen on human behavior as Charlotte. Sarah took words literally so if Matthew claimed to need advice on behalf of a friend she believed him.

He drew in a deep breath before asking, “Can I come back home?”

“I thought you were home.”

“Not anymore.”

Sarah shook her head with amusement, “You didn’t hear this from me, but Tony mopes around like the two of you broke up.”

Matthew burst with laughter, “I don’t believe it.”

Sarah chuckled, “It’s true. He wasn’t this jealous when he thought I was humping Tobacco Ben. Tony will be elated to have you back.”

“Just Tony?” Matthew asked with a naughty grin. “I want to hear you say it.”

Sarah couldn’t stop the corners of her mouth from curving into a smile as she said, “I want you back.”

That was good enough for Matthew. “I am on my way.”



Jimmy was furious that Matthew’s engagement fell through but Tony was able to smooth things over. Soon both brothers would be in Tony’s employ. All he had to



do was carry out one favor.

Tony drove to the Detroit House of Corrections, a prison that had housed the worst of the worst since its opening in 1861. He approached the scattered buildings surrounded by barbed wire fences that composed the prison. Tony stopped at a guard tower. Uniformed men ran mirrors beneath his car. They searched his trunk, glove box, and seats before allowing him to pass.

Once inside the building, more guards took his coat and hat. They gave his body a thorough pat-down and then he signed the visitor's log. Tony sat down at a table in the visitor's room awaiting an inmate. A guard brought in the femme fatale. Tony, being a well dressed and unfamiliar man, was assumed to be her new attorney.

Madam Crenshaw sat before him and said, "I've been rehearsing my speech for the parole board. Would you like to hear it?"

"No," Tony spoke flatly. "I'm not your damn lawyer. What I am is your worst nightmare."

She was about to alert the guards when he passed her a photo of her son.

"I wouldn't do that if I was you," he warned. "There are men who do not share my love for children watching your son as we speak."

"What do you want from me?" she asked in a trembling voice.

Tony confessed, "I don't know who you had to pay off, lie to, or screw to receive a parole hearing after only serving three years for your heinous crimes. You harmed a young man who is very dear to me, stabbed his brother, and got his sister killed."

"That isn't who I am anymore," she pleaded. "I am

just a person like you. I had almost finished a nursing education when the depression bankrupted my father.”

“I don’t care,” Tony growled. “Matthew may be chivalrous but I am not. I have drowned bitches who have crossed me. I have slit their throats as they’ve wept. You are sadly mistaken if you think you can charm, cry, or lie your way out of this.”

“Understood,” she nodded frantically.

Tony informed her, “Matthew’s older brother Jimmy reached out to me. He is aware that I have recently acquired ownership of two additional clubs. Matthew is only one man and he can’t brew for all three establishments. Jimmy offered his assistance under the agreement that I kill you or make you miss your parole hearing so that you never leave the inside of these grimy gray walls. I feel that the world could use one less murderous, kidnapping, sex trafficker. I wouldn’t lose one wink of sleep if I paid one of these desperate ladies to plant their shiv in your back but Jimmy is willing to settle for having you finish the life sentence you most certainly deserve.”

“I... I’ll stay in prison,” Madam Crenshaw promised. “There’s no need to have me killed.”

Tony rose with a nod of approval, “You and the poor bastard you knifed finally agree on something.”

Tony sauntered out of the prison like nothing had happened. He made small talk with the guards about the weather and baseball as if he hadn’t just threatened to murder a woman.

Sarah had no idea that the man she shared her home with was becoming more dangerous by the day...

## CHAPTER 11:

### Detroit Nights

**M**atthew waited at the busy train station glancing at the clock every five minutes. The sight of a “whites only” drinking fountain made him roll his eyes and sigh. *How can I ever make a life with Sarah if folks won't allow us to drink from the same fountain?*

Matthew rose from his seat as his brother's train pulled into the station. Within minutes Jimmy and his pregnant wife departed the locomotive.

Matthew walked over to embrace them and complimented his sister in law, “You are positively glowing, Virginia.”

She smiled brightly. “I'm as big as a house but the doctor swears he heard two heartbeats so it's worth it.”

Matthew led them to his vehicle. “That would be wonderful. Twins run in the family. I got a set of twin brothers and a set of twin sisters.”

Jimmy grinned as they climbed into the car. “I warned her that it’s expensive but we’re very excited.”

“As am I,” said Matthew. “It’s gonna be great working alongside you again.”

Jimmy sat in awe as they cruised down the road. He could not remove the proud grin from his face.

Matthew asked, “What’s got you grinning like the cat that ate the canary?”

Jimmy confessed, “You learned how to drive. You’re dressed all fancy in your tailormade suit. You’re taking in me and Virginia until we get settled here. I still can’t believe you’re all grown up.”

“Look at you with a wife and babies on the way. I gotta admit I never saw that coming,” Matthew replied. “Working together is gonna be great. We’re gonna own this town.”

Jimmy agreed wholeheartedly.



Sarah spritzed on perfume and dressed up for a date with Tony. They were able to finally get a little free time after Jimmy arrived to help out. Jimmy proved himself to be a valuable asset. The empire flourished.

Sarah was nearly ready when the phone rang.

“Hi, Sarah. Is Tony around?” asked Matthew.

“He’s in the shower. I’ll have him call you back,” she offered.

“Actually, you’re the one I wanted to talk to. I need a woman’s perspective,” Matthew confessed. “I’ve messed up two courtships and one engagement so far. I’d prefer

to keep the next one.”

Sarah chuckled, “How can I help?”

“Tell me what you hate about men so I can avoid making those mistakes,” Matthew enquired.

Sarah smirked, “I’ve only been in one relationship but I can tell you what I loathe about it. Let’s say one of the gunmen stop by my home so I can brief him on something business related. When he arrives I’m rearranging the bedroom furniture and he is gracious enough to help me. He loses a cufflink in the process. What do you think would happen if Tony found that cufflink?”

“I don’t know,” Matthew admitted.

“Well I do,” Sarah replied. “Instead of just bringing the piece of jewelry to me and asking where it came from. Tony would spend the next week brooding and tossing around vague questions to see if he can catch me in a lie. Then he would resort to sneaky little ways of spying on me and going through my belongings rather than just telling me what he found. It’s difficult to be with a man who would rather stalk me than communicate with me.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Thanks for the advice,” Matthew replied.

“You don’t get off that easy,” Sarah teased. “I just spilled my guts. The least you can do is tell me about the mystery woman you’re pursuing. Is she pretty?”

“She is beautiful,” Matthew spoke dreamily.

“Is she smart?”

“She’s brilliant.”

“Does she put others before herself?”

“Too often, in my opinion, but it’s one of her most endearing qualities.”

Like any good friend, Sarah ignored her desires and

forced herself to be happy for him. “It sounds like you really like her.”

“I’m in love with her,” Matthew confessed, “and I intend to tell her that tonight.”

Sarah ended the call when Tony walked into the room. Tony glanced at his pocket watch. They had to make haste. He was the lead bookie and it was nearly time for the heavyweight fight to begin. The boxing arena was an important hangout for gangsters. Not only did Tony rake in cash from bets, but the arena also served as a neutral ground to conduct business, while enjoying a violent sport and being served by beautiful women.

Matthew arrived at their home and draped an elegant fur coat over Sarah’s bare shoulders. He paused for a moment just to breathe in her essence. Given their circumstances, this was the closest he could be to her.

Sarah glanced over her shoulder, shocked to find Matthew tending to her. “What are you doing here? Where’s our chauffeur?”

Matthew explained, “George was stricken with Spanish flu. I was just a little tike when the last pandemic devastated the world but I remember carts full of dead bodies rolling by. I figured you wouldn’t want to put the entire crew at risk so I sent him home. I hope that was alright to do.”

“Thank you,” said Tony. “It won’t kill me to drive my car for once.”

“I’ll drive you,” Matthew insisted.

Sarah informed him, “It wouldn’t look right for someone as highly elevated as you to be driving us.”

