



BANNER

DEVILS CREED MC

REBEL OUTLAW

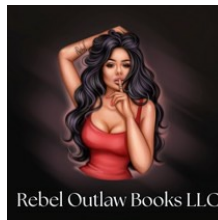
Banner

A Devils Creed MC Novella

Devils Creed MC

Book 1

Rebel Outlaw



For my Book World Family

I couldn't have done any of this without the encouragement and support of some of my closest friends in the author community. From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

Also, a HUGE shout-out to Debbie, Renae, and Cassandra, who run the show behind the scenes. You ladies are Rockstars, and I appreciate you dearly.

I do things like get in a taxi and say, “The library, and step on it.”

— David Foster Wallace

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Note From The Author

A gentle reminder that Banner Devils Creed MC is a work of fiction. While the story takes place in New York, there are certain aspects that are protected by copyright and trademark laws. Therefore, *REAL* places, names, and locations have been altered.

Acknowledgments

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Chapter 1

Banner

Bent at the waist with my arms draped across the railing, I watch closely as every member of the club works tirelessly to help get our current order filled.

A lot of shit has happened lately, and we're all exhausted. From shipments being hijacked out at sea, to money going missing, even so far as someone being stupid enough to target the locals under our protection.

“Ever think about handing over the keys to the kingdom and taking off?” Kane, my treasurer asks, stepping up beside me.

I turn my head and lift a brow. He knows my history and how I've been forced to leave once before. The Army or jail had been my only options, and back then, a cage felt like a death sentence—still did if I was telling the truth.

I shake my head. “Never. I'll never give it up.”

I turn back to survey my men pulling transmissions and disassembling motors. All these parts had been sold and would soon be packed into shipping containers and loaded onto The Lucifer. At sunrise, The Lucifer would head out to sea and reach its final destination in the weeks to come.

Running a chop shop was risky, but it was profitable—at least it had been.

As president of the Devil's Creed MC, I was used to maneuvering through political minefields, but whatever was happening now, wasn't the norm. The city had always been a melting pot, a playground for various criminal elements to fight for their supremacy and to maintain some semblance of peace; a treaty had been agreed upon. There was enough room

for everyone to prosper, but it required respect and motherfuckers staying in their own lane. Someone had forgotten this cardinal rule, and I was going to find out who.

As king of the city that never slept, it was my birthright to keep the peace.

“Yo!” I look over my shoulder and nod at Link.

I hope like fucking hell he's got the information I've been waiting on.

Pushing off the rail, I move back into my office, expecting my VP to follow.

“Tell me you have something.” I take a seat and wait.

“I do.” He drops a file on my desk and motions for me to open it.

I look up with a lifted brow.

Link rolls his eyes. “It ain't gonna bite ya.”

I pull the file closer, flip the cover, and quickly scan the contents. Rage like I've never felt before surges through my veins.

There are photos of Ivan-fucking-Romanov and a cop with their heads together, looking too fucking cozy, discussing only God knows what. There are rules we all abide by and at the top of that list is Don't Talk to the Cops.

My head cocks to the side as I scrutinize the grainy image of the pig. I've seen him before, but I can't recall where.

Pushing that thought aside for the time being, I flip through the remainder of the file, and there's a lot of shit there—meetings, money, property.

“Where'd you get this?” I ask.

“It was delivered anonymously.”

My eyes fly to his. “Come again?”

Link rubs at the back of his neck and sighs. “It was delivered anonymously.”

I scratch the days' worth of stubble on my jaw. “Anonymously.” It's not a question, I heard him the first time, but it doesn't make sense. Who would benefit from us having this information?

Link motions for the file and I slide it back to him focusing intently as he reads through all the information.

“How the hell did we miss that Ivan is a mother fucking snitch?” I ask mostly to myself. The fucking Bratva sold us out to the cops.

If Ivan is a snitch and working with the law, that means he's double-crossing the Italians too.

Pushing up from my desk I move to the window and look out over the warehouse floor.

What a clusterfuck.



As I roll through the clubhouse gates, I feel my phone vibrating in my pocket. It stops only to start right back up again, making the pit in my stomach feel heavier.

This can't be good.

Twisting the throttle, I quickly weave through the shipping containers that serve as protection between us and the outside world, around the clubhouse, and coast into my spot next to the door.

The vibrations quit momentarily but start up again as I pull my phone from my pocket. When I see Dragon's name flashing across the screen, I know he's not calling with good news. "Yeah?"

"Harbor Patrol just intercepted The Lucifer," he says in a panic.

My head whips around to the mostly empty parking lot behind me and I frantically look for my brother's bike.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

It's not here.

"FUCK!" I roar.

Jumping off my bike, I sprint as fast as I can across the forecourt to the warehouse that serves as my personal workshop.

"Pay them, Dragon. Whatever they fucking want—pay them!" I shout down the line as I burst through the freezer door, dodging slabs of meat hung from the ceiling on hooks.

"Banner," he sighs into my ear. "There's nothing I can do. The Coastguard is already on scene. They're going to seize everything, brother. Going to *arrest* everyone."

That isn't acceptable. I have people on my payroll to *handle* shit like this.

With shaking hands, I punch in the security code on my workshops door. My heart is threatening to beat out of my chest as I yank it open, skirt around my desk, and roughly shake the mouse to awaken my computer.

"Come on, come on." I growl impatiently.

Once the screen flickers to life, my fingers fly across the keyboard. The Lucifer's onboard camera slide across the screen frame by frame.

"Where are you?" I whisper as the screen cycles through different angles

on The Lucifer.

I fall heavily into my chair when I spot him. “Fuck!” There, on his knees in the middle of the deck is my brother with his hands clasped behind his head.

“I’m sorry, Boss,” Dragon says, reminding me he’s still on the line.

“Call Bianchi. It’s time he earned that fucking retainer.” I disconnect the call and whip my phone across the room.

Shit!



Seated at the head of the table, I try to keep my shit together as Link brings the brothers up to speed. It's not lost on anyone how much of an epic shit show today has been.

“Find anything?” Haze grunts. As enforcer his solution is always to take out the problem and bury it in the Hudson River but this is too fucking big. Too many eyes are on us.

Dragon shakes his head in the negative but his fingers never slow as he types furiously on the keyboard. He's been lurking in the city' private servers for anything that could explain what the fuck they have and how we can use it to get Ghost out.

“Doc, what'd they say at the jail?” Kane looks to my pop for answers.

I listen as pop relays what the lawyer had to say. The short of it, is things aren't looking good, but we won't know anything for sure until he's arraigned.

“How'd we miss this?” Kane asks, voicing the same question we all have.

I open my mouth to answer but stop as Haze storms back into church, waiving a newspaper above his head. He levels me with his dark stare and tosses it on the table in front of me. My eyes drop to the headline ‘New York's Most Eligible Bachelor is off the Market’. I keep reading, pausing when I see Ivan's name. *What the fuck?* I flip the page and there are pictures of Ivan but oddly none of his bride-to-be.

“This,” I tap the paper. “This is his next move. I just don't know what his endgame is.”

“How do you know?” Pop asks, as he steeples his fingers under his chin and fixes me with a questioning stare. That look still holds the power to halt me in my tracks and make me think twice. Admittedly, I feel a thread of

unease when I'm held under the pointed scrutiny of my father's gaze.

"Because Ivan is all about that Russian ballerina," Kane answers for me.

I point to him and continue his line of reasoning, "Because Ivan wants the dancer."

"Fuck yes, he does. He flaunts that little bitch around like she's a show pony." Link states, distaste marring his tone.

"What do we know about the girl he's supposed to marry, Dragon?"

His fingers soar across his computer's keys. "Oh, shit. Listen to this. Sophia Angelini is the bastard daughter of Tony Angelini. Her mother died when she was eight and to save face Tony took her in. He sent her off to Italy to an all-girls school where she stayed for... uh, records show she was there until last year. From the looks of it, she tried to keep as much distance as she could between herself and her family. Currently, she lives alone above her flower shop here in the Bronx. Oh, hold on a minute, what's this?" Dragon types something else and his eyes dart up to mine. "You ain't going to believe this, Prez. That building we've been trying to get our hands on. It's hers. It was part of her mother's estate, but if I had to guess, she doesn't know about it."

"If Ivan gets his hands on it..." Kane trails off.

"That's why he wants the girl," Dragon offers.

I was already thinking the same thing.

"We can't let that happen," Link asserts firmly.

I nod my head in agreement. "We won't. Get me a meeting with Alessio."

Link pulls out his phone and leaves the room.

"Anyone have anything else to discuss?" I ask. When nobody speaks up, I bang the gavel and wait for everyone to file out before following behind them.

With everything that's happened today, there's no time to sit around and cry over spilled milk. We have fucking work to do.



The next afternoon, Kane, Haze and I pull up in front of Alessio's mansion in the sky.

"What's the plan?" Kane asks, staring up at the seventeen-story monstrosity.

I really hadn't thought that far ahead; all I knew for sure was that something was going on right under my nose in *my own* fucking city and I wasn't about to sit around on my ass waiting for answers.

"Could kill 'em?" Haze shrugs.

My lips twitch. That is an option I haven't completely taken off the table, although it goes against the decades-old truce my grandfather brokered. It's probably best I leave that as a last course of action.

"Come on." Climbing off my bike, I head for the door. There was no time like the present and I was hoping catching Alessio off guard would garner more answers than questions.

"This is a joke, right?" Kane asks, eyeing the doorman and unguarded door with suspicion. I'm not seeing the easy access to the building as funny, but it's not my job to tell them how to run their shit.

"Fucking mafia," Haze snarls, disgusted by the lack of security. I nod in agreement. They've lived in this safe little fucking bubble for far too long and have forgotten one of the most important cardinal rules—never let your fucking guard down.

As we walk through the starkly decorated lobby on our way to the reception desk, I notice Haze scanning the room for threats and shaking his head. Not a single guard is stationed down here. Alessio must think the elevator, separating him from the real world, will keep the wolves at bay. Our ability to walk right in this motherfucker is testament to how off his rocker he is.

"Yo!" Kane says loudly, drawing the attention of the man behind the counter. When the attendant spins around to face us, his eyes widen comically.

"M— M—Mr. St. James," he stutters. Feeling at a disadvantage my eyes dart to his name tag.

Jon.

When he opens his mouth to say something else, I hold up my hand to stop him and nod at the phone on the counter. "Jon, call and let your boss know I'm here." He nods his head jerkily as he picks up the phone with shaking hands and does what I've asked.

This is fucking ridiculous.

I raise a brow at Kane, completely blown away by their lack of self-preservation. These rich fuckers love to look down their nose at us, but our clubhouse is safer than anywhere else in the city. Twelve-foot fences

surround the property and there's only one way in and out.

The more I look around this swanky joint, the more I wonder how the hell they've managed to stay alive with such lax security measures.

"Some—someone will b—be right down," Jon stutters. No sooner has he hung up the phone, when the elevator opens revealing Alessio's right-hand man, Giovanni Morano.

Haze nods his head as Kane and I step onto the elevator car. He'll position himself in the lobby and let us know if anything is off.

Gio smirks. "I was wondering when you'd show up." The comment catches me off guard, but I remain relaxed, giving nothing away. I'm almost insulted he thinks he can goad me so easily.

When the elevator comes to a stop and the doors open, we follow Gio out getting our first glimpse at how the other half lives.

"Overcompensating much?" Kane says, eyeballing the crystal chandeliers that seem to adorn every room. Gio glances over his shoulder, leveling Kane with a look that is meant to intimidate and probably would if we were anyone else.

"Enough," I growl in irritation. The single word meant to warn Kane off from starting a pissing contest. He rolls his eyes but thankfully doesn't say anything else.

"Banner. Kane," Alessio says as we step into his office. When he motions his hand to the chairs in front of his desk without getting up to properly greet us my fingers start to twitch with the urge to draw my blades.

I'm not at all amused by the power play. He seems to have forgotten who the fucking king of this city is, but he's about to fucking find out.

"Why are you doing business with the Russians, Alessio?" I ask, skipping all formalities, and getting right to the fucking point. Alessio's eyes jump to mine; I catch a fleeting glimpse of fear working behind them before he attempts to school his expression. He's nothing like his father was. Tony Angelini was a killer through and through. Jr. here is a fucking pussy, who's been fed with a silver spoon his entire life. He doesn't know the first thing about fighting and winning wars. He looks to Gio, but his capo can't save him. I want answers and I'm not leaving without them.

Alessio takes a deep breath and exhales slowly. "You don't understand, Banner. I don't have a choice. My father made the deal before he died. *Merda!* Whatever the fuck he got out of the deal was worth claiming his bastard daughter and in doing so, he destroyed my mother."

My brows furrow. “All that... for what?”

Alessio scrubs his hand across his face. “I don’t know, and honestly, I don’t care. Whatever my father got from Ivan, died with him.”

I believe him, but...

“What about the girl?”

“Fuck her,” he growls. “Once they’re married neither of them is my fucking problem anymore.” The hate for his half-sister is palpable. Even still, that doesn’t answer what Ivan wants with the girl when he’s so fucking hung up on the dancer.

As the new head of the Camorra, Alessio has the right to refuse the union and I can’t think of a better power play to establish his rule. It’s not adding up.

“Banner wants the girl,” Kane interjects. My eye twitches but I manage to keep my shit together. I don’t know what the fuck he’s playing at, but I trust him with my life.

“What?” Alessio asks, incredulity creeping into his tone as he unconsciously reaches for his tie, adjusting the knot.

Gotcha, motherfucker. The girl is the key.

“Your sister... What’s her name? Sonja?” I ask, turning to Kane who’s sprawled out in the chair next to me. Like a fool, Alessio’s shoulders slacken when he takes in Kane’s relaxed appearance.

“Sophia,” Kane answers helpfully.

“Yeah. I want her.” I stare at Alessio, waiting for his next move.

He shakes his head. “You can’t have her. I just told you; she’s marrying Ivan.”

Reaching into my cut, I pull out my Kogi blade. Alessio’s eyes grow to the size of saucers as they follow the path of the blade as I make it dance between my fingers. “I think you’ve forgotten who the fuck I am, Alessio. I wasn’t asking.”

With a flick of my wrist the blade sails across the room and lands between the eyes of his father’s portrait hanging on the wall.

Bullseye.

He continues shaking his head. “This will start a war—the truce.”

I slam my fists on his desk. “There’s already a war happening, Alessio! You’re just too fucking stupid to see it. You have three days to make a wedding happen.” I stand to my full height as Kane gets out of his chair and goes to retrieve my blade.

“Don’t get up, we’ll show ourselves out.” Kane chuckles, giving Alessio the finger.

“What the fuck was that?” I ask the second we step outside the building.

“Keep your panties on, Ban. You know as well as I do that there’s more at play here than some bullshit agreement his father made with the Bratva. They’re all hiding something, and this bitch is the key to it.”

Blowing out a breath, I rub the back of my neck. He’s right, but what the fuck am I supposed to do with a pampered princess?

“I’m not saying you’re wrong, Kane, but you just tied my fucking hands up there,” I say, climbing on my bike. “You just told him I’d marry his little sister. The girl’s barely fucking legal,” I growl.

