

## Chapter 1

### Lili

“Let me out!”

I banged my fists on the door until they hurt.

No one came. No one answered.

My heart hammering in my chest, I spun and paced across the locker room. I’d been yelling and banging for the last hour. Now, my throat was hoarse and my hands were throbbing.

The gym locker room was sparse. Old, battered lockers in faded gray lined one of the plain, cinder block walls. I chafed my hands up and down my cold arms. My thin T-shirt wasn’t keeping me warm. There was nothing in the lockers. I’d checked. I’d been hoping for a helpful crowbar or hammer.

But nope, nothing.

Story of my life. Things were never easy.

I pressed my back to the cold wall and slid down until my denim-clad ass hit the chilly concrete floor.

“It’s going to be okay, Lili.” My voice echoed in the room.

It wasn't. I didn't believe that for a second. Not since two of Chadwick Goodyear's goons had dragged me in here and locked the door.

Pressing a palm to my face, I tried some deep breathing. That was supposed to head off a panic attack, right?

I didn't know what was going on. One minute, I'd been helping sort some of Dad's gear, the next, the guys had grabbed me. They were standard-issue goons—thick necks, bulky bodies, and badly fitted suits. Goodyear had a whole squad of guys like that to do his bidding.

I'd spent plenty of time at this seedy warehouse over the years, even when I hadn't wanted to. It housed a *very* illegal fight ring. The people here could be rough, tough, and dangerous. In the ring here, few fighters wore gloves, and there were no rules except to win. I knew some fighters had been badly hurt, and a couple had even died.

Dad was a trainer. By day, he worked at his boxing gym, but at night, he trained here. I swallowed. I hadn't wanted him to work the illegal fights, but I got the feeling he couldn't say no to the man holding the purse strings.

I did the books for Dad's gym. I snorted. Okay, and stocked the gear, paid the bills, organized the cleaning, took care of the memberships. Dad treated me like an unpaid slave, most of the time.

*How the hell had I ended up here?* I wrapped my arms around my knees.

It had just been me and Dad since my Mom left when I was little. Brock Armstrong was gruff, rude, and a man's man. He'd had no freaking clue what to do with a little girl, and I'd tagged along around the gym like a shadow. I closed my eyes. He hadn't beaten me, and most of the time, didn't even realize I was there, but he was quick with a complaint if I didn't do something he wanted.

I sighed. Clearly there was something wrong with me. Mom hadn't wanted me, and Dad only wanted me so I could make his life easier.

Hell, even my one best friend, Ava-Jane, had ghosted me. She'd dropped out of my life three months ago and stopped returning my messages.

At least I'd moved out into my own apartment two years ago. It was as far as Dad would allow me to go. It wasn't much, and not in a great part of town, but it was mine. I'd tried to leave Las Vegas once, four years ago—when I was a bright-eyed, twenty-year-old filled with dreams and hope—but Dad had disabled my car, taken the money I'd saved, and ranted.

*You owe me, girl. For all those years I fed and clothed you. You ain't leaving.*

So, I kept working for Dad. I did some bookkeeping on the side, and was squirreling away my money until I had enough to disappear and start fresh. I dreamed of going somewhere different. Of heading to the coast and finding a nice beachside town.

Something told me there'd be no beaches in my near future.

I stared at the bare wall. What the hell did Goodyear want with me?

Dad trained four fighters for Chadwick Goodyear. My stomach did a sickening turn. The guy gave me the creeps. No, honestly, he scared the hell out of me. I'd never met someone as two-faced as him, who would trample anyone to get his own way.

Most of Las Vegas knew Chadwick Goodyear as a pillar of the community. He was in his late fifties, tall, fit, with a distinguished head of gray-streaked hair. He was a successful businessman, and he looked it. He'd turned his family's trucking business into one of the largest transportation companies in the country. He owned loads of Vegas real estate, had a glossy, blonde trophy wife, and three grown-up kids. The perfect family that he always trotted out for photo ops. They went to church every Sunday, attended the best parties and charity events, had all the casino owners on

speed dial.

I'd like to say that no one knew Goodyear was an asshole, but that wasn't true. There had been scandals. He'd been involved in some bad business deals, he'd stolen money from investors, and bullied some of his competitors. He'd denied it all and tied everything up in so many legal cases, they were still tangled up in court. He'd also been caught cheating on his wife—several times. His wife hadn't left him, and I assumed the other women were eventually paid to disappear. On top of all that, just the other month, he'd been caught on camera saying horrible, racist things.

That story had also faded into the ether.

When you had enough money, I guess you could do anything.

I snorted. I knew nothing about having lots of money.

But very few people knew that Goodyear also loved to watch fighting—the bloody kind, where bones got broken, and men's blood splattered the floor. And I bet they didn't know that he poured money into this place and supported four fighters that my dad trained. I'd catch glimpses of him on fight nights, drinking with friends, scantily-clad women dripping off him.

I chafed my arms again. I had no idea why his men grabbed me. I certainly wasn't beautiful or glamorous enough for him to show any interest in me.