“It would look even worse if you drove yourselves,” said Matthew. “You’re about to be late. You don’t have

time to call anyone else.”

They reluctantly agreed. Sarah, Matthew, and Tony ventured into the snowy weather of a Detroit night. Matthew pulled the fancy car around to meet his charges. It was beautiful with a decorative tire placed up on each side. Another consolation gift from Tony to Sarah because their relationship had run its course but he could not, would not let her go.

Matthew opened the door and Sarah ducked into the back seat followed by Tony. She blew warm moist air into her palms to warm them. Tony smiled at her with amusement. The Great Depression had run them out of the south years ago but Sarah still wasn't used to the frigid winters of Detroit. Tony clasped her hands between his to warm them. Sarah smiled softly at him but as she went for a kiss he turned his cheek to her.

She sighed. *Tony will not be with me and he will not be without me...*

Sarah crossed her arms in defeat and rode the rest of the way in silence.

Matthew took the back roads and got them to the boxing match just in time. As the roaring arena watched the heavyweight title fight on the edge of their seats, Matthew's only interest was Sarah. His feelings for her came at a steep risk but he couldn't ignore them any longer.

Now that Jimmy had come to help with the brewing Matthew often served as Tony's wingman. Matthew attended many gatherings with Tony and watched him disappear with a girl or two or three. Matthew assumed it was only a matter of time before Tony realized he wasn't ready for marriage and ended things with Sarah. Matthew

was counting on this outcome so that he could finally tell her how he truly felt. To Matthew's dismay, Tony veered in the opposite direction. He dumped all his side girls and proposed to Sarah... a woman he won't even kiss on the mouth.

Matthew never told Sarah about Tony's infidelities. If Sarah ever chose to share her bed with Matthew, he needed to know it was because she loved him and not because she was furious with Tony.

Sarah, always the soldier, excused herself to stash weapons around the boxing arena. Tony conducted a lot of business at these fights. She wanted to give him the upper hand in case things ever went badly. Matthew followed her to a remote storage room. She grabbed a hammer and started prying up a floorboard.

Matthew relieved her of the hammer, "I'll do it. I'd hate for you to ruin your pretty dress."

Given the nature of their relationship, she assumed he was being sarcastic. "I know. I look stupid, right? I hate dresses."

"You look spectacular," Matthew confessed and it felt like an anvil had been lifted from his chest.

Sarah was taken aback. "How many drinks did you have at the speakeasy?"

"None because I knew I would be driving you," Matthew insisted. "You are beautiful and you deserve someone who makes you feel that way."

"What has gotten into you?" She had gone from being shocked and confused to just plain worried. "Not that it's any of your business, but Tony tells me I'm beautiful every day."

"Perhaps, but when was the last time he made love to



you?” Matthew questioned. “He won’t even kiss you.”

“He’s not publicly affectionate,” Sarah explained.

“He’s not affectionate at all,” Matthew snapped. “I love Tony like a brother and it rips my heart out to betray him but it is selfish of him to marry a woman he won’t lay with just to keep her in his clutches.”

“And you’re supposed to be an alternative?” Sarah shook off the absurd possibility. “All we ever do is fight.”

“Well there’s a reason for that,” Matthew sighed. “My daddy once told me a story about a fox that was salivating over a cluster of juicy grapes. He could practically taste them as they dangled on a vine too high for him to reach. The fox jumped and he jumped but no matter what he tried those grapes were just out of his reach. Eventually, the fox gave up, trudged away in anger, and swore the grapes were probably rotten or sour anyway. The point daddy was trying to make was that it’s easier to insult what you can’t have because it’s unbearable to admit you’re being deprived of something great.”

“In this analogy am I the fox or the grapes,” Sarah asked as she felt his arms closing around her.

“We are both the fox and we are both the grapes,” Matthew confessed as they swayed to music that wasn’t playing as if they had the same tune in their hearts.

Common sense forced Sarah to shove him away. “This is my fault. I assumed that you went along with kissing me that night because given our predicament it was the safest option. I’m so sorry if I made things awkward for you but I can’t fix it by making matters worse. Please accept my apology for kissing the wrong guy.”

Sarah had just referred to Matthew as the wrong guy.

He never knew until this moment how deeply words could slice a man open.

Matthew shrugged, “You didn’t make things awkward for me. I’m not some virgin in need of your protection and I’m not a child. I have made love to women and killed men, so stop protecting me and start loving me because we both know you kissed the right guy.”

Sarah dropped a revolver into the hole he had made and walked away from him. He caught her arm before she fled the room.

Matthew confessed, “I learned a great deal this past year. I’ve made enemies as well as friends. Most importantly I learned to judge a woman by her character and not by her color. Being older than me doesn’t give you the right to completely dismiss my feelings. I am a man who has fallen irrevocably in love with you.”

Sarah screamed at him, “You are obnoxious! You are reckless! You do not deserve Tony’s friendship!”

Matthew released her arm in defeat. He hung his head with pain in his chest. The guilt of his betrayal felt as awful as the rejection.

“And... it’s been nine months, three weeks, and two days since Tony touched me,” Sarah admitted as a tear rolled down her cheek.

Matthew swept her into a kiss that felt like ecstasy in its purest form. He expected to be slapped at best, shot at worst, but she engaged him like she was starving. They fumbled and snatched at each other’s clothes only breaking the embrace for long enough to lock the door. He pressed her body against the wall with his own, so close he could feel her heart beating.

“Sarah,” Matthew whispered in that voice that made

her heart skip a beat. Even the way he spoke her name was enough to make her shiver with delight, the way it rolled off his tongue like a beautiful song.

Before this went any further he needed to know, “Do you love me or am I risking my life for nothing?”

Sarah’s hands roamed over his hard shoulders and clasped behind his neck.

She whispered, “I love you, but I can’t leave Tony.”

Matthew’s heart felt like it would take off flying. “I am content to be your dirty little secret if that is what you wish of me.”

She stifled a moan as Matthew ran his amazing tongue along the curves and valleys of her neck. Sarah’s bare leg, exposed by the high split of her dress, was rubbing against his crotch. Matthew moaned, low and loud, forcing her to clap a hand over his mouth. Sarah could feel him smirk against her palm and she realized she hadn’t been that happy in a long time.

Matthew confessed with a heavy heart, “I need you to know that women are not disposable objects to me. I cannot express in words how much you mean to me. I would place the world at your feet if it was mine to give and this wouldn’t be happening in a storage room.”

“Where would it happen,” Sarah asked dreamily as he lifted her onto the countertop.

“On my bed, after I had married you.” Matthew punctuated every sentence with a sweet kiss or a tantalizing nip of her skin. “I would look in your eyes and call you my wife just to feel the words on my tongue. I would be your gladiator and you would never feel alone because I will always raise my sword for you... only you.”

Matthew gently took her hand and kissed the sensitive flesh of her palm. He rubbed it with his thumb and smiled sweetly at her. She always wondered how he could be so irresistible. Sarah finally gave in, leaned forward, and captured his lips with her own.



When all was calm, Sarah sat once more at Tony's side. All she truly yearned to do was sleep the night away with Matthew but this wasn't possible. Tony would never release his iron grip on her.

As the rounds went on and the giants slugged it out in the ring Sarah caught Matthew gazing longingly at her. It was obvious that he had the same dreams of watching the sunrise in each other's arms and enjoying a southern-style breakfast. He wanted to sip sweet tea on the porch while they watched their children play. He desired to treat Sarah to the picture show every Friday night. Matthew didn't like settling for cheap stolen moments but when you love a woman you would rather have a piece of her than none at all.

Tony placed an arm around Sarah's shoulders and she forced her eyes away from Matthew. Then Tony picked the worst time in the world to kiss her straight on the mouth passionately, a sign that he may finally want to make love when they get home. Will he notice that Matthew has had her first?

The frightening thought caused Sarah to gasp out of the kiss. When she came up for air she could see that Matthew had turned a furious shade of red she didn't

believe possible for a human being. There were tears in Matthew's eyes though his iron will would never allow them to fall. His sorrow matched that of her own, but she wasn't his and could never be.