“Look on the bright side, Boss. She’s a virgin,” he laughs, wiggling his brows suggestively.

Shit. The thought of going where no man has gone before and claiming her pussy makes my cock twitch.

If I were a better man, I’d back out and force Alessio to leave the girl in peace. Unfortunately for her, I’m not a good man, and the deal’s been made.

“What’s the plan now, Boss?”

Fuck it. In for a penny, in for a pound. I might as well lean all the way fuckin’ in. “Gotta go see a man about a ring, motherfucker. I’m getting hitched.”

The girl is mine.

Chapter 2

S ophia

I peek over my shoulder at Enzo tailing me in his shiny black Cadillac and sigh. I'm getting sick of being followed around like a criminal. After my father's passing last year, my brother insisted a guard be with me at all times for my own protection. I fought it tooth and nail, but ultimately lost the war.

Alessio laid down the law; since I'm not willing to give up my freedom, I'm stuck with Enzo for the foreseeable future.

"We should try to lose him on the bridge," Nova giggles.

"We're going to be in so much shit when he catches us," I laugh, glancing over my shoulder but ultimately deciding to hell with it when Nova takes off.

I pedal my pink Schwinn as hard as I can and squeal when I hear Enzo's engine rev from behind us. I look over at Nova and she looks just as nervous as I feel.

This was a terrible idea, but that doesn't stop us from pedaling faster.

"We lost him," Nova shouts as we zoom across the bridge.

"He's going to throttle us when he catches up," I yell back weaving through the park and into the borough, making better time than ever before.

In spite of the trouble I'm going to be in, I look ahead and smile. The 49th Street intersection is almost upon us and another couple of blocks after that is my happy place—Sophia's Blooms.

"Made it." I declare in a whoosh of relief.

"He's going to be so pissed," Nova chuckles as she slides off her bike and hurries to push it into the bike rack in front of the building.

“I think you’re right.” I bite my lip, fighting a grin. If I’m lucky, he won’t say a word about this to Alessio, or worse to Ivan. Lord knows Enzo has snuck away plenty of times to fool around with his girlfriends, so he can’t be too sore we gave him the slip. It’s not like he takes my safety all that seriously in the first place.

“Come on. We need to get to work.” I push the riot of mahogany curls out of my face and secure them with the tie from around my wrist, then quickly wedge the tire of my bike into the rack next to hers and weave the lock around them both.

Everyone in The Bronx knows I’m under my brother’s protection but with things heating up around the city, I’m not willing to risk it.

Unlocking the door, I step inside and turn the sign to ‘open’ as Nova flips the switches to turn on the lights.

“I’ll start the coffee,” she says, heading for the backroom.

“Coward,” I tease.

She waves over her shoulder. “Damn right, I am.”

Enzo is a jerk on the best of days and his attitude has only gotten worse lately, so I don’t blame her.

Still giggling, I turn toward the office when suddenly the front door crashes open, sending shards of wood exploding around me. My body tumbles forward, and I land with a thud on my knees.

“Ow,” I hiss, twisting onto my bottom as the debris under me digs into my skin.

“Sophia!” Nova cries out, rushing over. She barely makes it three steps before stopping in the doorway at the sight of Ivan Romanov and his two gorilla goons standing in the middle of the shop.

“Ivan,” I breathe. My brother may have promised him my hand, but he doesn’t own me or my shop. My eyes narrow. I won’t give in without a fight.

“What the fuck is going on in here?”

Enzo.

I’ve never been more relieved to hear his voice than I am at this moment. “Sophia. Go into the back!”

My feet slip on the linoleum as I quickly scramble up and around the counter. Nova grabs my hand, and together we hurry into the back.

“She’s not your property yet, Ivan. Alessio won’t be happy about this,” Enzo shouts.

Nova tries to hide her reaction, but it’s too late. I see her pity. “It’ll be

okay. You'll see."

I nod my head, wishing she were right. Long minutes pass before Enzo makes an appearance and judging by the look on his face, he's pissed.

"Taking off was stupid, Sophia," he snaps, his face an angry shade of red.

"I know. I'm sorry." I'm surprised to find that I mean it. If he hadn't shown up, I don't know what Ivan would have done.

"I've called your brother and filled him in. He's requested your presence at dinner to discuss another matter."

Great.

"Okay."

"Let's get this mess sorted," he offers. I'm thankful he isn't his usual asshole self, and if I'd thought harder about it, I'd have realized this was the first clue that something worse was brewing.



"He's waiting for you in his office." He always is. Ignoring Gio, I head down the long hallway to my brother's office.

"Knock. Knock," I say, stepping inside the luxurious space, surprised to see my other brother Niko and my sister as well. I move closer and wrap my arms around Niko's neck and squeeze. He's my favorite. Never once has he blamed me for our father's infidelities. Alessio and Monica, on the other hand, have never hidden the fact they hate me. I'm their father's bastard daughter and the reason their mother took her own life.

"Sophia. Have a seat," Alessio instructs curtly, pointing to the chair in front of his desk.

I look to Monica for a clue as I sit but other than her usual catty smirk, she gives nothing away.

"The wedding with Ivan is off and you'll marry The Butcher." Instantly my breath catches.

My eyes dart to Nico. I'm confused by the pity etched across his face.

"Ivan has brought trouble to our door and you'll stay away from him," Alessio demands. I never wanted to marry that monster in the first place. However, my mind is reeling. *The Butcher?*

"Banner will be here tonight and you'll marry in three days."

"Three days?" I shriek. This is too much, too fast; I can't believe my

brother is bargaining away my future to these animals—again.

Alessio slams his fist on his desk. “Enough, Sophia. You’ll do what is best for this family.”

I narrow my eyes at him. I don’t give a damn about this family. They look at me and see the bastard child of Tony Angelini, not a sister who didn’t ask for this life.

“How could you?” I finally ask, my voice trembling as I struggle to keep ahold of my emotions.

“I didn’t have a choice,” he snaps.

Tears slip freely down my cheeks. “I know what they say about The Butcher, Alessio. He’s a monster.” Everyone knows The Butcher is a sadist who slices up anyone who gets in his way or dares to defy him. Rumor has it that he killed ten men in the subway with his bare hands for merely looking at him wrong.

“Please, Alessio. Don’t do this,” I beg.

Alessio lunges forward and wraps his hand around my throat. Frantically I claw at his wrist, in an attempt to get free, but he’s too strong. “Don’t mess this up, Sophia. You won’t like the consequences.”

Tears continue to stream down my cheeks as my body shakes in fear. “I won’t,” I manage to choke out before he shoves me back into my chair.

I rub at my throat and heave out a desolate sob.

What has he done?

Chapter 3

Banner

Coasting behind Haze into the parking lot of Alessio's building, and even though I've already witnessed it firsthand, I still manage to roll my eyes at the lack of security. No self-preservation. Haze is just as unimpressed as we cut our motors and look up at the flashy building.

"The fucking Italians are just as bad as the Bratva." I shake my head. They draw too much attention to themselves with all their flashy shit.

"Ridiculous," Haze agrees. Smart men make moves under the radar without an audience.

I climb off my bike and motion toward the door. "Let's get this over with."

Haze dismounts his Harley and follows behind me into the building where we find Gio standing sentry in front of the bank of elevators.

"This way." We step onto the elevator behind him and ride to the top. With a *ding*, the doors slide open, and we step out and find Alessio, his brother, Nico, their psycho fucking sister, Monica, and one of Alessio's capos throwing back drinks in their sitting room.

"Where's the girl?" I ask loudly.

Monica and Alessio jolt, clearly caught off guard at my presence, but Nico doesn't miss a beat when he stands and comes over to shake my hand.

It's a shame he's not the brother in charge. He's the only one in this whole fucking family with an ounce of respect.

"She's in the kitchen. I'll get her," Nico starts.

“I’ll grab her,” Gio insists, taking off with a purposeful stride.

Monica rises from the sofa in a too-tight mini dress with her tits hanging out. Her reputation as a party girl is clear to see just from her slutty appearance. “Care for a drink?” she purrs, swinging her hips in our direction.

“No,” Haze grunts, cutting the bitch off.

Movement draws my attention and I turn to see Gio dragging my woman into the room with a hand wrapped much too tightly around her arm. I lift a brow and he drops his hand. Smart fucking man.

“Touch her like that again and I’ll cut off your fucking hands,” I growl.

Sophia lifts her head, her face etched with confusion, and my knees threaten to buckle. Fuck me, she’s gorgeous. Why the fuck would Alessio agree to a marriage with fucking Ivan?

“Come here, baby.” I wave my hand for her to come to me. I’m not sure where the endearment came from, but I’m pleased when she obediently comes to stand in front of me. I gently pinch her chin between my fingers and lift her face.

She stares at me with innocence in her doe eyes, and it pisses me off that she’s been put in this situation.

“Did he hurt you?” She shakes her head.

Good. Killing him on Alessio’s turf would take some explaining, but if he’d hurt her, I’d spill his blood where he stands.

Her eyes drop to my other hand and widen when I pull the massive diamond from my pocket. I’d purposefully chosen the largest stone in the store to make a statement. Sophia was my property now. She watches closely as I slide the stone onto her finger and squeaks once it’s on. “Do you know what this ring signifies?”

She shakes her head again.

“You’re *my* property, Mouse! Nobody gets to touch you and keep their fucking hands.”

Something shifts in my chest as I stare at the ring on her finger, the reality of my words suddenly sinking in.

Sophia is mine—she belongs to me now.

What the fuck am I thinking?

I remind myself this is just temporary—a way to fuck with Ivan, nothing more.

“Make sure she’s at the church on time tomorrow,” I growl before quickly stepping back onto the elevator and tagging the button for the lobby.

“What the hell was that?”

I ignore Haze’s question ‘cause the only thing I know for sure is that I’m completely fucked.



I can feel my enforcer's eyes burning a hole into the back of my head as we walk into the clubhouse, but I'm trying to ignore him. I know what he's thinking; it's not like me to feel any kind of way about a woman. I've had my fair share over the years, but they've always been interchangeable. One woman is as good as another. Right? Except, now I'm not so sure about that because Sophia—soon-to-be—St. James is mine and if another man so much as touches a single hair on her head, I'll paint the streets with their fucking blood.

This must be what defeat feels like. I'm so fucked.

I shake off my internal pity party and scan the common room, spotting Pop at a table in the corner with Cherry perched on his lap.

Can this day get any worse?

“Get gone,” I growl, pulling out a chair across from them. Pop pats her ass and nods for her to take off. Cherry narrows her eyes but does as she's told. She's barking up the wrong fucking tree if she thinks she's going to become an old lady one day. That shit won't ever happen. It may be hypocritical, but no man will make a woman his permanent piece, knowing all his brothers have been for a ride.

“Something bothering you, Son?”

Rubbing at the back of my neck, I'm not sure how to explain the turn of events from the last few hours. “Uhm...”

“He's getting married,” Haze adds unhelpfully. Never even heard the stealthy bastard creep up behind me.

“I was getting around to telling him.”

“You gotta rip it off like a Band-Aid. Boss.”

I roll my eyes. Good Lord, he's a pain in the ass. “I’m getting married.”

Pop looks from Haze to me, then throws his head back and laughs. The humor dies on his lips when he realizes he's the only one laughing. “Shut the fuck up. You were only gone three hours. How the fuck did this happen?”

Exhaling heavily, I nod my head for my enforcer to take off, then holler

toward the bar. "Trina, bring me a beer." The timid waif scurries over with a bottle, carefully places it in front of me, then disappears just as quickly. Pop watches impatiently as I thumb the label, looking for the words.

"Times waisting, Son."

Exhaling heavily, I let the events of the last three hours spill out between us.

"Well, fuck me. It's not exactly the worst thing that could have happened, though. You're getting older and it's time you settled down. In a way, I'm glad your hand has been forced, Son. You've been a lone wolf for far too long and it'd be nice to have a few grandkids running around this place."

Beer spews out of my mouth. "Are you off your fucking rocker? I don't even know this girl, and she *is* a girl. Way too fucking young for someone my age."

"In case you missed it, Banner. We ain't fucking Boy Scouts. We live by our own rules. If you want the girl, keep the girl and fuck what anyone else thinks." Speechless, I watch as he drains the dregs of his beer and takes off down the hall toward his room.

If you want the girl, keep the girl.

He's right, I don't give a damn what anyone thinks and for now, I want the girl.



Ryker's Island

I've been selfishly putting off coming here, but the loud buzz before the metal door slides open reminds me of where my priorities need to be— here, getting my brother out of this fucking place.

"St. James," the guard calls out my name, and I walk through. He points to the stool at the end of the row, and I move that way. Sitting down in front of the glass partition, I wait impatiently for my brother to appear and sag in relief when he finally does. I scan his person, glad to see he's no worse for wear.

He nods his head in greeting and takes a seat, lifting the phone to his ear.

"How are you holding up?" I ask after doing the same.

"Catching up on my beauty sleep." I snort. Ghost's always been a cocky

fucker.

“Bianchi's working to get you out, but I have news.” I know how my brother feels about women. He's been burned a time or ten and has zero trust left in them.

He lifts a brow and waves his hand for me to get on with it. “I'm getting married.”

“Married? That code for something, brother, 'cause I don't know what the fuck you're talking about?”

“No code.” I shake my head. “Ivan wanted Alessio's sister because she owns property near the docks. I'm making it so he can't have the girl or the warehouse.”

“What does he want the warehouse for?”

“We don't know.” I blow out a breath, hating there are so many unanswered fucking questions. “While we're on the topic of things we don't know. You recognize this guy?” I open the photo of the cop on my phone and press it to the glass. He squints at the picture.

“He looks familiar, but fuck if I know from where. Tell me more about the wife.”

“Don't know shit about the girl other than her family has fucked her. She's different from the women we're used to. She's timid, sweet, obedient.” Her fire hasn't been completely extinguished. I saw a hint of the flames hiding in her eyes, begging to be fanned.

“Good,” Ghost grunts. That wasn't what I expected him to say, but I'll take it.

“I came to warn you to watch your back. Once he finds out, he's going to look to strike back and you're a sitting duck in here.” Attacking my brother now would be the worst mistake Ivan could make. He doesn't know it yet, but his days are already numbered.

“I'll talk to Pyro about protection.” That was good. Pyro and I went way back, and he's always been a friend to the club. Even serving a life sentence he was one of the Brooklyn Disciple's most feared shot callers. “Anything else?”

“Unfortunately, no. That's all I have,” I confirm.

“Right. Tell Bianchi to hurry it the fuck up.” Ghost hangs up the receiver and nods at the guard that he's done.

As I watch the retreating form of my younger brother, I feel the urge to yell for him to be careful, but I know I can't. He can't show weakness in a

place like this. It's too dangerous.

“Godspeed,” I mutter to myself as I rise from the stool and hang up the phone.

Finished dwelling on the things I can't do anything about, I head for the exit and try to focus on the things I can control.

I got a wedding to get ready for.

Chapter 4

S ophia

“You should run,” Nova suggests, her tone deadly serious.