The door rattled and the handle turned. I shot to my feet, adrenaline hitting my system.

My dad slipped into the room.

He'd come. God, I hadn't even considered he'd lift a finger to help me.

He wasn't tall, but he was broad. He still had wide shoulders and beefy arms from his boxing days, and he trained a few times a week. He liked his food and beer, though, and it showed in the slight gut he'd added the last few years. His black hair was mostly gray and he kept it shaved

short. I knew I looked like my mom, with her russet-brown hair, and I had none of Dad's strong, craggy features. The only thing he'd given me were my brown eyes.

"Dad."

He didn't meet my gaze, shuffling in, then shoving his hands in the pockets of his sweatpants.

"I don't know what's going on." I spread my hands. They were shaking. "Some of Goodyear's goons dragged me in here and didn't say a single thing. What's happening?"

"Lili..." He released a breath. "It wasn't supposed to end up like this." He lifted his head, and now I saw something I don't think I'd even seen in my father's eyes: regret.

"What's going on?" My voice was a monotone, fear trickling in like acid.

"Goodyear...I borrowed money from him."

It felt like cold claws scraped down my spine. Being in debt to a man like Chadwick Goodyear was never a good idea.

"I owe him, and uh, haven't been able to pay him back."

"What did you use the money for?" He paid me a pittance to run his business.

Dad rubbed the back of his neck. "My new truck, a few card games, and other...things."

My stomach curdled. I knew exactly what he liked to spend his money on. Dad liked to visit some of the brothel ranches out near Pahrump.

"What does that have to do with me?" I asked, my voice rising.

He stared at the concrete floor for a moment. "He offered me a deal. To clear all my debt."

A chill spread through me, intensifying. "What did you do, Dad?" My voice was barely a whisper.

"He...uh, he said he'd clear my debt in return...for you."

I stared at him, a hard ball growing in my chest. "In return for me? I'm a *person*, not property.

I decide what I do with my life.” Except Dad had never really let me do that.

My father’s face hardened. “You owe me, Lili. I raised you, kept a roof over your head—”

“That’s what parents do, Dad!” My tone kept rising. “It’s what they’re legally obligated to do.”

He scraped a hand over his face. “I didn’t really have a fucking choice! When Goodyear asks for something, there’s only one answer.”

“I’m your *daughter*,” I yelled.

“Keep your voice down.” He glanced nervously at the door.

Goodyear had gorgeous women around all the time. Thin, beautiful, with heavy make-up and barely-there clothes. That was *not* me. I was five foot five with curves. It turned my stomach to say, but he also liked them younger than me. “What does he want me to do? Work for him? Do his books?”

Dad looked away again. “He...knows Kamensky has a thing for you.”

I frowned, a hot ball of emotions tangling inside me. No, this couldn’t be happening.

Anton “Rampage” Kamensky was one of Goodyear’s fighters, one Dad trained. He was a big brute, and I didn’t like him. At all. He wouldn’t take no for an answer. He’d cornered me loads of times, pinning me against walls, rubbing himself against me, asking me out.

I’d said no so many times, and he still kept harassing me.

I wrapped my arms around my middle. “What’s Anton got to do with this?”

“So, Anton’s lost quite a few fights. Goodyear’s losing money. He wants his fighter...motivated.”

“I don’t understand.”

Dad licked his lips. “He wants you for Anton. You’re going to be the prize for tonight’s

fight.”

The world spun sideways. I slapped my hand against the wall to stay upright. “You...you sold me? To be a fucking prize for Anton. What the hell, Dad?”

“I didn’t have a choice—”

“Screw you! All I’ve ever done is try to help you, even when you treated me like shit. All I wanted was you to be a father.” To show me some scrap of care or attention. For you to love me.

His face changed. I’d seen it so many times before. When Dad lost his temper, he got angry and belligerent.

“Don’t fucking complain! This helps me out and—”

“Get out!” I screamed. I flew at him, landing a solid punch to his gut. He had trained me to throw a decent punch.

He grunted and shoved me back.

“You’re dead to me,” I whispered. “You weren’t much of a father, but...” I shook my head, pain and anger tearing through me.

He’d been all I’d had, and I’d fooled myself into thinking that somewhere inside him, he loved me. I was an idiot.

No one cared. No one loved me.

He looked like he was going to say something, a muscle ticking in his jaw, then he spun and stomped out.

*He’d sold me.*

My mind spun like an out-of-control carnival ride. He didn’t care what Anton would do to me.

I’d never felt so alone in my life.

I waited to hear the door lock, but the metal clicking sound never came.

My heartbeat took off like a frightened rabbit. I inched toward the door and tested the handle. It opened.

This was my chance to get away.

I made myself wait a few minutes. To make sure Dad was gone. Every second was agony, my brain screaming at me to run.

Opening the door, I peered out into the hall. There was no one in sight.

*The back door.* There was an old loading dock at the back of the warehouse, and it didn't get used much, except for deliveries. That was my best bet.