Sarah shut her eyes to pinch back tears as she expectantly doted on her crime boss fiancé. For Matthew's safety, she would end the affair as soon as they stole a moment to talk.

The two were never supposed to fall in love. This wasn't part of the plan, but the tragic thing about plans is that they tend to veer off course...



## CHAPTER 12:

### Forbidden Fruit

Sarah was surprised by how calm Mr. Melvin was when she arrived at the movie theatre. He called her with an urgent matter but nothing appeared to be out of order.

“I fail to see the emergency other than a severe lack of cars in the parking lot,” said Sarah. “I would round up the orphans if you were playing a children’s film tonight.”

He laughed and passed her a large stack of movie tickets bound by an elegant ribbon.

Mr. Melvin explained, “My parking lot is only empty because a friend of yours bought out the theatre. He felt you deserved to finally enjoy a film.”

Matthew walked up with a bucket of popcorn and two glass bottles of Pepsi-Cola. She couldn’t believe what he’d done.

Sarah couldn’t stop smiling, “Is it alright if I grab some candy?”

“You can have whatever you want,” he assured her with a dreamy smile.

They collected their snacks and headed to the screen room. It felt incredible to be on a date with no one looking over their shoulders. They could sit where they wanted, say what they wanted, and do what they wanted. Matthew used the bottle opener on his keyring to pry off the caps. He passed her a fizzy soda that she thoroughly enjoyed.

Sarah and Matthew nuzzled together in their seats as the projector flickered on. The big-screen illuminated like a magical gateway to another world. Sarah kissed him in the darkness before a flashing screen. His lips bore the taste of sweet Pepsi and his arms felt like pure heaven.

She confessed in a whisper, “I know it’s wrong but I can’t stop thinking about you. I want you all the time.”

“Then we finally agree on something.” Matthew stole another kiss before they settled in comfortable silence and enjoyed the show.



It was a beautiful afternoon on Lake Saint Clair. Beams of sunlight broke through puffy clouds causing the water to dazzle. Seagulls glided on a gentle breeze, cawing to one another. The beach was buzzing with families for Easter weekend. The happiness in the air was almost palpable. Matthew and Sarah stood on the dock in front of his shiny new boat. Soon they would be casting off on their maiden voyage.

Every time she gathered the courage to break up with Matthew he surprised her with something wonderful and



they ended up in the sack again. Weeks turned to months. Spring was now upon them. Tony had said that a teenager's heart was fleeting. This led Sarah to believe that if she slept with Matthew just once his infatuation would cease and it would be over between them. Tony was mistaken. Sarah and Matthew fell more in love with each passing day. They stole moments, kept secrets, and made love in the shadows.

Matthew and Sarah laughed joyfully as they broke a bottle of champagne over the bow of the boat they had christened *Infinity*. The name was elegantly scrolled on the back with a large infinity symbol beneath. Matthew unfastened the rope that secured his boat to the dock.

He joked as they climbed aboard, "That might have been the last bottle of champagne in the country and we just flushed it into the sea."

"Terrible waste but it's tradition," Sarah agreed as they retracted the anchor and began to set sail.

She confessed as they drifted away from the dock, "I never wanted to see another boat after the tragedy I survived. I'm not sure what it is about you that gives me the strength to try things I'm terrified of."

Matthew placed a kiss on her soft wet lips and wrapped his arms around her. "I promised that if you did something you were scared of I would do the same."

Sarah smiled up at him, "what terrifying thing do you plan on doing?"

"You'll find out later," he promised and allowed the engagement ring to remain in his pocket until the perfect moment.

Matthew had dreamt of proposing to the perfect woman, on a perfect day. He couldn't think of a more

perfect place to profess his love and devotion than the heart-shaped body of water known as Lake Saint Clair.

Sarah informed him, “I brought some seafood to prepare for supper. Good Friday is still part of Lent, right?”

Matthew smiled at her consideration of him, “What’s a Baptist girl know about Lent?”

“Not much,” she admitted, “all I know is that your diet is restricted on Fridays and you give up something for forty days.”

“And that’s alright with you?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“That kind of acceptance hasn’t been my experience,” he sadly confessed.

“Our differences don’t have to separate us,” Sarah insisted. “I love every part of you.”

Matthew could feel his heart swell to twice its size. “Thank you for offering to make fish for me, but I will be cooking this evening. I have something special planned for you.”

“Sounds wonderful,” she grinned happily.

He hugged her from behind and kissed the side of her neck. A sudden breeze made their clothes flap and snap about their bodies. The boat swayed subtly in response to the wind. Sarah and Matthew swooned from side to side to the melody playing in their hearts.

“I like the name *Infinity* but I am curious as to why you chose it,” asked Matthew.

“From the day we met, I saw forever in your eyes,” Sarah confessed.

She spun to face him and drew him into a kiss that ignited into a blaze. He lifted her by her posterior and she

wrapped her legs around him. Matthew carried her downstairs to the boat's bed chamber and closed the door behind them.



Matthew lied between the sheets with Sarah drawing small circles on her skin with his fingertip. He looked forward to wedding her so that moments like this wouldn't be diminished by guilt. Sarah had given him much to confess to the priest as of late, but she was worth it. Sarah recognized his look of shame. She had seen that look on Tony's face many times.

She assured Matthew, "We don't have to make love if it weighs on your conscience. Your company is enough for me."

"This isn't a race thing," he swore.

"I know. It's a Catholic thing," she squeezed his hand.

He nibbled on her earlobe and rubbed her naked thigh beneath the sheet.

Sarah could tell where this was going and she cautioned him, "Aren't you afraid of disappointing God?"

"You're the woman I love. I think God will understand," said Matthew.

He swept her into a kiss and placed his strong body on top of hers.

They jumped apart as a voice blared through a bull horn, "This is the police! Prepare to be boarded!"

Sarah and Matthew threw on their clothes as quickly as they could. They rushed up on deck to find two police officers climbing onto the boat.

Matthew addressed them respectfully, “What seems to be the problem officers?”

They boarded his vessel without permission and started shuffling through his belongings. Were there any civil liberties left in this country? The tall lean cop continued to rifle through Matthew’s possessions, breaking things along the way.

The portly cop with the thick walrus mustache informed Matthew, “We received a call from a few women on the beach. They claimed to have seen you bring alcohol and prostitutes onto this boat. It’s Easter weekend. There are too many families on the lake to allow lewd behavior.”

Sarah was aghast but she remained silent. She was aware that as a black woman anything she said would only make matters worse.

Matthew was fuming, “There is no alcohol on my boat. The only bottle I had was broken on the bow of this vessel in celebration. I assure you I am as sober as a judge. Furthermore, being black does not make my lady friend a prostitute!”

The chubby cop shrugged, “Harlot, courtesan, or whatever you choose to call her doesn’t matter. She’s coming with us.”

“She’s not going anywhere with you!” Matthew yelled. “I just told you she wasn’t a prostitute!”

Mustache glared at him in bewilderment, “Why else would you bring a Negress onto a boat?”

Matthew turned to Sarah and said, “Please wait for me downstairs, love.”

She nodded and did as he asked.

Once she was out of hearing range Matthew

whispered to the ignorant cops, “That woman is the love of my life. Being on a date with a colored girl is not lewd behavior just because a few nosey crones deem it to be. Her name is Sarah and I brought her here to ask for her hand in marriage. You are ruining my proposal. Please show some decency and leave my property.”

Beanpole approached and said, “I feel for you. What you do at home is your business, but your public presence with her, girlfriend or not, is disturbing other people.”

Matthew just shook his head, “What I hate most about prohibition laws is the total lack of respect for a man’s privacy and the trampling of his liberties by self-righteous fanatics. David Blair, who led the charge on the alcohol ban, claimed that every bootlegger should be stood up before a wall and shot to death. That’s tyranny, not freedom. Blair also encouraged people to anonymously report their neighbors. This dawned the age of frivolous calls to the police for anything you deem inappropriate, an era of forcing your beliefs on others in a country founded on the principle of freedom. Now in the name of prohibition you have stormed onto my boat uninvited, destroyed my things, and offended my girlfriend.”