I turn away from the window and shake my head. “I can’t.”

It’s not that I don’t want to take off and get away from this place. Maybe go somewhere where nobody knows who I am and live the life I choose. I shake off the dream; it serves me no purpose. It’s a waste of time to want something I can never have. Alessio would have his men drag me back kicking and screaming. He’d never allow the perceived disrespect to go unpunished.

“So, what are you going to do?” Nova asks as she wraps her arm around my shoulder and offers her support.

“I’m going to do what I have to and if I’m lucky he won’t take all of this away from me,” I admit, looking around the loft apartment I’ve made my home and committing it to memory.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

Nova and I jump.

“They’re early,” she says.

I look through the peephole and Gio is standing on the other side with an angry look on his face.

Bang. Bang. Bang. “Open up, Sophia!”

I flip the deadbolt and barely get the door open before he pushes past me without waiting to be invited inside.

Asshole.

“Grab your shit, Princess,” he snarls, pointing to the dress bag that’s draped over the back of my couch. I’m not surprised that it magically appeared in my apartment yesterday while I was at work.

“Hurry up, Sophia!” Gio snaps again.

I don’t know what comes over me, but I shout back. “I am!”

“You little bitch,” he growls as his fist connects with the side of my face.

Lifting a shaky hand, I brush my fingers against my brow and wince. When I pull my hand back, Gio’s eyes widen at the blood on my fingertips.

“I hope The Butcher kills you for this.” I laugh humorlessly.

Gio’s face turns an alarming shade of red before he lunges forward and wraps his hands around my throat. “You’ll keep your goddamn mouth shut if you know what’s good for you.”

“Let go of her, Gio. You’re hurting her!” Nova cries. He swings his narrowed eyes at her as he shoves me away.

“Get your stuff and let’s go,” he demands once more before taking off.

“Don’t provoke him, Sophia,” Nova sobs.

“I won’t.” Moving quickly, I gather up my stuff and head for the door. There’s no use fighting the inevitable.

I’m about to marry a monster.



As I stare at my reflection in the mirror, taking in the beautiful ivory mermaid dress, I can’t help but wonder who picked it out. It’s highly doubtful a man like The Butcher strolled into a bridal shop in the city and asked to see something from Vera Wang’s Iconic Collection.

I smooth my palms down the silky material. It’s a perfect fit and exactly what I would have chosen.

Who would have thought that the man I’m about to marry had exquisite taste in women’s fashion?

A knock sounds at the door and a second later Gio enters. I watch him through the mirror, hoping he hasn’t come to intimidate me some more.

“Let’s go. Your brother is waiting.”

“Please, Gio, you have to help me. I need to speak to Alessio.”

He shakes his head.

“Please!”

His eyes turn cold. “It’s too late! It’s done.”

“Done.” The whispered word holds so much finality.

Straightening my spine, I cover my face with the veil and follow Gio out into the holding area.

“Let’s get this over with,” my brother says, sounding annoyed.

Those are my sentiments exactly.

Alessio offers me his elbow and I slip my arm into the crook. My heart starts racing when the doors to the chapel open. Alessio guides us across the threshold and on the other side is The Butcher in an expensive suit with an impatient look on his face. His brows are pinched as he speaks to a man standing next to him.

“Don’t fuck this up, Sophia,” Alessio hisses.

I don’t bother answering as the Wedding March starts to play. Banner spins around and his eyes lock with mine before dropping lower and slowly moving across my body as he appreciates the dress he’s chosen.

As Alessio escorts me down the aisle, I wonder if I measure up to my fiancé's expectations.

“Your bride,” my brother says, placing my hand into Banner’s much larger one.

“Yes, she is.” There’s heat in Banner’s stare as he guides me to stand beside him. My heart beats a staccato when he leans in to lift the covering from my face. I’m utterly fascinated as the look on his face morphs from calm interest to nuclear rage as his eyes ping pong from the red mark on my cheek to the split in my lip. My eyes widen as my heart beats faster for an altogether different reason. Holy Moses. That look is for me.

I give him a silent plea not to make a scene in the house of God and surprisingly, he concedes. He also catches me off guard when he reaches out and pulls me closer. I tilt my head, confused by the series of events. Everything I’ve heard about The Butcher is of a monster—a killer; not a man who’s accommodating or acts like he cares about my well-being. I push those thoughts aside as the minister continues with the ceremony.

“Do you, Banner, take Sophia Angelini to be your lawfully wedded wife?”

Banner watches my face as he slips a dainty gold band onto my finger. “I do,” he says, his voice laced with possession.

“Do you, Sophia, take Banner St. James to be your lawfully wedded husband?”

Banner lifts my hand and drops a larger gold band into my palm. My thumb traces the precious metal, the significance feeling heavy in my hand. When I look up and see the intensity in his eyes, I know there's no getting out of this. Once I slide this ring on his finger, we'll be bound together forever.

"I do," I answer, sliding the ring into place.

"By the power invested in me by the state of New York, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride."

Cheers fill the church as Banner's arm tightens around my back and his hand cups the side of my face with a gentleness that belies his size. His eyes flick back and forth between mine as he dips his head and closes his mouth over mine. My eyelids flutter as his tongue swipes across my lips, seeking entry. I've never kissed anyone before, but he doesn't seem bothered by my inexperience as he takes advantage and explores my mouth. The taste of copper fills my mouth from the cut on my lip, but I ignore it as I follow his lead and kiss him back. A growl rumbles from his chest in appreciation. Someone clears their throat, and he slows the kiss and pulls away.

My heart races as I breathe out a "Wow."

"It's my pleasure to introduce you all to Mr. and Mrs. Banner St. James." The preacher's words are met with a swell of applause.

With a smile on his face, Banner lifts our joined hands into the air and his friends and family shout their excitement.

"Come on, Mouse." Banner squeezes my hand and leads me back down the aisle.

A man in the back row steps in front of us and judging by his looks, he has to be Banner's father. He casts a concerned gaze over my face as his eyes move from the mark above my eye to the split in my lip, and growls, "Who did that?"

"Sophia, this is my pop, but he goes by Doc."

"Call me Pop, sweetheart. I asked you a question, Son. Who did that to her face?"

Banner watches me closely as he says, "I was just about to find out."

My teeth sink into my lip and his eyes narrow. *Shit.*

Holding my breath, I look over at Gio and Banner growls. "Looks like you have your answer. Better send a message so it's loud and clear, Son. Nobody fucks with our family." With a whoosh, I exhale the breath I've been holding. *Family?* Why does that feel like it was fated in the stars?

Banner's eyes dart to the men wearing leather vests that are standing at

the back of the church and doing the same, I watch in awe as they have a silent conversation. In the blink of an eye, the men jump into action and grab Gio by his arms.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he shouts as they drag him away.

Monica storms over with a sour look on her face. “What’s the meaning of this?”

“He was warned,” Banner snaps.

Banner turns his back on the entire Angelini family and slides his arm around my shoulders. “Let’s go, babe.”

If I weren’t so terrified, I’d kiss my new husband for putting my family in their place.



“Welcome home,” Banner says as we climb out of the town car in front of what appears to be a large warehouse.

“Home?” I ask skeptically.

His brows furrow. “This is the clubhouse.” He’s looking at me like I should have already known this.

I turn back to the massive building. “You live here?”

“Look. I get that you’re used to mansions in the sky, but this place will grow on you.”

My spine snaps straight and before I can stop myself, my temper gets the best of me. “I don’t live in a mansion in the sky. I’m not sure what my brother promised you, but I’m not some pampered princess.”

Banner’s lips twitch as his shoulders shake until finally, unable to hold back any longer, he throws his head back and bursts out laughing. I should be afraid for lashing out at my husband so carelessly, but I’m too entranced by the bob of his Adam's apple and the cords in his neck. He may be older, but he really is an attractive man. Getting himself under control, he looks down at me and winks. “I like your fire, baby.”

He does?

“Come inside, Mouse. The club has prepared a celebration to honor you. This is a big deal, and they want to honor their new queen, yeah?”

My eyes swerve to the door. *What if they hate me?*

“Hey.” I turn back and look at him. “You’re safe here and nobody will

fuck with you. You have my word.” I can see the conviction staring down at me.

“I believe you.”

He nods his head. “I have something to handle, but afterward, I wanna see the place you call home. How does that sound?”

My heart leaps.

“Really?” I can hear the hopefulness in my voice.

Banner’s face softens. “If it’ll make you happy, babe. Yeah. Really.”

“It will.” I smile brightly.

Grinning, he offers me his hand and giving him my trust, I take it. When we step through the doors, the men who hauled Gio away are standing inside, waiting for their fearless leader.

“Sophia, this is my enforcer, Haze.” The big man nods his head at me, then turns to address Banner.

“He’s in the workshop.”

Banner looks down at me and smiles tenderly. The look confuses me but I’m starting to think there’s more to my husband than I’ve given him credit for. “I need to handle something,” he says before scanning the big open room and nodding for his father to join us.

I open my mouth to speak when I’m interrupted by Pop. “Sophia, my girl. Let me introduce you to your new family.”

“Be a good girl, Sophia.” Banner’s words make my belly flip and warmth fills my cheeks.

“Okay,” I answer softly. Banner dips his head and presses his lips to mine. When he pulls away his eyes are filled with desire and I’m secretly thrilled to be able to elicit the reaction.

“Sophia, this is Link, the club’s VP.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” I say, smiling up at the large Native American man standing before me. I would not have pegged him as being the second-in-command of a 1%er motorcycle club. The mohawk haircut and animated cartoon tattoos covering his arms don’t exactly say ‘man in charge’.

“Are—” Link is cut off when the clubhouse door is thrown open, and Alessio storms inside.

“Where is he?” he shouts. Alessio’s eyes are wild and filled with rage.

Instinctively, I step closer to Pop.

He looks down at me and frowns. “Sweetheart, you never have to be afraid of him again.”

“Are you sure?” I whisper.

“Look,” he nods behind me, and I spin around, my dress swishing out around me. Banner and his men enter from a side door and he looks pissed. His eyes dart in my direction, softening slightly as he scans me from head to toe.

My chest warms. How can a man who barely knows me show more concern for my well-being than my own blood?

“Alessio!” Banner shouts.

My brother spins around and points his finger. “You! What have you done with Gio?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about?” Banner says convincingly.

“Don’t fuck with me, Banner.”

The room goes deathly quiet. Banner turns his head in our direction and holds my stare, the threat loud and clear. “I told all of you what would happen if you touched a hair on my woman’s head.”

Woosh. All the air leaves my lungs as I see the truth shining in his eyes; he took Gio’s life because of me. No—*for* me.

Banner nods to the bikers standing closest to the door and they surround my brother. His face turns red with rage as they drag him out. “You’ll pay for this!”

‘I have to handle something.’ Banner’s words before we came inside echo in my mind and it’s then that I realize he’s swapped out his designer suit and dress shoes for a pair of blue jeans and his boots. He’s rolled the white button-down shirt up to his elbows, uncaring of the blood splattered across the front. Blinking rapidly, I start to see my husband with renewed appreciation, and suddenly I feel lighter than I have in days.

“Sophia.” He’s watching me with concern. “Wanna go home?”

“I do,” I answer softly, meaning the words more now than I did earlier.

He smiles.

There’s no doubt in my mind Banner’s the monster everyone fears, but this changes everything. The Butcher is *my* monster.

He’s proven his word is his bond, and I trust he’ll keep me safe.

Chapter 5

Banner

Without another word to anyone, I link my fingers with Sophia's and pull her behind me out the back door. "You doing okay, baby?" I ask, looking around the lot for my bike.

"What happened to Gio?" she asks quietly.

I stop in the middle of the lot and look down at her. This day has been such a whirlwind, I can't believe I haven't even taken a fucking second to admire how beautiful she looks in her white dress.

"You look beautiful, baby." I'm such an asshole for not telling her sooner.

Her cheeks turn a beautiful shade of pink. "Thank you."

"No," I shake my head, "I should have told you earlier. I'm new at this, but I'm going to do my best to be a good husband to you." I spent most of last night telling myself this was a bad idea, but then my pop's words shut that all down. I'm not a good man, but I can be a good man to my wife.

"You didn't answer my question," Sophia says softly.

No, I didn't. I exhale heavily. I don't want to tell her.

She deserves better, but unfortunately, that ship has sailed, and she's stuck with me. "I did what needed to be done. If I let his disrespect slide, every motherfucker in the city would think it was open season to ice skate. I warned him what would happen if he touched you."

"But—"

"No buts, honey. Disrespecting you is the same as disrespecting me." I

spin around and spot my bike in the back of the lot. I take a step but come stop dead in my tracks when she tugs on my hand. Looking down at her I lift a brow.

“Uhm.” She giggles and points at my bike. “I’m wearing a wedding dress. I can’t get on that.” I take a moment to ogle her subtle curves and the beautiful dress that hugs them perfectly.

“Shit.” Running my hand through my hair, I chuckle. “I guess we’ll have to take my car.”

“You have a car?” she asks skeptically.

I chuckle. “Yeah, baby. We have a car. It snows in the winter and it’s not conducive to being on my bike.”

“I like that,” she says softly.

I tilt my head, confused.

“You said, ‘We have a car’.” She shakes her head in laugh. “Ignore me. I don’t know what I’m saying.” She looks away.

“Baby, we’re married now. What’s mine is yours.”

“Thank you,” she says, the emotion thick in her voice.

“Come on. Let’s swing by your place and then head home. I’m exhausted,” I admit, opening her door and helping her inside. She situates her dress and I close the door carefully, then move around to the other side. As I slide in behind the wheel, I notice Sophia’s knee bouncing nervously. “You don’t have to be nervous.”

Sophia runs her hands down the front of her dress as I pull out of the parking lot. “I know what’s expected of me.”

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want, Sophia. I won’t force myself on you.” I may be a monster, but I’m not *that* kind of monster. It’s important that she knows that.

Her fingers slide across my hand perched on the shifter and she threads her fingers with mine. “I believe you.” I wasn’t expecting that.

“Good.” I squeeze her hand.



An hour and half later, after getting the full tour of her loft above Sophia’s Blooms, I park in front of my—*our* brownstone.

“What is this place?” she asks, looking up and down the street.

“This...” I eye the red brick building. “...is home.”

“But... the clubhouse—”

As I move to exit the car, I pause and look over at her. “Home isn’t just a place you lay your head at night, babe.”

Her face softens. “Touché.”

Throwing my leg out, I climb from behind the wheel and shut the door behind me. I watch her through the windshield as I make my way around to the passenger side, pull on the handle and offer my hand to help her out.

My cock pulses in my jeans as she holds onto my hand, extends one leg out, and then the other.

Sophia St. James is goddamn gorgeous.

“Here, babe.” I hand her the keys and tip my head toward the house. “Unlock the door while I grab your bags, yeah?” As close as she’s standing if I don’t put a few feet between us, I’m liable to do something she’s not ready for yet.

She smiles timidly as she grabs the keys. Her hips sway beautifully as she saunters up the steps and I stand here mesmerized like a lovestruck fool. Feeling my eyes glued to her ass, she looks over her shoulder and winks. I’m really liking this feistier side of her.