I slipped out and moved fast. My ballet flats were silent on the concrete floor.

I had no idea where to go, but that didn't matter. I'd jump in my car, empty out the money in my bank account, and drive. Once I was far away from Las Vegas, I'd worry about everything else.

As I got closer to the back door, the knots in my stomach tightened. I was almost there.

Then...voices. I froze and pressed my back to the wall.

"You're a fucking asshole, Goodyear," a deep voice bellowed. "I should have been done with you years ago."

I knew that voice. It was Bronco. He was another of Goodyear's fighters. Chuck "Bronco" Jones was in his fifties, past his prime, and constantly injured. He'd once been famous in the ring for shaking off any fighter, but he should have retired years ago. Scuffling sounds followed, and I closed my eyes. *Please go away.*

"You're washed up, Bronco. So was your whore."

Goodyear's smug, blustering voice made the air in my lungs freeze.

I heard thuds and a grunt. I knew the sound of punches being thrown.

“And what do you know about my kid, Goodyear!”

I sucked in a breath. Bronco’s daughter was Ava-Jane. We’d met here at the fight ring. She was a few years younger than me and stunningly beautiful. Like model gorgeous. She dreamed of walking the catwalk.

What would Goodyear know about Ava-Jane? Like me, she avoided the man.

“You don’t give a fuck about your daughter,” Goodyear snapped. “You’ve used the last of my patience, Jones.”

There was the sound of more punches, followed by a long groan.

“This is punishment for trying to fuck with me,” Goodyear said, voice steady.

“I never fucked with you,” Bronco shouted.

“You’ve been sending me notes, setting my alarm off at home, keying my cars.”

“I never did any of that, you crazy son of a bitch.” A grunt and more thuds. “Gloria never did anything.”

I knew better, but I peered around the corner.

There was Goodyear, in an expensive suit, accompanied by three of his thugs. Two of those men were holding Bronco, slamming punches into the older man’s gut. The third was holding an unconscious woman over his shoulder.

I swallowed a gasp, putting my hand over my mouth. That was Gloria, Bronco’s girlfriend. I recognized her bright-red hair. She always dyed it on a regular schedule and that was her favorite gold sequin jacket. She was Bronco’s age, and loud and saucy.

*Quickest way to a man’s heart is a blowjob, Lili. Mark my word.*

Her sayings weren’t exactly something to embroider on a pillow, but she’d always been kind to me.

*I envy you that hair, Lili. You're a pretty little thing. Don't let life chew you up and spit you out.*

As I watched, I saw something drip off her dangling hand. I sucked in a sharp breath. Blood.

*Oh, no.* They'd hurt her. Was she dead?

My stomach pitched and my throat burned. I swallowed, desperately trying not to be sick.

*"Enough,"* Goodyear ground out. He reached into his jacket.

And pulled out a gun.

I gasped and jerked back. *Oh, my God.* What should I do?

*Bang.*

I jolted.

I heard Bronco cry out, then nothing.

"Get them out of here and take care of things," Goodyear ordered. "I have an appointment to get to, then I need to be back for the big fight tonight." He sounded excited.

Heart fluttering like a frightened bird, I chanced another look.

I saw Goodyear's men dragging Gloria and Bronco's bodies out the back door. Goodyear just watched with a faint smile.

My escape route was gone. I couldn't go out this way.

And I couldn't let Goodyear see me.

Quickly, I jogged back down the hallway. There was no way I could make it out the front.

Goodyear had guards out there. Maybe I could find a window—

I rammed into a hard body and stumbled back.

"What the fuck are you doing out here?"

It was another one of Goodyear's men. One who'd locked me in the room earlier. He didn't

wait for an answer. He grabbed my ponytail and yanked me down the corridor.

Pain exploded through my scalp and tears filled my eyes.

Without any ceremony, he tossed me back in the room. I lost my balance and hit the floor.

Pain flared in my hip.

He disappeared out the door, then reappeared holding a black dress. “You need to wear this tonight.” He tossed it at me.

I caught the cheap satin. The dress had tiny straps and was short. Very short. It was designed to show off everything. He tossed a pair of cheap, strappy high heels at me.

I swallowed, my stomach hollowing out. There was no way for me to escape.

Tonight, I’d be the prize for Anton to win.

“Who...who’s fighting tonight?”

“Rampage,” the guard said with an ugly smile.

“And?”

“The Wolf.” He strode out the door. It slammed behind him, and this time, I heard the lock click.

But as I sat there, the dress clenched in my hand, I felt a tiny shred of hope.

*The Wolf.*

Cole Black was one of the best fighters in the ring. He didn’t fight all the time, but when he did, he always won and the crowd loved him.

Anton had lost to him recently and had been enraged. He was desperate for a rematch.

I hugged the stupid dress to my chest. I’d spoken with Cole a couple of times. He was quiet, a little scary, but he seemed decent.

I needed the Wolf to win.

He was my only chance.