The tall cop assured him, “I know this seems unfair but if you send the girl with us we’ll see to it she gets home safe and sound. We mean her no harm.”

Matthew felt like he was going to blow a gasket. “It ain’t your job to see her home safely. It’s mine. Get the hell off my boat so I can do just that.”

“There’s no need for that disrespectful tone,” said the portly cop. “We could arrest you for sassing us.”

“Go ahead,” Matthew offered up his wrists. “I’ll be certain to call my attorney, Mr. Wakefield.”

The officers shuddered at the name of the lawyer that had gotten so many of their brothers in blue fired. They climbed off the boat without cleaning up any of the things they had knocked over and broken in their search for contraband alcohol.

Sarah emerged from below to help Matthew sail back to shore. She had experienced such treatment before. This is why she marched and legislated for change. This sort of harassment was new to Matthew. There's no feeling like your first encounter with discrimination. It stays with you and leaves a scar that never heals. Sarah hugged him from behind and kissed the nape of his neck.

"I'm sorry they ruined your plans," said Sarah. "Will you tell me what they were?"

"Not a chance. You'll just have to wait until the next date." The scowl finally left his face and he smiled over his shoulder at her.

Sarah was pleasantly surprised, "I never expected to go on another date after what happened tonight."

Matthew stubbornly vowed, "Only death could keep me from you. Even then I'd find a way to cheat it."



The policemen who harassed Matthew and Sarah reached the docks to the sound of applause. Women were thanking the cops for shielding their children from such depravity.

The officers climbed into their cruiser and flipped through the photos they had stolen from the boat. They added them to the already damning stack of pictures they

had snapped at Matthew's house through his bedroom window. The young police officer agreed that justice must be served but he did not agree with the methods.

The rookie asked the older cop, "Doesn't it bother you that anonymously delivering these photos to Cafero will get that girl killed? That boy who looked younger than I am is going to die, probably horrifically."

"That 'boy' is an unrepentant peddler of an illicit substance and his girlfriend should have thought twice before two-timing a gangster. I pity neither of those degenerates," said the older cop.

"She's a madam. He's a bootlegger. Neither are crimes punishable by death. We are sworn officers of the law. We shouldn't be playing judge, jury, and executioner," said the rookie.

The older cop insisted, "Cafero's lawyers are too good. The only way to bring down this criminal enterprise is to make it implode. Their crew will be severely crippled after Tony murders his head brewer and brothel madam. This will cause a rift. The gangsters will take sides, and the whole damn empire will come crumbling down."

The rookie suggested, "The boy confessed his plans to propose. There's no way he can marry that colored girl and remain in Tony's crew. They'll have no choice but to run away together. Losing two valuable members will damage Cafero's enterprise without any loss of life."

The older cop did not agree. "Do you want to show the public that criminals are allowed to ride off into the sunset or do you want to show society that crime doesn't pay? An example must be made. Those pictures are going to Cafero."

The young cop nodded understandably. He gazed

with pity at the photos of Sarah and Matthew. They appeared deliriously in love. They had no idea of the perils to come...



## CHAPTER 13:

### A Killer Announcement

Sarah couldn't bring herself to risk Matthew's safety anymore. She finally gathered the strength to break his heart in order to save his life. It had been a week since Sarah walked out of Matthew's life. He tried to forget about her and focus on his work with Tony: running the underground joints, finding new talent to perform, bootlegging booze, etc. Sarah had made her decision so what did Matthew care? To hell with her! And still, on this sparkling snow-covered morning, Matthew found himself picking up the two-piece phone. He cranked out the number, held the mouthpiece with his left hand, and the earpiece with his right. One day he'd be able to afford a fancy desk-set like Tony: it was a rotary phone as well but much classier and the ear and mouthpiece were conveniently attached to the same handle.

"It's Sarah," her voice was like a beautiful song after such a long absence.

“Is he around?” Matthew’s voice was like a replenishing rain after a desert drought.

“It’s just me.”

Matthew cut straight to the point, “I know you’re planning to marry Tony on Saturday but if you ever loved me at all you will at least hear what I have to say.”

“That isn’t fair Matthew.”

“What isn’t fair is how you left without giving me a chance to speak my heart. What isn’t fair is how you didn’t tell me the truth. Tony walked in with a killer announcement today. He was bragging about the little bundle of joy. He said you were three months along. You got pregnant sometime around the championship fight and you know what we did that night!”

“The same thing I turned around and did with him!” Tears filled her eyes and her voice cracked beneath the weight of her emotions. “I’m not worth loving. I’m not worth caring about. I’m not worth anything. Find a nice girl... not a tramp like me.”

“You are no such thing.” Matthew’s heart sank to hear her speak so harshly of herself.

“If not a harlot, then what am I?”

He could hear her voice shaking with tears.

“You are human,” Matthew insisted. “You’re torn between two men that you love very much, and you’re afraid for the life of one of them. Meet me for breakfast Sarah. We don’t have to marry but I think we should talk.”

Matthew hung up the phone and gazed out the window in awe. Just weeks ago he was on the boat with Sarah. He assumed spring had finally arrived and then out of nowhere Detroit is struck with a snowstorm in April...

APRIL! What kind of place has a blizzard in April? Michigan was the most peculiar place he'd ever been but he didn't regret coming here. Every trial he had suffered ultimately led to Sarah and he would not be giving her up without a fight.



Matthew walked over to his collection of vinyl and pulled a Louis Armstrong record from its cardboard case. He placed it in the record player and gingerly set the needle upon its surface. Sweet horn music began to sound throughout the room and Matthew returned to his seat to ponder the words to win her heart.

The knocker sounded. Matthew practically ran to the front door. He encircled Sarah in his arms the instant the door was open. They needed to embrace one another more than they needed air to breathe at this moment.

After just holding each other in sweet beautiful silence for a minute or two Matthew spoke at last, "Now let's feed that baby."

"Sounds good to me," Sarah smiled softly and he led her down the hall.

Matthew's house wasn't enormous like her and Tony's. It was perfectly cozy, a home.

Matthew walked over to turn off the record player but Sarah assured him, "I love Louis. Please allow it to play."

"Very well," Matthew smiled and pulled out her chair for her.

He had fixed her a southern-style breakfast: two fried

eggs with a side of shrimp and grits. They ate in silence, neither yearning to be the first to address the elephant in the room.

Without further hesitation, Sarah regretfully informed him, "I'm marrying Tony. He's always loved me."

"Yes, but not in that way."

"What do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean, Sarah. Tony does not love you romantically and never has," Matthew informed her.

She gasped, "how dare you!"

"I'm not trying to hurt your feelings but you need to be honest with yourself," Matthew insisted. "You may see Tony as a lover but he has never seen you as such. I wouldn't have a pot to piss in without Tony. It destroys me to betray him, but you deserve better, you both do."

Sarah was fuming. She wanted to lash out at Matthew but her whirling revelations froze her in a trance. *Tony always looks away when I undress. We've always slept in separate rooms. The first time he made love to me he spoke the same words he did the day of the shipwreck. The night he took my virginity I asked him what those beautiful words meant. "Means I love you" he replied and I believed him until now.*

"Matthew," Sarah spoke at last, not wanting to know the answer but needing to. "I know you speak French and English fluently but how's your Italian?"

"Fair," Matthew shrugged at the rather odd question. "Why do you ask?"

She repeated Tony's words as best she could, and asked desperately, "Do they mean I love you? Please tell me they mean I love you."

“Roughly translated it means fear not, I will save you,” he answered.

Tony wasn't overwhelmed by passion the evening he took her virginity. He was merely saving her from getting her heart broken by a slick cat named Marcos. Tony warned Sarah that Marcos used women and threw them away but she wouldn't hear sense. The evening she planned to give Marcos her virtue, Tony seduced her. Now Sarah sat at Matthew's table feeling as if she'd been hit in the chest with a sledgehammer. She couldn't breathe and everything hurt.