Without missing a beat, I shrug my shoulders and wink back. “You’re my wife; I’ll perv on your sexy ass all I want.”

She shakes her head and laughs. “Are you coming?”

Pulling my mind out of the gutter, I reach into the back seat and grab her bags. I take the stairs two at a time and follow her inside, making sure to lock the door behind us.

I start to climb the stairs but stop halfway up and look over my shoulder when I realize she’s glued to the spot. “Come on, babe. I’ll show you to our room and help you get out of that dress.” Her cheeks turn a bright shade a pink.

“That’s not exactly what I meant.” I laugh. “I saw all the tiny buttons on the back... I just assumed.”

“It zips up the side. The buttons are just for show,” she says shyly.

I nod my head. Admittedly, I don’t know a thing about women’s fashion. I lucked out when I went into Vera’s Bridal, showed them a photo of Sophia and left all the hard work to them. When she appeared in the mouth of the church and I got that first look of her in the dress, I knew I was a goner.

“Okay. I’m going to shower if you want to join me,” I offer.

I wasn't expecting her to follow me upstairs and into the bathroom, but surprisingly she did.

Not wanting her out of my sight, I grip her hips and set her onto the bathroom counter. With her perched in front of me, I commit this moment to memory.

My bride. My wife. My woman to protect.

"Beautiful," I mumble under my breath as I reach into the shower and start the water.

Quiet as a mouse, she watches me move about the bathroom, stripping off my shirt as I go. I grab two towels out of the closet and set them down on the white granite countertop next to her hip, then slide my hands around her waist and pull her until she's seated on the edge. Slowly, I lift my hand and use the back of my fingers to push her curls behind her ear. Possession consumes me and I tell her honestly, "You're so damn beautiful. I'll kill anyone who touches you."

"I know," she whispers, placing her hands on my chest.

I've tried not to think about the wounds on her face, but it's getting hard to ignore that they're there.

"Never again," I grit as my eyes flick from the split in her lip to the bruising on her neck.

At the ferocity of my words, she instinctively smooths her hands up and down my chest. Her touch feels like a balm to my temper.

Exhaling slowly, I tighten my hands on her hips and carefully lower her onto her feet. I slide my fingers up the silky material until I feel the tiny zipper she mentioned earlier, and slowly pull it down.

Sophia's chest moves up and down rapidly as the fabric starts to loosen around her tits. I lean forward and softly press my lips to hers. "You're safe," I repeat once more as I gently push the material over her hips and let gravity handle the rest. There's a *swoosh* as the fabric falls and pools around her feet.

I swallow thickly as my eyes travel down to her pebbled nipples and groan. I cup her small tits in my palms, giving them an experimental squeeze before gliding my thumbs across the hardened peaks. Sophia's eyes hood at my touch and a whimper escapes her pouty lips. "You're beautiful," I say quietly. Her face softens.

Holding her stare, I drop my hands from her breasts, push my jeans and boxers over my ass, and kick them toward the hamper.

Sophia's cheeks redden and I can tell she's trying not to look, but her

curiosity wins out and she drops her gaze. She squeaks when she gets a look at the piercing in my dick and it's a reminder of her innocence.

Her wide eyes dart up to mine and then drop again. My dick thumps against my belly as it starts to settle in that I'll be her first.

Her one and only, my subconscious screams.

"Keep staring at my dick like that and I'm going to take it as an invitation you want me to fuck you," I growl. Waiting until she's ready to take things to the next level is going to be harder than I thought.

Her eyes fly up again and she stares at me like she's just now seeing me for the first time. "You're my husband."

"Sophia," I breathe out heavily. Just because we're married doesn't mean that she doesn't have a choice. As similar as our worlds appear, they're vastly different. We don't barter our women away to the highest bidder. "I won't force you to do anything you don't want—married or not."

"I'm sorry." She bows her head. There's nothing for her to be embarrassed about.

I tilt her face to mine so I can see her pretty, hazel eyes. "Don't apologize, babe. You're always safe with me."

I've never given a damn about women; one was just as good as another, but I'm finding there's something special about Sophia.

"I know."

Attempting to prove that she has choices, I leave her standing in her panties and head into the shower.

She watches me for a split second before kicking off her panties and climbing in behind me.

Progress.

"I trust you," she says softly as she her innocent brown eyes lift to mine.

Grinning down at her, I lift my hands and gently cup the sides of her neck. Her skin feels like silk beneath my thumbs as they trace the apples of her cheeks. "Thank you. That means a lot to me." I feel like we've bridged a monumental gap with her admission.

Sophia grins back.

"Let me rinse off and I'll grab your stuff from the bedroom," I say, and her smile widens.

Placing a kiss on the tip of her nose, I make quick work of finishing my shower and return with her toiletries, then head back into the bedroom so she can have some privacy.

I fall into bed and situate the covers around my hips then set about checking my phone.

Just as I'm about to hit send on a text to Dragon, Sophia comes sauntering out of the bathroom without a stitch of clothing on and her hair in a sleek braid.

Damn.

The sway of her hips is hypnotizing but I pull it together and lift the covers for her to slide in next to me.

Watching me, she settles in and tucks her hands under her cheek "You're not what I expected," she says softly.

Lifting a brow, I smirk. "Is that a good thing?"

She moves her head up and down on the pillow.

Interesting.

Truthfully, she's not what I expected either.

"Get some sleep, Sophia. You have nothing to fear here," I say around a yawn.

Her lips form a soft smile as her eyes close. Like a creep, I watch her find sleep and it hits me.

I want this marriage to work.

Chapter 6

S ophia

Laying perfectly still, I wait for the edges of sleep to fade and my surroundings to register. The first clue that *I'm not in Kansas anymore* is the bulging bicep under my cheek. Then, there are the softest sheets on the planet wrapped around my naked body. None of these are things I'd find in my cozy loft. I liked nice things, but I didn't like to splurge on unnecessary stuff.

Blinking away the fog, I tip my head upward and freeze; my new reality hits me like a wrecking ball.

Banner—The Butcher—*My husband*.

I bite my lip and rake my eyes across his chiseled features. Everything about him screams masculinity and power and it's those attributes that make me feel safe, because he doesn't use them to lord over me, but to protect me. My body softens and I continue to take him in. His dark, thick hair is mussed, and his cheeks are pink from sleep, and that cupid's bow... My tongue swipes across my bottom lip at the memory of his mouth on mine.

Lifting slightly, I take in my husband's full glory. Broad shoulders, thick arms; he's strong, but nobody sane would ever question that logic given his reputation as the most feared man in the city. What little I've experienced of him I can see why.

Continuing my exploration, I run my eyes across the wide expanse of his chest, down the ridges of his rock-hard abs, and lower still, following the thin trail of hair to the tented sheets around... Jerking my head up, I lock eyes with Banner and there's an amused look on his face.

I squeak and he smiles.

“Good morning, Mouse.” The raspy timbre of his voice creates a surge of moisture between my legs. I’m not sure why he keeps calling me a mouse, but I’m too embarrassed at being caught gawking to question it.

“Good morning,” I whisper.

With unimaginable strength, Banner tightens his arm around my waist and jackknives up into a sitting position and I squeak again in surprise. His hips twist and with great care, he guides me onto my back. With his hands braced on either side of my head, he stares down at me with a soft expression on his handsome face.

“How’d you sleep?”

Curious about how it feels, I lift my hand and graze my knuckles against his scruffy jaw. Surprisingly, it’s softer than I expected. Realizing he’s waiting for an answer, I shift my gaze to his and admit, “Better than I have in a long time.”

Amusement twinkles behind his eyes.

“What?” I can’t help but grin at his mirth.

His eyes widen comically, and he says, “We got married yesterday.”

I tilt my head, confused. “Yeah?”

“If someone had told me a week ago that on Saturday, I’d wake up next to my sexy as fuck wife, I’d have called bullshit.”

This is true but I can’t get passed him calling me his sexy as fuck wife. I hope he means that. “A week ago, I thought I was going to end up shackled to—” Banner growls and my voice trails off.

“I’ll slit his throat before I let him get near you again.” There’s a violent truth shining in his eyes, but it doesn’t scare me. Instead, his impassioned vow spurs me into action.

Feeling braver than I am, I take a deep breath, slip my hand around the back of his neck, and pull.

Banner stops right before our lips can touch and his eyes search mine, for what I’m not sure, but he must find what he was looking for because, in the next second, he closes the distance and slants his mouth over mine. His tongue flicks across my lips and instinctively I open them, allowing him entry as he carefully moves and settles his big body between my thighs. My nerves kick into overdrive but I’m still not afraid.

“I want you,” he groans as he grinds his stiffened cock against my center.

I moan loudly in response.

“Fuck.” He pulls back, his chest is rising and falling rapidly.

“What’s wrong?” I search his face looking for clues, confused as to why he stopped. I’m no expert, but he seemed like he was enjoying this as much as I was.

He closes his eyes tightly and shakes his head, “I’m sorry.”

I can hear the remorse in his voice, but it’s unnecessary. Placing a gentle palm on his cheek, I voice the words I know he needs to hear, “I want this.”

His eyes fly open and dart between mine. “What,” he says but it’s not a question.

I nod my head.

“Thank fuck,” he mutters, slamming his lips against mine. The kiss is rougher than our first, but it’s perfect. It feels like it goes on for hours before he pulls back slightly to trail his lips down my neck, nipping at the tender flesh as he goes, before soothing away the sting with his talented tongue.

“Yes,” I hiss.

Banner lifts his head and watches as his hand squeezes my breast before dipping his head and wrapping his lips around the pebbled peak and pulling.

My eyes flutter closed as feelings of unbidden pleasure consume me. “Ah,” I cry out, and my head arches back inadvertently pushing my chest closer to him.

His mouth moves to my other breast, and he repeats the process. “Mine,” he growls possessively.

“Yours,” I breathe as his teeth scrape down my belly, stalling before reaching my mound.

“Are you sure?” he lifts his head and asks me again. I melt into the mattress. Banner St. James is not the man I thought he was, and I don’t care what anyone else says. My husband is a good man.

“Yes,” I answer softly. I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life. I want this.

He watches my face for any changes as he moves farther down my body. But he doesn’t have to worry; I’m not going to change my mind. I lift onto my elbows when he uses his wide shoulders to spread my thighs apart. Before I can ask what he’s doing, he lowers his head and latches onto my clit.

“Oh!” I moan, my head dropping back on my shoulders.

Oh. My. God. His tongue is magic. My hips roll on their own accord seeking... I don’t know what, but if he stops doing what he’s doing, I might die here and now.

“Don’t stop,” I beg, lifting my head and threading my fingers through his hair to hold him to my center. *Oh God.*

His eyes are blazing when he lifts his head to watch my face as he slips a thick, blunt finger inside my pussy.

My eyes shutter and my breathing becomes labored. I’m so close. Banner teases another finger inside my center and stills when my body tightens.

“Relax, babe,” he says softly as he starts slowly, gently, pumping his digits in and out.

As if tethered to his demands, my tension slowly dissipates. The initial pinch of discomfort I felt from the unfamiliar intrusion subsides, and I begin to pant as a feeling I’ve never experienced races to the surface.

Banner growls at my body’s response. “Good girl.” The praise makes my pussy clench.

“Fuck. Can’t wait to explore that.” He offers a lazy smirk before latching onto my clit again.

The pleasure builds quickly from his talented tongue. “Please,” I plead, unsure what I’m begging for.

Banner flicks his tongue once more before rising up and settling onto his knees. My eyes drop to his hand wrapped around his cock and widen.

“That won’t fit,” I squeak, unable to look away.

“It’ll fit.” His voice is firm.

I’m mesmerized by the way his palm slides up and down his erection. Up, down, again, and again, his thumb pausing to gather the bead of moisture at the tip and then continuing to stroke once more.

“Look at me,” he growls. Heart racing, I look up. “I’ll go slow.”

“O-okay.” I suck in a deep breath and try to relax. I trust him.

“That’s it,” he hums reassuringly, using one hand to grip my hip and the other to align his cock with my opening. Carefully, he begins to rock his hips back and forth, working himself deeper an inch at a time. His eyes lift to mine when he meets resistance. I nod my head. This is it. He holds my stare and swiftly flexes his hips, breaking through the membrane that symbolizes my innocence, and buries himself to the hilt.

My body goes stiff. “Ah,” I hiss, squeezing my eyes shut as I desperately try to fight back tears.

“Shh, shh, shh. It’s okay, it’s over. I won’t move until you’re ready,” Banner rushes out. I hear the remorse in his tone, and oddly enough, it makes me feel slightly better.

“I’m okay,” I whisper, opening my eyes. As the initial sting fades, I can focus on the sensation of having him fully inside me, and with a flush of boldness I shift my hips experimentally. The move causes Banner’s cock to rub a spot inside me and a moan is ripped from deep within.

He rocks his hips again drawing out the same response. “Like that, do ya?” He grins and repeats the motion.

“Yes. I feel so full,” I admit, lifting my hips to meet his.

“Shit,” he hisses. “Your pussy’s so wet, so tight. Fuck, I’m not going to last.” Dropping forward, his hands plant on either side of my head and he picks up speed. His hips thrust harder and faster in a frenzy to get us to the finish line.

“Yes!” I cry out, feeling my center grow wetter. “Right there. Yes. Don’t stop.” I barely recognize my own voice and should feel embarrassed, but at this moment, I don’t care about anything but the way he’s making me feel.

“Fuck yeah, baby,” he groans.

He buries his face in the space between my shoulder and my neck, and my pussy flutters, signaling I’m right on the edge.

“Let go, Sophia. Fuck! Let go!” he demands before sinking his teeth into the tender flesh of my neck.

“Banner!” I scream as my pussy locks onto his driving cock and fireworks explode behind my eyes.

Banner thrusts his hips once more before pressing himself as deep as he can get. His cock twitches as his cum spills into me.

I lock my limbs tightly around him as my heart beats wildly.

Banner gathers me into his arms and rolls onto his back without losing our connection. “You okay?” he quietly asks once our breathing has slowed.

“Is it always like this?”

“No. This... us...” I lift my eyes to see him shaking his head. “Never felt anything like this,” he finally says.

The admission sends a rush of butterflies into flight in my belly.

I’m blown away by how sweet Banner has been to me. Nobody has *ever* made me feel special the way he does.

Chapter 7

Banner

I watch in awe as Sophia pulls a wooden bowl that I didn't even know I had from the refrigerator and places it on the island.

After consummating our marriage this morning, we lazed for a bit then got up and showered together. It took all my control not to have her again, but I could tell by her movements that she was sore.

Since then, she's been familiarizing herself with our kitchen and putting together what I have no doubt is a traditional Italian meal.

I make a mental note to thank the prospects for filling the kitchen with food while we were at the clubhouse yesterday since clearly cooking makes my new wife happy.

Feeling my eyes on her she looks up and smiles. "Is something wrong?"

"Nobody's ever cooked for me before," I admit.

Her lips turn down at this revelation. "I love to cook."

"I love to eat." Her cheeks turn pink from the innuendo, and I smirk. Her naivety is so damn adorable.

"After we eat, I have to run over to the warehouse for a little while." I pull down two plates and set them in front of the food while she grabs the silverware.

"Can I go with you?"

My brows furrow. "You want to go to the warehouse?"

She turns her head and stares out the window. "I can stay here if you don't want me to go."

I gently grip her chin and lift it to see her face. “Mouse, I want you to listen and listen good, okay?”

Her head bounces up and down.

“You are not a prisoner here. You don’t have to putter around this house like some obedient housewife.” Her eyes light up and she opens her mouth to speak, but I keep going, saying what I need to say. “You’re not a mafia wife; you’re my wife. My fucking queen.” I say the last forcefully so it hits its mark.

She covers her mouth as tears start to well in her eyes.

“Aw, fuck. Don’t cry, babe.” Wrapping my arms around her slender waist, I pull her against my chest and chuckle when she burrows her face into my shirt.

“Thank you,” she whispers, her voice muffled from my tee.

“Sure.” Exhale heavily, I seriously contemplate starting a war with her family and showing them firsthand what wet work really means. I give her another squeeze then release her with a kiss to the tip of her nose. “Let’s eat.”



Looking over the top of my laptop, I wonder for the hundredth time what the fuck I was thinking, bringing Sophia here. “I’m fucking up my first full day of being a husband.”

She lifts her head from her computer. “Why do you say that?” *Because I brought you to a goddamn chop shop and the cops are fucking with us.* I don’t tell her that of course, instead beating around the bush. “What kind of husband brings his wife to his *illegal* garage?”

Her eyes crinkle at the edges. “You mean your chop shop?”

“That’s what I said.” She giggles and the tinkling sound has my dick perking up. I press my palm against my growing erection.

Down boy.

“You’re doing fine.” I’m glad she thinks so, ‘cause she married an outlaw.

I nod to her computer. “What are you looking at?”

Sophia spins her laptop around and there’s a rainbow of colorful flowers scattered across the screen. “Working on this order for the shop.” She shrugs her shoulders.

I tilt my head. “The flower shop; is that what you always wanted to do?” I had Dragon look into her finances and Sophia’s Blooms is in the black, which is surprising for someone so young.

Her eyes cloud over and a soft smile spreads across her face. “I’ve always loved flowers. My mom used to take me to Central Park in the spring when everything started to bloom, and it left an impression.” For a beat, she seems lost in her memories until she continues. “Anyhow, a lawyer showed up at my school in Italy a month before I graduated with a letter and a check. My mother had left me money and a rundown building down near the docks. I used some of the money to open Sophia’s Blooms.”

“Italy? Inheritance?” I feel like an asshole for lying. I know all about her mother’s death, the money, and the properties that were left to her.

Sophia closes her computer and gives me her complete attention as she explains how her mother died when she was a little girl, and her father swooped in and brought her into their family. In a whirlwind, her whole life changed, and she was sent away to Italy to an all-girls school where she got her education with the focus being how to be the perfect mafia wife. She goes on to describe the turbulent relationship she has with her half-brother and sister. “I’m grateful for one sibling that doesn’t despise me. Niko is the only one who’s never treated me like an outsider.”

I clench my fists, grasping at the threads of my self-control.

My sweet wife is grateful for being treated with decency by her own fucking family.

I thought I knew her story, but it turns out I didn’t know the half of it.

Three hard knocks land on the office door before Haze shouts from the other side. “Boss!”

“What?” I yell back. Sophia giggles at our interaction. The sound makes me grin.

Haze swings open the door and comes inside, with Ronan McGregor following.

Sophia’s smile drops, and she hops out of her chair like her ass is on fire. She quickly moves around the desk behind me and I frown. Her fear doesn’t sit right with me.

“Babe.” Her eyes flick down to mine then back to Ronan.

“Sophia.” Reaching back, I pull her around my chair and down into my lap. “You’re safe here, Mouse.”

Her body is trembling and again, I don’t like it.

“What can I do for you, Ronan?”

“I came to see if the rumors were true, mate.” The smug bastard smiles, blatantly eye-fucking Sophia.

“If you're referring to my wife, then yes, the rumors are true; and while we're on the subject of *my* wife, take note to keep your fucking eyes off her, *mate*. Feel free to spread that shit far and wide.”

“I hear ye, Banner. Calm the fuck down, mate. I didn't come here to poach yer' missus. I came to tell ye the Russian is gunning for ye.” He looks down at Sophia and smiles sadly. “The both of ye.”

Sophia lifts a shaky hand to her chest, and I try to soothe her as best I can by stroking her back.

Truce or not, I was going to kill the Russian bastard for his role in getting my brother locked up, but now that he's threatened my wife, I'm going to drag his death out. Pop was right when he said a message needed to be sent. This is my city and I need to remind motherfuckers why they call me The Butcher.

Ronan hones in on Sophia's reaction to the news and frowns. I'm glad to see he's put off by her reaction almost as much as I am because I'm going to need all the allies I can get for what I'm planning.

Ronan turns his stormy gaze to mine and nods—a silent show of support.

I nod back, showing my respect.

Thank fuck.

Chapter 8

S ophia

One Week Later

The bell above the door jingles as I step inside the shop. Nova scribbles something on a pad of paper then looks up and freezes. Her eyes dart from me to the huge guy standing behind me, then back to me and her mouth falls open. I know the feeling. When he showed up this morning and Banner introduced him as my shadow, I almost fell on my butt. Hunter's gorgeous, but in a scary-as-hell kind of way. He's completely covered in tattoos, but after sneaking glances all morning, I noticed his artwork covers some pretty extensive scarring. Turning my attention back to Nova, I lift a hand and smile sheepishly. "Hi."

Her eyes narrow, but there's not an ounce of heat behind them. "Where have you been? I've been worried sick about you!" she hisses as she storms around the counter in our direction. When her arms wrap around me, I deflate. I pat her back, feeling like the worst friend for not checking in with her sooner.

"I'm sorry I worried you. I'm fine, though." Her head bobs up and down before finally she leans back and holds me at arm's length to look me over.

"I thought..." She squeezes her eyes closed. "Don't do that to me again."

"I promise." I want to make a joke about the next time my brother arranges my marriage, but I think it's too soon.

"Good." She sighs and relaxes.

Her eyes drift over my shoulder then come back to mine again. "I see

you've got a lot to catch me up on."

"You don't even know the half of it." I'm not sure how much I'm allowed to say so I veer toward making introductions. "Nova," I turn around to face my guard and wrap my arm around my best friend. "This is Hunter. He'll be watching over us for a while. Hunter, this firecracker is my best friend, Nova."

"Ma'am," he says, voice deep and smooth.

Nova's brows shoot up to her hairline. My lips twitch. I had the same reaction the first time he spoke to me too. "Uh. Hi," she says breathily.

I turn my bestie around and lead her into the back. It's hard to believe it's only been a week since I was here last. So much has happened but not for the worse, surprisingly. If I'm being honest, it's turned out so much better than I ever could have dreamed.

"I'm going to check the perimeter, Mrs. St. James." I look over my shoulder at Hunter and can see the shadows playing behind his eyes. He's not much older than me, but there's no denying he's a man who's lived through nightmares beyond his years.

I smile softly. "Okay. I'll stay right here." I pat the large stainless steel table in front of me.

He nods his head, then disappears out of the front door.

Once the telltale chime of the bell ends, signaling his departure, Nova pins me with a look that demands I tell her everything that's happened.

So... That's exactly what I do.

I don't skimp on the details, either. Explaining how Banner has been true to his word and hasn't restricted my freedom or tried to lock me down like a prisoner. I go on to tell her that with the threat of Ivan still surrounding us, he's insisted one of the club's prospects shadow me when he can't be around. Her eyes are the size of saucers by the time I'm done telling her everything.

"Wow, Soph. That's..." She swings her head back and forth and for the first time in maybe forever, my bestie is lost for words.

"I know," I agree. My life's been one crazy episode after another the last couple of weeks.

"I'm glad you're back."

"Me too—" Before I can apologize for leaving her in the trenches alone this week, the bell on the door up front jingles and that's our cue it's time to get to work.



The rumble of motorcycles can be heard off in the distance and quickly grows louder until finally, the sound has all the windows in the house rattling in their frames. There are a few revved engines and then nothing—complete silence. My lips twitch.

I turn back to the chicken on the cutting board and smile.

Five. Four. Three. Two...

I listen as the front door opens and three sets of boots “Babe!”

I look at the clock above the stove and chuckle.

6:00 p.m.

If there’s one thing I’ve learned about my husband over the last week, it’s that he’s consistent, down to the minute.

“I’m in the kitchen” I call over my shoulder. Since coming to live here, Banner has made it his mission to establish a domestic routine, of sorts, and I must say, I’m not mad about it.

Warmth hits my back as two strong arms wrap around my waist. “Let’s go out tonight and have some fun,” he whispers into the crook of my neck. I tip my head to the side to give him better access.

“I’ve created a monster.” He laughs, kissing my pulse point and pulling away.

Spinning around in the circle of his arms, I look up at him and ask, “Where are we going?”

“Haze is fighting tonight.” I peek around his shoulder at the massive man sitting at the island. Watching two men beat the snot out of each other isn’t exactly my idea of a good time, but I made a promise that I’d be open to new experiences, and being the wife of the president of a motorcycle club comes with *a lot* of new experiences.

“Okay.” I look down at my black leggings and bite my lip.

Banner laughs and shakes me from side to side. “You can wear whatever you want, baby. Anyone from the garbage man, all the way up to the mayor might be there. The fights are pretty popular.”

The mayor?

“Can I dress up?”

“Knock yourself out, Mouse.” I clap my hands, excitedly.

Banner presses a kiss on my lips and then aims me toward the stairs. I know exactly what I’m going to wear.

An hour later I descend the steps in a black halter-style dress with two sexy slits that run up the sides to just below my hips. My hair is straightened into long ebony sheets that rest just above my bottom. To finish off my look, I slipped on a pair of peep-toe Louboutins and a stack of gold bangles on each wrist. I look damn good, even if I do say so myself.

“Fuck me, babe. You look...” Banner blows out a heavy breath as his arms rest atop his head. His eyes slowly move from the tips of my toes to the top of my head, where they linger on my long tresses. Most people are shocked by how long my hair is when it’s straight and it looks like the hubby isn’t any different.

“Need to take more knives,” he mumbles under his breath as he comes to stand in front of me. His arms snake around my waist and he presses his forehead to mine. “You’re so goddamn beautiful, Mouse.”

My heart skips a beat. “Thank you.”

“I’ve got my car waiting outside for us.” His hands smooth down my naked back and he gives my bottom a squeeze before stepping back and twining his fingers through mine. I never pictured The Butcher as being the type of man who held hands with his woman, but he keeps continuing to surprise me. I follow beside him and grin to myself when he holds the door open and ushers me outside. A stone-cold killer *and* a gentleman.

“What do you think?” he asks, pointing to the sleek sports car parked at the curb.

“It looks fast.”

“It is.” He laughs as he helps me down the steps. He reaches around me and opens the car door, then guides me inside so I don’t flash the neighborhood my goodies.

It takes us forty-five minutes to make it over the bridge and into the city. I know we’re on the Lower East Side but I’m not sure where and I’m even more confused when he drives through the gates of what appears to be an abandoned warehouse.

“Where are we?”

“You’ll see,” he answers cryptically. He pulls up close to the door and cuts the motor. He aims his boyish grin, the one I’m starting to fall in love with, at me and hops out. He rushes around to my door and reaches in his hand to help me out. Banner wraps a protective arm around my waist and leads me towards the massive wooden door.

When we step inside, I’m immediately blown away. Massive gold

chandeliers are hanging from the ceiling and lush fabrics are on the walls. This place is beautiful. “Wow,” I whisper.

“A hidden gem,” Banner teases. It truly is. From the outside this place is unsuspecting, but once you step through the door you’re transported into a world of pure elegance.

“Is that the chief of police?” I ask softly not wanting to draw any attention.

“Yep, and there’s the mayor.” He wasn’t lying. Anyone and everyone’s here tonight. The place is packed, but thankfully the warehouse is big enough that it doesn’t feel suffocating.

“This way, babe.” Banner tightens his hold around me and places a possessive hand on my hip whilst he ushers us down a long hallway to where the locker rooms are. Banner leads us to the last door on the right, where a strip of painter’s tape declares the room is occupied by The Enforcer. It’s not very original, but then again, a man like Haze doesn’t need the flashy fanfare.

“You decent?” Banner shouts after knocking on the door. It swings open to reveal a smiling Kane, alongside Haze who’s seated on a table getting his hands taped up.

“He is,” Link, the VP, says as he squeezes by us.

“Sophia wanted to wish you good luck,” Banner says, causing me to blush. That’s not exactly what I’d said in the car, but I don’t argue.

“Good luck and be safe.” The men in the room grin at me like what I’ve just said is the cutest thing they’ve ever heard. I roll my eyes. *Men.*

“We’re gonna go grab our seats. See you on the other side, brother.” Haze pounds his fists together.

Okay.

Walking back into the lobby, Banner grabs a couple of beers and a glass of wine off a server’s tray, then continues deeper into the warehouse. I’m again surprised when it opens up into a larger space with a cage in the center. I look around at the tables set up around the room and start to feel uncomfortable when I notice several women standing together eyeing me angrily.

“Do you know them?” Banner follows my line of sight.

“You’re my queen, baby. Fuck them, you hold your head high.”

He’s right. I’m his wife. I nod and straighten my spine.

“That’s my good girl,” he whispers into the top of my head.

I preen at his praise and lean deeper into his side, only to feel his body

shake with laughter.

Banner pulls out a chair for me, and I take a seat. Having a sip of my wine, I let my eyes wander around the room and I'm surprised at all the club members who are scattered around the room.

I can't explain it, but knowing there is added protection around us allows me to completely relax.

Leaning into the curve of Banner's arm, I settle in for the fight.

Chapter 9

Banner

There's a feeling of déjà vu as I stand here on the catwalk watching my crew in motion down below. We've been on a bit of a time crunch to replace the shipment that the ATF intercepted.

"We'll get it done, Boss."

"We don't have a choice."

I glance at Haze standing next to me, my eyes going to the stitches above his brow. He won his fight last night, but not without letting his opponent beat on him for a couple of rounds. If I didn't know any better, I'd think my enforcer has a death wish, but that's not it.

"You gotta stop that shit." I lift my chin toward his wound.

Haze turns around and pins me with narrowed eyes. "You don't know what you're talking about."

I lift a brow. We both know that's not true. Haze has been punishing himself for the missions Uncle Sam demanded we complete. We didn't agree with our orders but that's the thing about being a soldier. It wasn't up to us; disobeying wasn't an option.

"Ain't talking about that shit. I got news about your brother. Word on the street is that the Russians have put a target on his back." he claims, cleverly changing the subject. I grunt. I'd heard just as much from Ronan when we'd spoken at the fight.

"Well, for now, he's safe in solitary confinement. He'll be there for the next few days for putting a man in the infirmary." I rub at the back of my

neck. Can't we ever catch a fucking break?