She rose with tears streaming down her face. *Tony was never the love of my life, just my rescuer.*

“I'm so sorry,” Matthew called to her. “What did I say?”

She fled down the hall blinded by her tears. “Tony never loved me! NEVER!”

Matthew caught her by the hand and swung her back into his arms. “Tony loves you, Sarah. Just not in the same way I love you. I've talked to Ben. He's going to help us run away. Marry me.”

Sarah's breath caught in her throat and she was once more consumed by that ugly feeling of not being good enough for him. “You're only asking because I'm pregnant. I want romance and passion, not an act of charity.”

“This ain't an act of charity,” Matthew swore. “I planned to propose to you on the boat long before I found out you were pregnant but those shitheels with badges interrupted us. I was gonna make you a nice Cajun dinner and we were gonna eat on the deck under the stars. That's when I planned on asking you to be mine forever.”

“Sounds beautiful,” she spoke wistfully as she pictured his proposal in her mind. “I’m glad we were interrupted because I wouldn’t have had the strength to say no to you.”

“Why do you feel you must say no when your heart is screaming yes?” he questioned.

Sarah regretfully reminded him, “Even if the law would allow such a thing, I couldn’t. We don’t even know if you fathered this child.”

Matthew lowered to his knees and kissed her belly. “Regardless of who fathered this precious blessing, I want to be the baby’s dad and your husband.”

Matthew spoke to her belly, “Do you hear me, little one? This is your dad. Kick your mother if you want us to be a family. Kick her now!”

Sarah laughed and shoved him, “The baby can’t hear you, fool!”

He laughed and rose on his feet, “You would make me the happiest man alive if you married me.”

She cast aside her fear, shame, guilt, and obligations to consider what she truly wanted. “It would be my greatest joy in life to call you husband.”

Matthew swung her around ecstatically. He howled in triumph, “We’re getting hitched!”



A flurry of snowflakes blew around the windshield as Matthew drove his car for the last time. Snow turned to slush beneath his tires, causing them to slip but he maintained control. After his time in the big city, the

southern bootlegger had learned to navigate treacherous winter roads. He'd learned to use his brewing talent to manufacture high-quality booze. He'd learned to market this illegal product, make friends of powerful men, and earn a significant income during a time when the country was in the Great Depression. Matthew had learned so much since leaving his moldy shack in Louisiana, but the one thing he never learned was how to ignore his feelings for Sarah, to disregard the way she made him feel alive and saw him as no one else did.

Matthew ran his fingers over the luxurious interior of his automobile. The polished wood and lush upholstery were hard-earned. He would miss this car and the cushy life he'd become accustomed to but he had to leave it behind. Bloodthirsty gangsters would be hunting them. Matthew had to throw the goons off their trail.

He slowed down and turned into his brother's driveway. He cautiously climbed the steps, which were gleaming with ice in the moonlight. Matthew lifted the heavy iron knocker and tapped.

Jimmy answered with a grin, "What brings you around stranger?"

"You see me all the time. We work together," Matthew reminded him.

"Working is not the same as quality time with your family," Jimmy chastised him in the deep country accent that neither brother could rid himself of.

"Sorry I haven't stopped by in a while." Matthew looked over his shoulder before asking, "Can I come in?"

"Of course, but leave your guns in the car."

Matthew rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah I already know,

my lovely sophisticated sister in law hates guns and don't want them around her children."

"I hate guns and don't want them around my children," Jimmy confessed, "but I avoid ridicule by blaming the fairer sex. I don't even bring mine in the house."

Matthew nodded understandably and walked his pistol out to the car. Then he returned to the warmth of his brother's home. He joined Jimmy in the parlor and confessed his sins over a glass of bourbon.

Jimmy gasped, "She's the boss's girl, Matthew! Have you lost your mind?"

"Where are you going," Matthew questioned as Jimmy walked toward the door.

"I need fresh air, a moment to think," said Jimmy with an agitated hand on his forehead. "I'm gonna take out the garbage and salt the steps before somebody falls."

Within a few minutes, Matthew heard Jimmy reenter the house with furious steps.

"You'll get yourself killed over this broad," Jimmy spat the moment he stepped back into the room.

"Don't call her that," Matthew sternly warned.

"Dump her now!"

"I can't. I got her in trouble."

"She's pregnant?"

"Three months."

Jimmy flung his head back into the couch cushion, a show of frustration he had done throughout their youth. "Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle."

Matthew knew this was a poorly disguised jab at Sarah's dark skin and he rose to leave. "You can accept her as a sister in law or no longer call me brother."



“I’m kidding,” Jimmy swore. “You used to laugh.”

“I used to be a moron,” Matthew admitted, “but she changed me in ways I can’t explain. I love her.”

Jimmy palmed Matthew a handful of cash. Matthew tried to refuse his generosity.

Jimmy insisted, “You’re giving me your car. It’s the least I can do.”

Matthew knew that given their upbringing in the Jim Crow South, this was the most understanding and acceptance his brother could offer, and he graciously pocketed the gift. “Thank you.”

Jimmy instructed as he gave Matthew a huge man hug, “You better write momma and send pictures of that baby. Daddy is rolling in his grave but color never mattered to momma. Y’all take care of each other.”

“Y’all do the same,” Matthew said and passed him a letter. “If the worst should happen, please give this to Tony.”

“I will. I promise,” said Jimmy.

Matthew jogged upstairs to kiss his sleeping niece and nephew before bidding a final farewell. Everything was falling into place. Soon he and Sarah would be free. Matthew walked onto the porch, shoved a scoop in a bin of salt, and sprinkled it over a spot Jimmy had missed, a final gesture of protection between brothers.

Matthew reached into his trunk and slung a bag over his muscular shoulder, then he made his way down the road. He had left his home, his car, even the recipes for his illegal liquor and beer. He was determined to go legit for Sarah and their child.

Matthew raised his collar to block the cold winter breeze. He walked down the snow-covered sidewalk

leaving tracks with every hurried step. Each footfall brought him a tiny bit closer to Sarah and the happiness they would share in just six short months.

Matthew looked up at the glow of approaching headlights. The sound of tires drawing closer made him cringe. The black vehicle slowed to a creep. Its headlights threw his shadow down the street. Matthew's blood turned to ice. His heart pounded so loudly the drumming rang in his ears.

Thugs in trench coats and fedoras climbed out of the vehicle. Their ominous faces were shaded by the brims of their hats. What little he saw of their faces was unfamiliar. Tony hired out of town henchmen instead of using his crew because strangers won't hesitate to pull the trigger. Strangers feel no sympathy and they can't be reasoned with.

The world skidded to a stop as they raised their Tommy guns. Matthew wanted to run. He needed to run but his feet were nailed to the ground.

There was no point in fleeing.

No point in negotiating.

This was a hit...

## CHAPTER 14:

### A Night of Shattered Hearts

**R**apid gunfire shattered the silence. Muzzle flare lit the midnight sky like the Fourth of July. Matthew leaped, rolled, and tumbled from the spray of bullets. He ran full speed through a whirling winter blizzard to reduce their visibility. The icy wind chapped his cheeks as he cut through alleys, jumped fences, and used every trick he knew to survive.

Matthew made it to the closed arena, with the sound of squealing tires and flying bullets piercing his eardrums. The shatter of glass rang in the night as he kicked in a basement window. He dipped into the building in search of weapons Sarah had hidden. Matthew pulled a gun from behind the toilet in the restroom and another from beneath a rickety floorboard in the storage room.

The alarming racket of breaking glass let him know that Tony's hit squad was in the arena. From the sound of numerous voices, Matthew could tell there were even

more of them now. He gripped a gun in each hand waiting for them. Matthew knew he was destined to leave this world tonight, but he'd be damned if he was going alone.

The assassins hunted him down in the storage room. Matthew came up guns a blazing, firing with both pistols like an outlaw in a western. Men shook from side to side as they were pelted with hot lead. Bodies hit the floor.

Before reinforcements arrived, Matthew reloaded and shimmied up the laundry shoot. He emerged in the locker room and shot the two armed thugs who were lying in wait. Matthew took their firearms and awaited the rest of the army. He had a fiancée counting on him and a baby in need of a father. These killers would not be claiming the bounty for his carcass without a fight...



Sarah arrived at her house much sooner than Tony was scheduled to be home. She entered the mansion and walked straight to her chamber. She would grab food on the way out. She hastily packed a knapsack with clothes. Lastly, she reached into her jewelry box and bypassed the expensive rings and necklaces for a raggedy, water damaged, playing card. Sarah wept as she kissed the ten of hearts and placed it into her bra. She wanted to keep Tony near her heart even if she never laid eyes on him again.

Sarah froze at the click-clack of Tony's pump-action shotgun. He emerged from behind a curtain with it aimed at her belly. His eyes looked bloodshot and deranged. Tony reeked of alcohol. She saw his opium pipe on the

window seal and knew he was not of a mind to be reasoned with.

Tony tossed a stack of compromising photos on the bed and admitted, “I have remained in a drug-induced haze from the moment a mysterious envelope was slipped beneath my office door. As you can see, it contained some very hurtful photos of my fiancée in the throes of passion with my best friend, Matthew.”

She pleaded, “You know that was the cops. We’ve all been arrested at least once but our lawyers are too good to allow any charges to stick. The police have resorted to making our organization cannibalize itself.”

“Bon appetite,” Tony shrugged.

“We both know that I’m not the only one who made mistakes,” Sarah reminded him.

“I could have handled a mistake,” Tony confessed. “I would have broken both of Matthew’s legs and shipped him home to Louisiana. Then you and I would have gone about our lives and raised this baby. What you’re doing is an absolute betrayal. You’re leaving me for him. After all these years, how could you do that?”

Their front door creaked open. They heard footsteps on the stairs.

It was Jimmy. “Boss, please hear me out.”

Tony narrowed his eyes on Jimmy, without removing his aim from Sarah’s traitorous womb.

Tony slurred drunkenly, “I suppose you’re here to beg for your wretched brother’s life?”

A tear rolled down Jimmy’s cheek, “I already know you done killed Matthew. I heard those awful shots ten minutes after he left my house. I am here to plead on behalf of that baby. That innocent child ain’t hurt no one

and you know it's as likely to be yours as my brother's."

Sarah was inconsolable and horrified, "Tony, what have you done?"

Tony's chest heaved with furious breaths that his two-timing fiancée would have the nerve to weep over his usurper.

"Shut up before I finish off what's left of him," Tony warned as he aimed the gun at her belly.

Jimmy reasoned with him, "Matthew made me promise to deliver this letter in the event of his death. You were his friend and you took his life. You can at least read his letter."

Tony told Sarah, "In the top drawer there's a sedative. Inject yourself."

"Tony, that drug could hurt the baby," she pleaded.

"You can take a shotgun shell or a sedative. Choose," he spoke coldly.

Sarah cautiously sidestepped around the bedroom. His gun veered to follow her to the dresser. She lifted the syringe with a trembling hand and injected herself. It took just minutes for the drug to take effect. Her vision blurred. The walls began to spin. Sarah stumbled over and fell on the bed.

He instructed Jimmy, "Find something to tie her up with and do a good job. She's more dangerous than she looks."

Binding Sarah was better than shooting her. Perhaps rendering her completely at Tony's mercy would make him feel less threatened. He wouldn't be in a rush to kill her. Jimmy tied up her unconscious body and awaited further instructions.

"Now toss that letter at my feet and get the hell out of

my house,” Tony demanded.

“All I ask is that you sober up before making another hasty permanent decision. She ain’t going nowhere. There’s nothing to stop you from killing her tomorrow,” Jimmy insisted as he backed down the stairs.

Tony followed and locked the door behind him. Then he walked back upstairs to finish her off. With Jimmy gone and Sarah unconscious, Tony kicked the letter aside. He tossed a shirt over her head so he wouldn’t have to look at her face when he pulled the trigger. Tony laid down his shotgun, drew his revolver, and aimed at her heart. He yearned to at least give her parents the option of an open casket funeral. He still hadn’t figured out what he would tell the kindly people who took him in and raised him. These people accepted him for who he was and never tried to change a hair on his head. They would drop him off at Mass every Sunday before attending their own church. On days that he sang in the choir, they missed their service to support him. Most other families would have forced him to convert but the Brodeurs loved all of Tony: his goodness, his darkness, and every complicated shade in between. The Brodeurs had already buried a child. Sarah certainly deserved this but did her folks after all they had done for him? The thought of lying to them about their daughter’s death stole Tony’s breath and made his head spin.

Tony uncocked the pistol and took a moment to breathe. A flash of white peeking out of Sarah’s shirt distracted him from pulling the trigger. He grabbed it and stared with a slack-jawed expression. *How can a card I gave her when we were eight still be her my most prized possession? This was the day I showed her that she could*

*trust me. Look at what I've done with that trust...*

Tony uncovered her face and shook her but she wasn't waking easily.

"Sarah! Why do you still have the ten of hearts!"

"Go fish," she groggily murmured.

Tears welled up in his eyes. It became obvious to Tony he would not be able to carry out the act himself. It was just too hard. He would have to call someone else to put an end to her. He started cursing in his native language.

He wasn't sure if she heard his foreign tongue or if she was dreaming of their youth but Sarah slurred in her delirium, "You talk funny."

Tony burst into heaving sobs and backed away from her. It was time to read Matthew's letter. He snatched it off the floor and ran downstairs.

Tony tore open the envelope and devoured the words:

*Dear Tony,*

*If you're reading this letter I'm already dead. I understand why you've done this. You lost your mom. You lost your dad and now you believe I'm trying to steal your sister. Yep, I said it. Sarah is your sister. That's why you'll defend her with your dying breath but you won't have sex with her. Right now you're thinking I'm wrong because you were smitten the day y'all met but after that ship went down she became more than just a cute girl on a boat. You moved into a dead boy's room, took on Evan's responsibilities, and began to see her through his eyes. You're screaming that I'm wrong right now because you slept with her when y'all were fourteen but an*



*adolescent's dick has no conscience. I would have humped a jack o lantern's smile at fourteen and hoped the candle didn't burn my tip. Be honest with yourself. How soon did it start to feel wrong, after the second time? Perhaps the third? You grew up in the bedroom down the hall from Sarah. Y'all fought in the car on family trips and stood up for one another. That's the definition of family, not romance. You know that she deserves to be loved in a way you can't and that marriage would have been a mistake.*

*I never intended to take your family away. I only yearned to make it bigger. I still had hope for us reconciling someday. Perhaps you would marry Charlotte and the two of us could watch our kids play together. We'd sip beer on the porch in a world where it ain't illegal no more while Sarah and Charlotte complain that we haven't mowed the lawn yet. I couldn't picture this future any other way because you're the only best friend I got. As you so eloquently stated at the ballgame, "you're the only one for me". It's too late to plead for my life and I won't plead for Sarah because we both know that would be pointless. It's ultimately up to you. I only wrote to say that I love you no matter what and I forgive you. Please find it in your heart to forgive me, not because I deserve it but because you do. Don't drag me around like an anchor of misery. Forgive me and let me go because you deserve to be happy. I want you to be happy.*

*-Matthew*

Tony hugged a toilet and spewed vomit until he had nothing left but gasps of air. He couldn't fix what he had done to Matthew but he could still let Sarah go. Weak and dizzy, he climbed to his feet and braced a wall. Tony staggered to the banister and made his way upstairs.

He reached Sarah's bedroom relieved to find an open window and no sign of her. He ran to the window glad to see Jimmy's car speeding away with her. She was going to be okay.