Haze hands me a burner and I quickly punch in the warden's number. It rings several times before going to voicemail. I hang up, then hit the number again. On the third ring, O'Malley finally answers. "I'm a little busy right now, Banner."

Seems I'm going to have to send a message to remind everyone on my payroll what happens when you fuck around.

"I don't give a fuck, boyo!" I growl. "The Russians are coming for my brother and if *anything* happens to him on your watch, you won't like the consequences."

"He's in the hole," he says, sounding confused. "Nobody can get to him down there."

"You better make damn sure of that. You and I both know that for the right price, your guards will look the other way."

"Fuck!" he swears. He knows I'm right because he takes bribes too. "I'll handle it." The line goes dead.

"Do me a solid and have Dragon look into the guards in solitary. I want to be thorough on this."

"You got it, Boss." I watch as Haze jogs down the iron steps and disappears through the side door.

I bow my head and rub at the ache in my shoulder.

"Your phone's in here vibrating all over your desk."

I shove my hand in my pocket and come out empty-handed. "Shit." Hurrying back into the office, I grab my phone off the desk and see the missed call from Sophia. I hit call and lift my phone to my ear hoping that nothing's wrong. It's not like her to call so late in the day when she knows I'll be home soon. It barely rings twice before Sophia answers, and I hear the sound of a screaming baby in the background. "Oh, thank God you called me back."

"Mouse, turn the television down. I can barely hear you," I say loudly.

Sophia laughs but there is no humor in it. "That's not the television, honey. Someone dropped a baby on our doorstep."

My heart starts to race. "Say that again?" I must have heard her wrong because it sounded like she said someone left a baby on our doorstep. I wasn't a saint before I met Sophia, but I know for a fact I've always wrapped it up. My blood runs cold. Except I haven't with Sophia. Fuck, I don't know if she's on birth control or... "Babe, you on the pill?" I blurt out.

“What? Oh my God.” She starts laughing hysterically, but I’m not finding any of this funny. After she gets herself under control, she puts me out of my misery. “Yes, honey. I’m on the pill. We just got married and I’m not ready for kids yet.”

I look to the heavens and whisper, “Thank you, Jesus.” It’s not that I don’t want kids, but—an image of Sophia with our baby growing in her belly flashes in my mind and I start to second-guess putting off having kids. The baby in my house screams out again and I push the thought away for now.

“I’ll be home in fifteen minutes, Mouse. Try to stay calm. We’ll figure this out.”

“Okay, honey. Be careful, I love you,” she says and then the line goes dead.

“Boss, you okay?” Kane asks with a worried look on his face.

A slow smile spreads across my own and I nod. “Someone dropped a baby off on my doorstep and split,” I explain as Sophia’s words repeat in my mind. *She loves me.* I feel like the luckiest bastard in the entire city.

Kane’s worried look quickly morphs into shock. “The fuck? Have you lost your damn mind? You’re smiling about a rug rat being left at your place?” he shouts.

Ignoring his outburst, I pull my keys out of my pocket and head for the door with him jogging behind me to catch up. “Wait up. This I gotta see.”

Fifteen minutes later, I walk through my front door and the sound of crying is absent. That’s a plus.

“Babe! I’m here!” I shout, closing the door behind Kane as I toe off my boots.

“Shh.” My brows hit my hairline.

I move toward the sound of her voice with my nosey treasurer right behind me and when I step into the lounge, I freeze. Sophia is nestled into the corner of the sofa with a tiny infant dressed in pink pressed against her chest.

“Come in and meet your niece. At least that’s what the note says.” She flicks her chin toward the coffee table where the worn piece of paper lies. I grab it and start to read.

Ghost,

I’ve tried writing this letter a hundred times but can never find the right words to tell you how sorry I am that I kept my pregnancy from you. I thought

I was protecting Payton, but I can see now that I was wrong. I'm in a lot of trouble and I won't let it touch our baby girl. That's why I'm leaving her with your brother where I know she'll be safe. I hope you can forgive me someday.

I'm sorry.

Jenny

“Fuck.” I lay the letter back on the table and sit down next to Sophia and Payton. Kane’s curiosity wins out and he comes into the room and moves to stand behind Sophia.

“She’s a cute little thing,” he says quietly. I look closer and there’s not a doubt in my mind that she belongs to my brother. Her nose flares out at the tip just like Ghost’s. Her eyes have the same almond shape and ocean-blue color. However, the cowlick in the mess of dark hair on her head is the real giveaway.

Being careful of her tiny size, I gently trace my fingers across the top of her downy head. “How old do you think she is?” I peek at Sophia.

With her eyes glued to her charge, she says, “I’m not sure, but her bag is in the kitchen. Maybe her papers are in there?” Kane stalks off to the kitchen and comes back with a pink and purple bag that’s overflowing with pampers and other shit the kid must need. He hands it over and I sort through it, twice, but come up empty-handed. Damn it.

“There’s nothing here.”

“I’ll head over to the clubhouse and get Dragon on it. A baby needs papers,” Kane grumbles as he takes his leave.

I pull out my phone and find Pop’s number. “I need to call my dad. He’s never going to fucking believe this.”

The rest of the night goes by in a blur as Pop fawns over baby P before finally deciding he’ll be staying here until Ghost’s spare room is converted into a nursery.

Chapter 10

S ophia

“Junk, junk, junk, bill,” I mumble under my breath as I sort through today’s mail. I’ll take a stack of junk mail over a pile of bills any day. I’m not rolling in cash around here, but I do okay.

“Stop hovering!” Nova shouts from the other room. I dump the ads and mailers into the trash and peek around the doorway. She and Hunter are at each other’s throats again, making me groan. Their bickering like brother and sister has yet to ease up. I love them dearly, but it’s made me grateful most of my childhood was spent at a boarding school and not fighting with my half-siblings. Just as I’m about to tell them to cut it out before they scare away all our customers the front windows implode sending glass and debris flying everywhere. My ears are ringing but I hear Hunter’s shouts. Still stunned by what just happened, I mindlessly turn around. Hunter is shoving Nova toward me and yelling something, but I can’t make out the words.

“What?” I say, too loudly.

“Are you okay?” he shouts back; his voice is faint but I’m able to understand.

“Yes. Are you?” I ask them both. There’s a cut on Nova’s cheek and she’s covered in dust and dirt, but thankfully she looks no worse for wear.

“Call Banner and stay here,” he says, looking at the mess inside the office. The shelves that were once on the wall are now in pieces on the floor and there’s stuff everywhere from the blast. It’s just cosmetic, I tell myself. Structurally, I’m sure we’ll be safe in here. Hunter closes us inside and I

press the lock before I grab Nova's hand and lead her around my desk. "You need to sit down."

She nods her head but doesn't speak.

"Shit."

Nova looks up at me. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know what happened to my phone." I bite my lip as I flip through the disaster scattered on the floor. It was just here.

"Hey, Siri. Call Banner." My brows lift as we wait with bated breath.

"Calling Banner."

I exhale heavily. *Thank God.*

"You're a damn genius, Nova." I hug her shoulders.

"Hey, baby. What's up?" Banner's voice is like a balm to my frazzled nerves. I didn't realize how safe him being in my life makes me feel until just now.

"We need your help. Something's happened, but I don't know what. The windows exploded and—"

"Where are you? Where's Hunter?"

"Hunter locked us in the office."

"Fuck! Don't move a fucking inch, Mouse. Do you hear me? Don't. Move. I'm on my way." The line goes dead.

"Your husband scares the hell out of me." Nova shutters. I shrug my shoulders. He's grown on me.

It feels like hours, but in reality, it's probably only a handful of minutes until we hear the thunderous sound of Harleys racing toward us. Broken shards of glass and wood shimmy and shake across the floor from the vibrations and the sound grows impossibly louder until all of a sudden everything just stops. The silence is almost deafening but it's quickly overtaken by the sound of my husband's frantic voice.

"Sophia!"

My fingers fumble with the lock for half a second before the mechanism releases and I yank the door open. "I'm here!" I shout slipping and sliding on broken glass as I dart out into the shop. Banner's head whips around in my direction and his eyes lock onto mine. I keep moving in his direction as he scans me from head to toe. I'm sure he's freaking out considering the state of my shop. I can't fault him there.

"Thank fuck you're okay," he says as he holsters his gun and opens his arms just in time for me to face-plant against his chest. My eyes close as

Banner wraps his arms around my back and pulls me deeper into his body.

My body sags in relief. This is my safe place.

“I’m okay,” I whisper when I feel his body trembling under my touch. My big strong husband was afraid for me.

“You could have been killed,” he rasped.

“Hey.” I tip my head back and see the fear in his eyes. “I’m okay,” I assure him. Everything that was destroyed can be replaced.

Nova peeks around the office doorway. “Where’s Hunter? Did he catch whoever did this?”

Banner shakes his head. “Whoever did this was gone by the time he made it outside. I’ve got Dragon checking all the cameras in the area right now and once he finds something, I’ll handle it.” Nova nods her head, unaffected by what my husband is hinting at. I don’t want to know what ‘handle it’ means so I’ll pretend like I didn’t hear him make the threat.

“Let’s get you girls out of here.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Nova says, reaching for my hand. I take it and squeeze it as we follow Banner out the door.



“Are you sure you’re, okay?” Banner asks, for the umpteenth time since he swept into my shop like my dark avenger. I roll my head in his direction and my heart warms. He takes his eyes off the road for a second to look at me, and it’s at this moment that I realize how much I love him.

“I’m okay, honey.” It’s the truth. We’re all safe and that’s what matters. The shop can be repaired.

He glances back at me and nods when he sees the sincerity in my eyes. I smile softly and reach over, placing my hand on his leg. Taking one hand off the wheel, he links his fingers with mine then lifts our joined hands to touch his lips to my knuckles. The rumors about my husband may be true, but I’ve yet to see him treat the people he loves with nothing but respect and care. If we weren’t at odds, I’d send my brother a gift to thank him for arranging my marriage.

“Are we expecting company?” Two bikers are carrying boxes out of our house.

“Pop is taking Payton to Ghost’s house today. I meant to tell you earlier,

but it slipped my mind.” Something in my heart shifts. I’ve grown quite fond of having Payton and Pop around. Truthfully, I think caring for her triggered a mild case of baby fever and not just in myself. I’ve noticed the way Banner watches me when I’m holding her. There’s a longing there that mirrors my own.

Banner parks his car in front of the brownstone and comes around to my door to help me out. When we step inside, Pop is standing there holding Payton in his arms. To say he’s over the moon about his granddaughter is an understatement. He’s been nothing short of amazing with her. “You’re a good one, Pop,” I say as Banner releases my hand. Carefully, Pop transfers Payton into my arms and I cuddle her close. Banner steps in beside me and wraps his arm around my waist. “I can’t get over her beautiful blue eyes.”

“Wait until you meet my brother. She’s the spitting image of her daddy.” I smile down at the sleeping angel in my arms. I’ve seen pictures of Bishop and they do look alike. I can’t bring myself to call Banner’s brother Ghost.

“When are you two going to give me a grandchild?” My cheeks heat and Pop grins.

“Soon,” Banner answers. My body sinks deeper into his side, and he gives my waist a squeeze.

“I got some news earlier about Payton’s mother.” Banner and I look at Pop for him to continue. “She’s in jail. Brought in on prostitution and drug trafficking charges. My source tells me she was using too.”

Anger like I’ve never felt before surges through my veins. How could anyone leave their child on the doorstep of a complete stranger and just take off?

I kiss the top of Payton’s head and whisper against her downy soft locks, “We’re your family little one and we’ll keep you safe.”

“That goes for you too, darlin’.” I hit the jackpot with my father-in-law. He’s been my biggest supporter since Banner and I married.

“Thank you, Pop.”

A grunt is his reply.

“We need to head out.”

I give Payton another cuddle then put her in her carrier and buckle her in. Pop grabs it and Banner and I follow him to the door.

“I’ll come visit you soon and we’ll play another round of Scrabble.” Pop chuckles. He kicked my behind the first time we played.

“You do that, darlin’.”

We stand in the doorway and watch him secure the car seat in the back of an old Cadillac and drive away.

“Come on, baby. Let’s get you cleaned up.” I look down at my clothes and frown. I should have changed before holding the baby. Hindsight is twenty-twenty.

Banner leads me upstairs and into the bathroom. Like our first night together, he sets me on the counter, but this time he turns on the water to the large soaking tub in the corner. I’m blown away when he pulls out bath salts, oils, and bubbles from the linen closet and dumps them in. The scent of lavender fills the room, and my body begins to relax. Once the tub is filled, he helps me down and carefully removes all my clothes.

“You’re a good man, Banner St. James.” Taking his offered hand, I step into the tub and sigh as I sink into the hot water.

“Only for you, baby.” I don’t believe that for a minute.

Banner grabs my bath sponge and other toiletries then comes back to kneel on the floor beside the tub.

With a practiced hand, he secures my hair on top of my head, then lathers soap on my sponge and gently cleans every inch of my body.

“I love you.” The words are out of my mouth before I can call them back. “I—”

“Don’t,” he growls, climbing to his feet. My heart thunders in my chest as I frantically think of a way to take it back, when suddenly Banner grabs me under my arms and yanks me out of the tub. Water sloshes over the edge of the tub, dripping everywhere, but my husband is unconcerned as he turns and storms toward our room.

“What are you doing?”

“Quiet, Mouse!” My lips snap closed. As if I were made of delicate crystal, Banner carefully sets me on the edge of the bed then steps back, his eyes admiring my naked form. His tongue glides across his full bottom lip as he grips the bottom of his shirt and yanks it over his head. Next to go are his boots, socks, and jeans. His hands drop to the elastic band of his boxers and I push his hands away. His eyes droop as he watches my thumbs slip below the waistband and push them to the floor.

“Scoot back,” he demands.

I shake my head, no and before he can protest, my hand is around his velvety shaft. I stroke him from root to tip. His palm glides against my cheek and into my hair where he fists the locks.

“You’re mine, Mouse.” Banner is always dominant in bed, and I love it.

“I am,” I tell him truthfully as I lean in to taste him. Before I can take him into my mouth, he clenches his hand to stop me. My eyes fly up and meet his hooded gaze. *So hot.*

“Please,” I whine.

He moans loudly and uses his hold on my hair to guide my face closer to his waiting cock. I wrap my hand around the base and flick my tongue across the tip. Banner’s eyes close and his head falls back on his shoulders. That’s all the encouragement I need. His hips rock in a silent plea, so I wrap my lips around the ruddy head of his cock and suck him deep.

“Such a good girl,” he groans. The praise spurs me on. I slip my hand between my leg and strum my clit, but it’s not enough. Banner starts to thrust his hips and I relax my throat as best I can. “You suck me so good, baby.”

Banner raises his head, and his eyes go right to my fingers working furiously between my legs. “Does your pussy need my dick?”

When the dirty words make me whimper, he tugs on my hair, and his cock slips from my lips with a pop.

“Do you need me to fuck you, Mouse?” His eyes are blazing.

“Yes.” My breathing accelerates.

“Beg for it, baby,” he growls. The dominance in his voice makes me wetter.