Tony engaged in a desperate futile attempt to call off the hit on Matthew but no one was answering. Had Jimmy told the unfortunate truth when he said the henchmen already took him out?

Having exhausted all other options, Tony found himself praying for the survival of a man he wanted dead just minutes ago...



Sarah roused with a start. She was in a moving vehicle with no recollection of how she got there.

Jimmy tried to calm her, "I put a ladder to the window, tossed you over my shoulder, and carried you out."

"Thank you," said Sarah.

"You're welcome," Jimmy assured her.

The car cruised over Ambassador Bridge. It was a marvel of supreme architecture. The newly finished pavement was as smooth as a baby's bottom. Road signs with the Canadian maple leaf told her she'd be crossing

the border in minutes. Sarah and her child would be safe but how could they ever be happy without Matthew? Such a future was impossible to picture.

Jimmy drove over the bridge into Windsor. “I made arrangements with my wife’s kin across the border. I told them my sister in law needed a place to stay but I didn’t give them a description...”

“You didn’t tell them I was black,” Sarah gathered.

“Just wait in the car while I explain the situation,” Jimmy instructed with a comforting pat of her hand. “There’s raisins and cookies in the glove box. I know food is the last thing on your mind but it’s important to stay fed while you’re growing a life.”

Sarah nodded, “Thank you, Jimmy.”

He parked the car and climbed out to talk to a Canadian couple. She felt relieved when she saw them nodding yes. Sarah opened the glove box and dug for the snacks. She forced herself to eat for the baby’s sake but even the smell of food made her nauseous.

She looked out through the windshield unable to believe her eyes. Instead of Jimmy offering compensation to harbor Sarah, the Canadian couple paid him. Jimmy hadn’t rescued his pregnant sister in law. He had sold her.

Sarah fled the car. She ran as fast as her medicated body would allow. Jimmy caught her, tackled her, and drug her back to the human traffickers. Sarah’s groggy swings were no match for Jimmy’s brawn.

He hissed in her ear, “Being sold to a brothel is better than death. Tony would have blown off your head if I hadn’t saved your life. You should be thanking me.”

“He wouldn’t have hurt me! Tony would have come to his senses!” Sarah screamed. “When he finds out what

you've done, he will kill you!"

Jimmy chuckled, "Keep telling yourself that. These absurd fantasies will help you through long nights in the whore house. You got my brother killed. You should be grateful I didn't break your neck."

Jimmy held Sarah down in the cold snow while the others clapped her in chains. Seventy years after Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves Sarah was reduced to shackles by a man whose kin dwelled in her womb.

## CHAPTER 15:

### The Iron Coffin

Jimmy stuffed a fighting Sarah in the backseat of his accomplices' car.

He asked the pair of criminals, "Do y'all have an extra shirt? The whore tore mine and I don't want questions from the Mrs."

"You're in luck," said the woman. "You're taller than my husband but the shirt should fit."

Jimmy climbed into their backseat with Sarah. The others enjoyed a smoke in the front seat while they waited for Jimmy to change. He peeled off the shirt Sarah had ruined in the struggle. His body was divine thanks to years of hard work brought on by financial hardships. He was a being of supreme physicality. Perfect except for the scars left by a sociopathic madam four years ago.

"How long were you and Madam Crenshaw screwing before you sold your sister to her?" asked Sarah.

Jimmy addressed her with a bewildered expression,

“Excuse me?”

“If I had to stab that beautiful body I would avoid your vital organs too,” Sarah admitted. “From the appearance of those scars, she must have loved you.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, you crazy bitch,” Jimmy swore as he buttoned up the new shirt.

Sarah refused to relent. If she was facing a life of servitude she was determined to oust this slimy bastard, “Madam Crenshaw told a reporter that she shouldn’t bear all the blame for Nicole’s death because she was permitted to bring her to the brothel. Matthew and Tony assumed that she was going to tarnish Nicole’s name by claiming she wanted to be a whore. You had Tony threaten Crenshaw out of telling the parole board the truth. It was you who gave her consent to kidnap your sister, you piece of garbage! After Nicole died and you couldn’t receive her wages, you sold Matthew to Russo!”

“My shit father sired ten kids, clutched his chest, and killed over!” Jimmy yelled. “Leaving me to shoulder the responsibility for everyone! There was no work other than sharecropping and it wasn’t enough! We were starving! Nicole was deaf! DAMAGED! She would have never fetched a decent husband and remained a burden forever!”

Even the goon in the front seat condemned him, “You sold your sister and brother? We can’t do business with you. There isn’t a soul on earth you won’t cross.”

Jimmy explained in a desperate plea to save his new business relationship, “In dark times all you can do is sell whatever resources you have. The only things I had in abundance were brothers and sisters.”

The woman up front had never been more repulsed by a human being. “Why have yourself stabbed?”

“I couldn’t appear to have given Nicole up without a fight. Madam Crenshaw had nearly finished nursing school when the Great Depression hit. She knew where to cut me so I wouldn’t suffer grave injury,” Jimmy replied.

The Canadian man put a pistol in Jimmy’s face. “You sold your brother into slavery and your sister to a whore house. How do I know you won’t rat on us the moment you’re in a pinch? Leave my money on the seat. Get the hell out of my car and take your whore with you.”

Jimmy complied to avoid eating a bullet. The other criminals drove away. Jimmy struck Sarah to the ground. She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of crying out. Sarah just stared up at him with furious heaving breaths.

“Do you have any idea how much money I just lost!” He screamed and yanked her out of the snow.

Blood trickled from Sarah’s nose with no free hand to wipe it away. “You’re a monster.”

“I’m a realist,” said Jimmy. “Your little stunt solved nothing. There’s always another brothel. Falconi needs girls. I didn’t want the risk of selling you that close to home but you’ve left me no choice.”

Jimmy pulled out an abortifacient he bought from the apothecary. “Drink up. Nobody wants a pregnant whore.”

Sarah bumped the vial from his hand and crushed it beneath her heel.

“Fine,” Jimmy snarled. “We’ll do this the hard way. Falconi is going to strap you to a bed, pry your legs apart and have it cut out of you.”



On the opposite side of town, Tony was still praying when the phone rang at last.

“Hello, Hello!” He cried frantically into the receiver.

“Tony, I’m sorry. Please don’t hang up,” Matthew pleaded amidst the sound of gunshots.

“Thank God you’re alive!” Tony shrieked. “You have nothing to be sorry for. I made a terrible choice tonight but I will save you!”

“Forget about me,” Matthew pleaded as the shots continued. “I need you to save Sarah. She’s in danger.”

Tony assured him, “Sarah is safe. Your brother rescued her.”

Matthew pleaded as he remained barricaded in the office of the boxing arena dreading the moment the henchman would shoot through the door, “You don’t understand. It’s Jimmy who poses the danger. I drove to his home tonight. He told me he had to take out the garbage and salt the steps. Then he got into my car and removed the bullets from my gun. I was defenseless when the hitters showed up. If not for the stash of weapons at the boxing ring I would already be dead. Now I’ve run out of ammunition.”

“Is that where you are, the boxing arena?” Tony asked in a panic.

“Yes, I barricaded myself in the office but they’ll be on me soon. I killed a lot of their crew,” Matthew regretfully informed him.

Tony assured him, “You’re in luck. I recently acquired that property to launder my money. There’s a safe behind you. The combination is 32-18-47. Take out every dollar and offer it to those hitmen right now!”

Matthew did as he was told but the assassins refused



to accept his offer. “They don’t believe me. They think it’s a trick. I tried to tell them you changed your mind and I offered to put you on the phone but they ain’t listening.”

“Don’t give up. It’s not over,” Tony pleaded. “I need you to lock yourself inside the safe and hold out until I get there. Its cast iron. They can’t shoot through it. They won’t even try because the ricochets will kill them.”

Matthew cringed at the thought of encapsulating himself. “That safe is an iron coffin! I’ll run out of air! I’d rather open the office door and eat a bullet right now!”

“Matthew! I don’t have time for your claustrophobic cowardice!” Tony shouted through the phone. “You are soon to be a father! Dads do things they are terrified of for the good of their families! I need you to stay alive and help me find Sarah!”

“If I don’t make it, search the nearest brothels for Sarah,” Matthew pleaded.

“Why would she be there?” asked Tony.

“Because I have a feeling it’s what Jimmy did to Nicole,” Matthew confessed. “He betrayed me tonight, proof that he has no family loyalty.”

“You and I will check the brothels together after you climb into the safe,” Tony promised.

Matthew shook his head in horror of his greatest fear, “I can’t do it! I would rather get shot than suffocate!”

“If you love Sarah and you value me you will climb in that damn safe and live long enough to fulfill the promises you made in that letter!” Tony demanded. “I want our kids to play together on adjoining properties. I want to enjoy a beer on the porch without skulking in the shadows because we legislated to make it so.”

“It was just a dream,” Matthew uttered in defeat,

knowing he would be killed at any moment.

“It doesn’t have to be,” Tony swore. “The man who wrote that letter had more faith in me than I had in myself. Believe in me one more time. I will not let you die.”

The henchmen were bursting into the room.

Tony yelled at Matthew, “GET IN THE SAFE NOW!”

Matthew escaped the spray of bullets and closed himself in just in time.

“Ceasefire you idiots!” yelled the lead hitman after one of his thugs fell to a ricochet. “It’s iron. We can’t shoot through it. We’ll have to wait him out. He’ll run out of air.”

They heard the panicked screams of Matthew from within the iron coffin and realized a bullet would have been more merciful.

“This is just cruel,” one of the goons admitted in response to Matthew’s tortured cries. “Give me the combination so I can get you out of there kid. I’ll kill you quickly. I promise it won’t hurt.”

“No!” Matthew stubbornly held out, enduring his worst nightmare with faith that Tony would rescue him.

“Any death has to be better than a slow, torturous, suffocating demise,” the goon reasoned with him.

Matthew’s wails of terror continued as the henchmen talked amongst themselves.

“The kid wasn’t lying. He did have money to pay us with,” said one of the assassins as he stuffed his pockets with the arena’s cash.

“Cafero owns this arena and I have no intention of invoking his wrath. Put the money back,” their leader growled and the others complied.

It took about ten minutes for Matthew's wails to diminish, a sign that he was running out of air. The gangsters grinned triumphantly. This standoff would be over soon and they could collect their pay.

Tony burst through the door with a suitcase full of cash. "I'll take it from here."

"He was a tough bastard," the lead assassin admitted. "Killed half my crew."

Tony gave him an additional stack of money from the safe. "Compensation for your losses. Get the hell out!"

The hitmen rushed out. Tony cranked the dial of the safe. It sprung open. Matthew slumped out as blue as a berry. He wasn't breathing. There was no heartbeat. He was gone...



Sarah was overwhelmed by the feelings of dread and déjà vu as she rode to yet another prisoner swap. The only thing Falconi was willing to accept in trade for Sarah was Tony. Killing Tony would make Falconi king of the criminal underground. Sarah couldn't believe that the man who was aiming a shotgun at her was prepared to die for her. Tony was an enigma wrapped in a riddle. Falconi didn't bother to blindfold Sarah. She had already seen their faces. Tony's hands were tied behind his back as he walked toward his doom. They met in the middle.

A tear rolled down Tony's cheek as he regretfully informed Sarah, "I'm so sorry. I tried to stop the hit but it was too late. Matthew's last thoughts were of you. He endured his worst nightmare out of love for you."

Sarah threw her shackled arms around Tony and wept on his shoulder. "I never wanted things to end this way. I love you, Tony. I just..."

"I understand." He kissed her cheek and for the first time, she found comfort in the chastity of it, the innocent kiss of a brother.

"I love you," Tony vowed and allowed the bad guys to take him.

Tony was forced to kneel before Jimmy, Falconi, and two other gangsters. They stood before him with all the menacing of the four horsemen of the apocalypse. They raised their pistols to riddle his body with holes.

Sarah clenched her eyes and screamed at the sound of gunfire. She screamed to drown out the horror. She screamed to make it all end. Even as a pair of strong arms circled her she did not cease her screaming. She fought until a voice echoed in her ear that everything was okay.

Sarah opened her eyes to find Matthew holding her. His smoking rifle lay on the ground at her feet. Matthew had dropped Falconi, Jimmy, and the other goons with the precision of an expert marksman.

"I thought you were dead," Sarah wept in Matthew's arms.

Matthew blessed her lips with a kiss and confessed, "I would've been if Tony wasn't desperate enough to stab me in the heart with one of your piss needles."

Tony walked forward and shook his head, "It's called adrenaline. You are the dumbest smart person I've ever met."

Tony wiggled out of his wrist restraints and passed Sarah her ten of hearts. They hugged one another for dear life and then he forced himself to let her go.

## EPILOGUE:

### Wedding Bells & Shotgun Shells

**M**atthew and Tony acquired neighboring properties on the Canadian side of Lake Saint Clair. They had a beach for a yard and the sunsets were breathtaking. Since Matthew missed his opportunity to propose to Sarah on the heart-shaped lake, he decided to wed her there. His family came up from Louisiana. They were quite loving to Sarah without Jimmy around to poison everyone with his bigotry. Sarah's family had driven up too.

Everyone was happily surprised by how smoothly the ceremony was going. The Canadian people minded their own business. A man was able to profess his love to a woman without the police being called by nosey, self-righteous, zealots.

Sarah rubbed her giant belly with embarrassment. "Daddy, I feel like a whale."

Tom lifted her veil, kissed her forehead, and

delicately replaced it. “You are beautiful, pumpkin. No one is gonna pay any mind to that belly.”

Sarah grinned from ear to ear, convinced that she had the best papa in the world. She hooked her arm around his. He grabbed a shotgun with his free hand.

Sarah gasped in shock, “That isn’t necessary!”

Tom smiled at her. “Now relax pumpkin. It’s just a little insurance.”

The aisle was lined with beautiful seashells and led to a pavilion festooned with flowers and ribbons. Matthew, Tony, Charlotte, and the clergyman waited for Sarah to make her entrance.

Tom proceeded to walk down the aisle with Sarah in one arm and a loaded shotgun in the other. Their sophisticated northern guests were appalled. Their southern guests, including Matthew’s own family, complimented the make and model of the firearm. Some even commented on what shotgun they used for their own daughter’s wedding.

Tom was wrong in assuming no one would notice Sarah’s belly. The Louisiana natives spoke of it but only to whisper compliments and congratulations.

“That’s a blue ribbon belly, Sarah.”

“You’re carrying low. It’s likely a boy.”

The northern guests felt like they were on a foreign planet. Sarah shook her head with amusement. There was nothing in the world more special than family. Tom dutifully left his only daughter at the altar. He sat down next to his wife with the shotgun on his lap.

Sarah and Matthew joined hands, looked into each other’s eyes, and began to recite their vows.

The celebration went well into the night. Two

families who could not have been bigger opposites broke out their banjos, harmonicas, and fiddles and jammed together. Some were even playing the spoons and blowing on jugs. There were crawfish, clams, and other southern favorites, along with fancier foods to accommodate the northern guests.

The best part about this celebration was looking forward to doing it all over again tomorrow. Tony didn't feel it would be fair to make his family drive across the country twice so he and Charlotte would be getting hitched tomorrow.

Matthew swayed with Sarah beneath the stars as folks ran amuck on the beach. The lovers were in a dreamy world of their own as waves lapped onto the shore.

She looked up at him and whispered, "You could have suffocated in that safe but you locked yourself in for me."

He shrugged, "I knew I'd survive. The only one who has ever taken my breath away is you."

Matthew and Sarah floated into an epic kiss and vowed to remain in each other's hearts for infinity.





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Catalina DuBois was first published at the age of eleven and has loved writing historical thrillers ever since. She resides in Roswell, New Mexico with her husband and daughter, where she is writing *Infinity: Season of the Witch*.

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