“Please, honey,” I cry out, my desire growing to a fevered pitch. “I need you inside me.”

Like an explosion, the last string of his control snaps. He dips at the waist, grabs me by my hips, hoists my body up, and drops me onto his dick.

“Yes,” I hiss.

“Hold on, Mouse.” My arms snake around his neck as I wrap my legs around his waist, locking my ankles tightly. His hands grip tightly around my thighs, and he lifts my body up and down his cock. Banner staggers to the nearest wall and my back hits the cold surface. I hiss, arching my back and my eyes widen at the new angle.

“Oh god! Don’t stop. You’re so deep.” He thrusts harder and I rock my hips. My pussy starts to flutter as the feeling of electricity starts to surge through my system.

“Fuck. So tight.” His thrusts start to become frantic signaling that he’s close.

The next flex of his hips hits just right and I scream out his name.

“Banner!”

“That’s it, baby. So good. So fucking good,” he coos as he thrusts inside me again and again. Our bodies are slick with sweat, and I tighten my hold. My pussy squeezes too and with a final flick of his hips, he stills and holds himself deep.

Panting heavily, I lift my head from his shoulder and our eyes connect. “I love you too, Mouse.”

Chapter 11

Banner

Buzz... Buzz... Buzz...

“Banner,” Sophia says quietly.

I tighten my arm around her waist. “Mm?”

Her soft hand rubs up and down my arm. “Honey, someone’s at the door.”

Buzzzzzzzz...

I turn my head and look at the clock. 3:00 a.m. The fuck? I let Sophia go and she moves to her side of the bed and reaches for her nightgown. Someone’s getting their ass kicked for waking us up.

Throwing my legs over the side of the bed, I reach down and grab my boxers off the floor. I pull them on quickly then open my bedside door and grab my gun and clip. I slide the clip in and pull the slide. “Stay here,” I demand.

I take the steps two at a time and peek at the security camera on the security panel. *Pop?*

Hurrying to the door, I unlock the locks and disarm the alarm, then swing the door open and growl, “What the fuck, Pop?”

“Why aren’t you answering your fucking phone, Son?” Shit, I never put it on the charger after it died earlier. “Never mind that your wife’s shop is on fire.”

Sophia gasps and I turn around and find her standing at the foot of the steps. Damn it. I told her to stay put. She spins around and rushes back up the

stairs.

“Come on in, Pop. I’ll be back.”

“Mouse,” I call out, taking the steps two at a time. I enter our room to find her hunting for clothes to put on. “Baby, what are you doing?” I ask carefully.

“Getting dressed. I need to go down there.” Her eyes are glistening with unshed tears, but she holds my stare, determined to see this through.

I nod my head. “Okay, Mouse. Whatever you need.”

Ten minutes later, I fasten Sophia’s helmet atop her head and help her onto my bike, then climb on in front of her. She scoots closer and tucks herself tightly into my back as I kick-start the bike. I rev the engine and Sophia squeezes my middle to let me know she’s ready. I take that as my cue and hit the throttle. We’re a few blocks away from Sophia’s shop when she taps my shoulder and points to the sky. I look up and see it filled with billowing thick, dark smoke. Oh shit. When I pull in behind the firetrucks, I know it’s worse than I’d originally thought. I cut the motor and help Sophia off, and we stand here in shock as firefighters work furiously to extinguish the flames.

When the roof collapses, Sophia buries her face in my chest, her body wracking with deep sobs. “Shh,” I whisper into her hair as she falls apart in my arms. Long minutes later, she rubs her face against my tee and pulls away. She tilts her face to mine and my heart plummets at seeing her tears. I use my palms to wipe them away. “I’m sorry, Mouse. I know this place means everything to you.”

“Thank you. Can you help me figure out who we need to talk to?” I look up and down the street and my eyes lock on Ivan a block away. A growl rumbles in my chest and Sophia stiffens. My eyes dart to her then back up to find Ivan has vanished. I move Sophia behind me and step around the truck, but the area is full of chaos. Fuck. I could have had him.

Sophia touches my back and leans around my body to see my face. “What’s wrong?”

I look down at my wife’s concerned face and frown. It doesn’t make sense. Why would Ivan burn down Sophia’s shop? I never pegged him for an idiot who took unnecessary risks, but maybe I was wrong. What I do know is there’s no way I’m going to mention that I think I saw him until I have Dragon look deeper into everything we know about the fucker.

“Nothing, baby. Let’s see if we can get some answers.” I see an officer I

recognize from the Mills St. Precinct and nod in his direction. “This way, babe.” With my hand on the small of Sophia’s back, I lead her in his direction.



“How’s Sophia holding up?” Pop asks, hefting Payton’s carrier onto the bar top.

I shoulder him out of the way and slide the carrier in front of me. She’s a tiny ol’ thing. A grin tugs at my lips at how much she looks like Ghost. I still can’t believe my little brother has a kid. “Your drinking buddy’s got spit-up on her chin.”

Pop rolls his eyes but pulls a handkerchief from his pocket and cleans her up. I bet he never thought he’d be changing diapers and juggling late-night feedings again in this lifetime.

“I didn’t come here to drink, smartass. I came to find out how your wife is holding up and to see if there’s any news on your brother.” My smile drops. It’s been a week since the fire at Mouse’s shop and unfortunately, the place was a total loss. Ivan used an accelerant when he torched the place, and nothing was salvageable. “Sophia’s heartbroken.”

“And your brother?” There’s a hopeful look on Pop’s face, which is exactly why I’ve been avoiding talking to him ‘bout this shit. Looking at him now, Sophia was right. He needs to know so he’s not in limbo. I blow out a breath.

“Bianchi got everything dropped except the bullshit resisting arrest charge. They’re throwing the book at him on that one, Pop. He’s going to have to serve six months.”

“Shit.” He drops his head.

I grab his shoulder and squeeze. “I’m sorry, Pop. It’s the best the lawyer could do.”

He looks up at me and nods his head. “It could be worse.” It could be a whole lot worse.

“Give Sophia the butcher shop. She’ll be closer and protected there.” My brows hit my hairline. Why the hell didn’t I think of that? The spot is perfect. It needs some remodeling, but the size and layout are almost identical.

“Think she’ll go for it?” He grins but it’s only half-hearted. He’s worried

about my brother.

We spin around on our stools when the doors are pushed open. Sophia follows Hunter through the door with a smile on her face. Seeing her happy makes me feel lighter. Something I hadn't realized I needed until she came into my life.

"Surprise her. She'll love it." He's grown quite fond of Sophia over the last few weeks, and it shows.

The smell of cheap perfume hits my nose a second before a hand slides across my thigh. "Hey there, stud."

"Oh shit," Pops whispers before all hell breaks loose.

Chapter 12

S ophia

“Hey there, stud.”

I stop dead in my tracks and look from this woman’s hand on my husband’s leg to the look of shock on his face. My head tips to the side as a feeling of anger starts to boil in my veins. I would never have described myself as a woman prone to aggression, but I’ve never been in this kind of situation before.

Before I can remind myself it’s not how a lady would act, I eat up the distance and position myself between Banner’s spread legs. “Get your hands off my husband and run along.” The threat is clear. This is my man and she better move on, or else.

“Or what?”

I lean in and speak softly. “Or I’ll slit your throat myself.”

Her eyes widen and she looks over my shoulder, then back at me. “You’re crazy. I’m out of here.”

Banner’s strong arms slip around my waist, and he pulls me flush against his chest. “You make my dick hard when you get territorial, Mouse.”

“Oh yeah?” My heart is racing. I’ve never threatened anyone before, but I meant what I said.

“Mm. It’s hot as fuck watching you toss that biker bitch attitude around.” My cheeks heat. I’ve never acted this way before, but it felt really good to stand up for myself.

Remembering that I came here to see Pop, I spin around in the circle of

Banner's arms and smile at my father-in-law. "I'm onto you." I laugh.

Pop smirks. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Banner's arms tighten around me and he lays a kiss on my lips. "What's he done, baby?"

"Baby stuff has been showing up at our house all day long. At first, I thought it was stuff for Payton, although I wasn't sure why it was being delivered to our house. However, as I started snooping, I found this." I pull the note that was attached to a stuffed lamb out of my back pocket.

Banner takes it from my hand and reads it. "Could you be more subtle, Pop?" His lip curls amusingly at the corner.

"Payton's going to need cousins to play with." I roll my eyes and giggle.

"Should we tell him?" Banner asks.

"I don't think we have a choice." I smile teasingly.

Banner grins and with his eyes locked on mine, says, "We're trying."



Three Days Later

"Do you know what he needs my help with?" Hunter shakes his head.

"He didn't say."

Hunter pulls up in front of Banner's warehouse and the first thing I notice is the pink and white striped awning and the sign declaring the corner spot as Sophia's Blooms.

"What in the..." I trail off as Banner steps through the pink door and walks toward us. He opens my door and reaches out his hand. There's mischief working in his eyes and a little bit of worry too.

I take his hand and whisper, "What have you done?"

"Given you back what was stolen from you, Mouse." I look over his shoulder as he helps me out of the SUV.

Sophia's Blooms is etched in the glass of the large picture window. There are bushels and bushels of fresh flowers overflowing in pots along the sidewalk. This place. It's more than I ever could have envisioned. I cover my mouth and shake my head in disbelief as tears stream down my cheeks. I don't deserve this beautiful perfect man.

Banner's eyes widen. "Why are you crying?"

I shake my head and sob.

“Fuck, babe. Don't cry.” Banner wraps his arms around me.

It takes a beat, but I finally pull myself together enough to tell him how I feel about this wonderful surprise. “I love you and I'm happy. Nobody's ever done anything so thoughtful.”

“I love you too, babe. I want you to be happy here, but more importantly, I want you close so you're safe.” He's trying to play it off like his motives are selfish and it might be slightly true, but I know my husband. He did this because he cares about me.

Tipping my head back, I pull him in for a kiss and whisper against his lips, “Thank you, honey.”

“Anything to make you happy, babe. Come on, let's go in so you can look around. Nova's already inside, organizing shit the way you like it.”

I brush the tears from my cheeks and smile. I'm excited to see what he's done.

Hand in hand we step inside the shop and the scent of fresh flowers envelopes us. My eyes close. Nothing will ever change the way this smell makes me feel. This is my happy place.

Banner gives my hand a squeeze and I open my eyes. “Check it out and come find me when you're done, baby.”

“Okay.” I press my lips to his and watch as he disappears out the door.

“Your husband is a rockstar.” I turn to Nova and smile.

“He is.”

I spend the next two hours checking out every inch of the new shop and come to a conclusion about my husband.

He's the best man I've ever known.



“Do you think this is a good idea?” I look from Payton's sleeping form in the stroller over to Nova and frown.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“We're *walking* through the Bronx.” My eyes widen. I hadn't thought about that. I just wanted to surprise Banner with some lunch.

“I... but Hunter's with us.” I point over my shoulder. Plus, there are people everywhere, going about their business. Nobody's paying any

attention to us.

Nova shrugs her shoulder, and I can hear Hunter growl. If they didn't fight like brother and sister, I'd seriously start to wonder if they secretly had a thing for each other. I look over my shoulder expecting the boogeyman to jump out, Nova's comment has put me on edge. Turning back to focus the sidewalk in front of me, I eye everyone suspiciously. I've got a baby in my care, and someone did just burn down my shop. God, what was I thinking bringing us out here without more protection? Things have been happening to the club for weeks, of course, Banner's kept most of the details from me. 'Club business,' is what he always says whenever I ask. I take a deep breath and try to push the worry out of my mind. We're only a few blocks from the warehouse. We'll be fine.

We make it two blocks when, in rapid succession, Ivan emerges from the alley in front of us with two of his goons and more of his men step out from in between the cars parked on the street.

"Run, Nova!" I grip the stroller with both hands and whip around only to stop short when the biggest man I've ever seen pistol-whips Hunter in the back of his head. He doesn't see it coming and hits the ground like a lead weight. Nova positions herself in front of the stroller as a layer of protection for my sleeping niece.

"Only a coward would ambush two women and a baby!" Nova hisses.

"Shut your mouth, girl!" Ivan growls. If looks could kill, we'd be done for. I slip around the side of the stroller and quickly unfasten the safety belt. I lift Payton into my arms and look around for an escape route. The entrance to the subway is less than ten feet away.

"Come with me and nobody else has to get hurt." I freeze.

"No, Sophia!" I look at Nova and then down at Hunter's prone body. I can't let anyone else get hurt.

I turn toward my ex-fiancé. "Give me your word that you'll let them go."

"I'm not making deals, Sophia. Get the fuck over here or I'll shoot your friend." He means it.

"Please, Sophia," Nova begs, her eyes pleading with me not to do it.

I give her a watery smile and move to hand her Payton when she shakes her head and lunges. She catches the big brute off guard, and he trips over his own feet onto the ground.

"Run!" Nova screams.

Instinctually I tighten my hold on Payton and my heart drops when she

squawks her displeasure. “Sorry, baby girl,” I say, dodging the grabby hands of Ivan’s goon that’s on the ground. We dart down into the subway taking the stairs two at a time to put distance between us and the Russians. Nova frantically pats down her pockets as we approach the turnstile.

“We’ll have to jump over it,” she breathes, looking over her shoulder. Without breaking stride, she hops onto the top of the barrier and slides across to the other side. I hand Payton over and Nova’s eyes widen at something behind me.

“Hurry!” she screams.

I grip the top of the machine and heft myself up, just as someone behind me grabs my hair and pulls hard. Flailing backward, I land with a thud. I toss my hair out of my face and look up into the rage-filled face of Ivan’s giant. I look behind him at Nova’s horrified expression and yell. “Go!”

“Stupid bitch.” I look back at the giant as he lets his fist fly. Pain explodes against the side of my head for a split second before everything goes dark.

Chapter 13

Banner

“M.E.R.C.E.D.E.S.” I hit enter and lean back in my chair. This is the part of the job that blows. The DMV is still living in the Stone Age, and it takes for-fucking-ever for the vehicle list to populate. We could bypass this shit all together, but we have a code. We don’t boost in our own backyard, and we don’t hit single parents. Everyone else is fair game since we only pick off luxury and classics from assholes on the repo man’s hit list. We’re doing them a fucking favor.

“Yo, Boss. Your pop’s on line two,” someone from downstairs yells as the list starts to generate locations.

With my eyes trained on the screen, I lift the handset and press it to my ear. “You got me.”

“How’s the butterball feeling?” My brows furrow.

“The fuck you talking about, old man?”

“Payton. She was running a little bit of a fever this morning and Sophia offered to keep her so I could get some shit done at the clubhouse.”

“Damn. I haven’t talked to Mouse since I left the house this morning. You’ll have to ring her.”

“Hunter sent me a message that they were on their way to see you about an hour ago. Maybe they got hung up.” Maybe, but Hunter’s been going above and beyond to keep me and Pop in the loop when the girls are in between locations. If they stopped off somewhere, he’d have let one of us know.

“Let me give Hunter a ring, and I’ll call you back.” I disconnect before he can reply and dial Hunter’s number.

“Hello?” a woman answers frantically.

“Uhm. I think I dialed the wrong number.”

“Wait! Don’t hang up. This isn’t my phone. It fell out of a man’s pocket when he was being loaded onto a stretcher. The ambulance took off before I could get it back to him.”

Stretcher. Ambulance. My ears start to ring.

“Was there a woman and a baby with him?”

“No—Yes! Sorry. I did see two women and one was holding a baby. But, they ran down into the subway after the giant hit the man in the head.”

“What subway tunnel?” My heart beats wildly in my chest. I listen carefully as she rattles off the location. I tell her to hold onto Hunter’s phone and answer if it rings again, then hang up.

I yank my cell out of my pocket and scroll to Dragon’s number.

“Need something, Boss?”

“Track Sophia’s phone!” Within seconds I hear his fingers flying across his keyboard.

“Uhh... It’s in the middle of the Hudson, Boss,” he says slowly.

“Fuck!” I roar, jumping to my feet. I’ve got to find her.

“Banner! Banner! Anyone; help me!” What the fuck? I end my call as my office door is thrown open.

Nova races inside with Payton tucked tightly against her chest and screaming bloody murder. My eyes fly behind her, waiting for my wife to appear, but she doesn’t.

“Where’s Sophia?” I demand.

Nova starts talking so fast I can barely understand her. “They took her! We were coming here, and they popped up out of nowhere. I told Sophia I thought it was a bad idea to be out, but by then it was too late, and Hunter got hurt. Sophia was going to let them take her. She was going to sacrifice herself, but I couldn’t let her do that. I knocked that big fucker down and we were almost home free, but the giant caught us in the subway before Sophia could jump over the turnstile.” She’s breathing heavily and her next words make me see red. “He grabbed her by the hair and yanked her back. Then... then he hit her.” Nova dissolves into uncontrollable sobs making Payton cry even harder.

“Who took her?” I say through clenched teeth.

Nova lifts her tear-stained face and hisses, “Ivan!”

“Stay here with Payton until someone from the club comes for you.”

I stalk toward the exit and leap down the steps. I push my helmet onto my head as I climb onto my bike and crank the motor. Before I take off, I call Dragon back and hit the button on my helmet to connect to my Bluetooth.

“Ivan has Sophia!” I shout over the roar of my bike when he picks up. I hear the click-clack of keys as he pounds away on his keyboard. “He’s at his warehouse.”

“Get there,” I yell before ending the call.

I make the twenty-minute trek in ten, park my bike a block away under the bridge, and take off on foot. He has to know I’m coming for him. He’d be a fool not to, but even so, I’m not going to announce that I’m here. It’s too dangerous for Sophia and if anything happens to her... No. I refuse to go down that road of thinking. She’s going to be fine and once I get her out of here, we’re going to start our family.

I look up and down the road as I make my way closer to the fence line and do a double-take when I spot a hole in the fence up ahead.

Thank God.

I eat up the distance and duck behind the bushes once I’m close enough. Parting the weeded shrubs with my hands, I scan the area. There isn’t a soul in sight but I’m not letting down my guard. I can feel it; the fucking Russian is up to something.

I’m about to step through the gap in the fence when my phone vibrates in my pocket.

Dragon: They’ll be there in five.

How many?

Dragon: Everyone.

I slip my phone back into my pocket and squeeze through the hole. I dart across the parking lot and move quickly to the back of the building.

Fuck. I look at the metal door that’s the only way inside from this side of the building and reach for the handle. I’m positive it’ll be locked, but I turn the metal knob and damn near trip over my own feet when it twists all the way.

My brows lift. No way, it’s going to be this fucking easy to get in. As quietly as possible, I pull the door open and peek inside to find a long

hallway with one of Ivan's men posted at the foot of a stairwell. Standing guard at the other end is the big fucker Nova was telling me about. That's gotta be where they're holding Sophia. Using my boot to hold the door, I pull out my blades and take a deep breath.

It's now or never.

Yanking the door open, I look to my left and let the daggers in my hands fly. They glide through the air and hit their mark. There's no time to savor the kill with Sasquatch stomping in my direction. Nova wasn't exaggerating; the fucker is huge. Pulling more blades from my cut, I spin around quickly and fling one blade, then two, then three at the giant lumbering toward me. His body jerks as each blade penetrates his flesh and his eyes widen before the light inside them is extinguished. His body hits the ground like heavy timber. Stepping over his body, I rip open the door and barely duck out of the way of the metal pole Sophia's wielding like a weapon. Her eyes widen when she realizes it's me. "Whoa there, slugger."

She drops the pole and jumps into my arms. "I knew you'd come," she breathes into the side of my neck.

"I'll always come for you, Mouse." I've never meant anything more than I mean that. I'd walk through hell to get to her. She unlocks her legs from around my hips and plants her feet on the ground. I tip her head to the side to see the black eye that has already turned a mottled blue, I also note a patch of hair that's matted with her blood.

"What happened?"

"The giant punched me," she says, pointing to the side of her face. "I woke up in the back of their van. There was a tire iron and I grabbed it; I had to fight."

"Shh. You did good, baby—"

"I tried," she sobs. "But they were too big, and then someone hit me." She lightly presses at the back of her head and hisses.

"I'm so sorry, Mouse." This is all my fault. I knew Ivan was getting bolder, but—

"No!" Sophia narrows her eyes at me. "This isn't your fault."

I disagree, but there's no time to stand around hashing it out. "We need to get out of..." I pause. "Do you hear that?"

Sophia's eyes widen and I grin. The rumble of bikes racing in our direction is growing louder by the second.

"They're—" The door is thrown open and slams loudly against the wall.

With his gun drawn, Ivan steps inside, and instinctually I step in front of Sophia as my hands go to my cut and I pull out two blades. I'm going to kill this pretty boy motherfucker.

"Pathetic." He shakes his head, a look of disgust on his face. "You're willing to die for a fucking gash?"

"She's my wife!" I growl, readying my knives. There's no way he's leaving here alive.

"SHE WAS SUPPOSED TO BE MINE!" he roars. It's the truth, but we're beyond that. He sealed his fate when he started fucking with the locals and targeting my family.

"You're a coward."

"Says the pussy who ambushed my woman." I sneer. His face turns beet red, and I laugh. "Come on, asshole." I wave him forward. "Put down the gun and fight me like a real man." It's a huge risk, provoking him but I have to get Sophia out of here.

"You first." He nods to my blades. I lift my hands and slowly set them on the edge of the desk as he does the same with his Glock and once it's out of his hands, I pounce. My fist connects with the side of his head as he lands a solid hit to my middle. "Oof," I wheeze. Damn, he can throw a punch. We trade blows and land hard against the wall. It doesn't take long before he's running out of steam.

This is why I don't let my men handle shit for me. It makes a man go soft and that's exactly what Ivan's done. I draw my fist back again to finish this once and for all but falter when a blazing fire licks across my ribs. This motherfucker stabbed me.

I drop my hands, putting pressure on the laceration but I'm the king of wet work and know it's bad. I'm losing too much blood.

Chapter 14

S ophia

I watch in horror as the man I love clutches his side and slides helplessly to the floor. His eyes slowly lift to mine, and I see it in his sorrow-filled stare—he’s fading fast, but like the leader he is, he’s already calculated the probability of how this ends—*of how he...*

“NO!” I growl, refusing to accept the truth in Banner’s eyes. “You’re not leaving me.”

Swerving around, I lunge for the gun and yank it off the desk. “Get back!” I hiss at Ivan who’s already advancing. I pull a page from Banner’s book and position my body in front of his.

Ivan laughs like he’s already won this fight, but he has no idea what I’m prepared to do to protect the man I love. “You don’t have the fucking guts to shoot me.”

He moves closer and with shaking hands, I lift the gun and aim it at his chest just like my husband taught me.

‘If you’re ever forced to pull this trigger to protect yourself, you aim at the biggest part of the target, baby.’

His words play in my head, and I pull the trigger.

Ivan’s eyes widen as he looks down at the blood flowing from the hole in his chest. His accusing eyes swing back up and he crumbles to the ground.

“Don’t you die on me, Banner St. James!” I cry, dropping to my knees beside my husband.

His glassy eyes soften. “I’m sorry, Mouse.”

“You can make it up to me later. You hear me.” Hearing the heavy tread of boots thundering up the stairs, I reach for the gun again. Pop appears in the doorway and quickly assesses the situation.

“Help him!” I yell.

He looks from me to Banner and moves.

“Move, Sophia!” I slide on my bottom and lean my back against the wall. The world around me starts to blur when my eyes settle on Ivan’s lifeless body. I killed him. I took his life. A sob wrenches from my chest and I quickly cover my mouth, trying to hold in all the anguish. I can feel the walls are closing in as my breathing becomes labored. I want to go home. I turn to Banner to ask if we can leave, but his eyes are closed.

“Banner!” I pant, struggling to get enough oxygen. “Banner!” I call out again, but he doesn’t move.

“She’s in shock,” someone says but it sounds hollow as I watch Pop feel for a pulse, yank a pen out of his pocket, take it apart, then shove the casing into the hole in Banner’s chest. A scream is ripped from the depths of my soul as blood pours out of the hole.

“Get her out of here!” Unfamiliar hands grip under my arms, and I struggle against their hold.

“No! Please, I can’t leave him!” I cry as I fight against the tight hold around my shoulders.

“Stop fighting me, Sophia. I don’t want to hurt you.” I look up into Haze’s worried eyes and completely crumble. I don’t notice when he lifts me into a truck or when the door closes like a tomb. Nothing else matters as I pray over and over for God to spare the man I love.

Please don’t take him from me.



One Month Later

The sob I’ve been holding escapes when I lift the pregnancy test off the vanity counter and see the two faint pink lines. Pregnant. I didn’t need the test to confirm what I already knew. No, there’s been subtle signs over the last couple of weeks. Tenderness in my breasts, getting sick in the mornings, and worst of all, no longer being able to stand the smell of coffee. I wasn’t

sure what kind of sick game God was playing on me, but I was sure someone up above was getting a laugh at the irony.

“I wish he was here to see how happy I am,” I whisper to my still-flat belly.

Strong arms wrap around my waist as soft lips skim across my neck. I give him my weight, leaning heavily against his muscular chest, and my eyes close. This is my happy place.

“We’re having a baby,” he rasps.

My head bobs up and down as I sniffle.

“Don’t like it when you cry, Mouse.” I know he doesn’t, but it can’t be helped.

“They’re happy tears, honey.”

“Still don’t like it.” I turn around in my husband’s arms and press my hands against his warm bare chest. As is tradition, my fingers follow my eyes to the scar that serves as a constant reminder of the day I almost lost him. The day will haunt me for the rest of my life.

His face softens. “Are you happy, baby?”

Gliding my hands up and around his neck, I pull, and he lowers his head until his lips are a hairsbreadth from mine. “More than I’ve ever been. Are you?”

He closes the distance and presses his lips to mine. When he pulls away, his words completely rock my world. “There’s no word that comes close to describing what you’ve given me. I thought I had it all and then I stole you.” He smirks and I roll my eyes. His expression turns serious, and with what he says next he almost brings me to my knees. “You’ve brought light into the darkness and now... now you’re having my baby. You’re everything right and good in my world.”

His arms tighten, and I sink into his hold.

I almost lost this because of my brother. He was the one who put me in Ivan’s path, knowing he was an obsessive sicko. Dragon had done some digging and had discovered that there’d never been a deal between Ivan and my father. Alessio had lied. He’d made it all up in some sick twisted ploy for revenge. Our father’s affair with my mother, all those years ago, was the catalyst for his mother taking her own life. And for that, he blamed me.

“Come on, little momma. Let’s get you both fed.” When my stomach grumbles loudly, he hits me with that boyish grin that makes my heart flutter and I smile and send my thanks to the man upstairs.

Thank you for giving him back to me.

Epilogue

G host

SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

There's a dangerous energy in the air tonight, and I keep wondering if it's because of the message my brother sent. Two words: Stay alert. The short of it is that I need to keep my head on a swivel.

The warden is convinced I'm safe here in solitary, which is laughable considering he knows how fucking deep the city's underbelly runs. He's made a fucking business out of knowing who the biggest players are and how to extort favors and cash for turning a blind eye.

Climbing off the hard concrete floor, I peek through the bars, expecting to find what, I'm unsure. Seeing nothing, I move back to my bunk and fall backward onto the hard as fuck mattress. I'd give my right nut to be sleeping in my own bed tonight.

Thoughts of home trigger my fear of what awaits me when I get there. Payton—my daughter, for starters. Scrubbing my hands across my face, I blow out a breath. I don't know the first thing about kids, but I sure as fuck ain't about to bounce like fucking Jenny. If it's the last thing I do, that bitch will get what's coming to her. My dark train of thought is halted by the sound of—is that someone fucking whistling? I sit up straight and tilt my head to listen.

Seconds later two guards and an asshole in a suit appear on the other side

of my cell. My eyes dart from the billy clubs clutched tightly in their hands to the suit with a smirk on his face.

“So, this is how it’s gonna go down, huh?” I ask calmly as I slip off my bunk and position my back against the wall. My instincts have kept me alive for the last twenty-nine years and I ain’t about to ignore them now.

“It’s always the filthy fucking bikers that cause me the most problems,” the suit snaps, nodding for my cell to be unlocked.

“Not a fan of bikers, huh?” I laugh, calculating the odds of making it out of here alive.

“Fuck you! When I’m done with your club...” he trails off.

I’d advise him not to take up poker with a face that can’t hide shit, but he didn’t come to chitchat.

I recognize the guard on his right as the asshole from cell block B. He’s doing his best not to make eye contact as he does what he’s been ordered. Pussy.

“You’re a dead man, Marshall.” He swings his head up and his eyes are huge. That got his attention. His name is going at the top of my hit list.

“The only dead man here is you, Bishop. Your fucking brother ruined everything! I needed that warehouse and... fuck!” I mask my surprise when the suit steps from the shadows and into my cell, revealing his identity.

“Well look who it is.” I grin. The photo Banner has on his phone is grainy but there’s no hiding that gnarly fucking scar slashed across his face. He must have pissed someone off, and good.

Shock flashes behind his eyes that I already know about him.

That’s right, asshole. You’re on our radar now and right behind your lackey on my kill list.

“No matter. You’re leaving here in a body bag.” His head tips to me and I lift my fists as the guards squeeze inside the tiny space.

A smile spreads across my face. “Boys...”



To find out what happens next, be on the lookout for Ghost: Devils Creed MC Book Two.

Thank you for taking a chance and reading Banner’s novella. If you enjoyed this quick-paced romance, please consider leaving a review to help

other readers discover new authors like myself.

About the Author

Indie Author Rebel Outlaw, better known as BeBe Rebel on social media, writes romantic and suspenseful short stories with a hint of dark and a whole lot of spice that she hopes you'll enjoy.

Her goal is to showcase strong characters with real flaws and real triumphs that readers can relate to.

Rebel loves books, coffee, Sour Patch Kids, top-shelf tequila, and the F-word.

If you would like to follow Rebel on social media, head over to her website and click follow me at the top of the page.

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