



Beast

RUTHLESS KINGS HOUSTON

KL SAVAGE

BEAST

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BOOK 1

K.L. SAVAGE

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Content Warning:

This book deals with some dark topics, violence, including physical and mental abuse, and the suggestion of rape (not the main characters).

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CHAPTER 1



Beast

*S*lot machines clang and crash. Coins clatter into trays. A dark jacket whips around a corner. My vision goes red. My world narrows to me and the bastard I'm hunting.

"Jackpot!" somebody hollers. I feel the same way when I see him.

He bolts the opposite way. I charge after him, past the slot machines and into the pit. I've always been faster than his punk ass, and he's given up cover.

I snag the collar of his cut and stare down into the blue eyes of Dallas, my best friend in the Ruthless Kings. That is, my best friend until yesterday, when we found out he was a fucking rat.

He stares back at me, but doesn't say anything. He knows there ain't nothing he could say.

Reaper steps up on Dallas' other side. "Well?"

I stare at our musclebound Prez.

"You vouched." Reaper crosses his arms. "Clean it up."

Crow. Ironhead. Riffraff. All dead because of Dallas. I look down at him again and see myself reflected in his eyes.

I rub my eyes and smooth down the worn leather of my cut, shaking the memory away. That was over a decade ago, the day before I left Vegas and headed home to the Lone Star

State. I look at myself in the bathroom mirror, scrub a hand over my wavy hair and meet my own dark eyes. Despite the thick scar running from my left eyebrow down to my cheek, a knife wound I got so long ago I barely remember the motherfucker who gave it to me, I don't look half as tough as I need to today.

I look tired. More tired than I did in that memory, and older too.

I'm not tired of the life. I'll be Prez for another decade before I even think of giving it up. I'm just tired of calling meetings like this.

But dragging my feet won't make the news any sweeter, and I didn't get here by indulging my every goddamn whim. I stalk down the hall from my bedroom, out the front door, and across the scrub grass of the compound to the clubhouse at its center. I asked my top men to meet in the reinforced war room there five minutes ago. I storm down the main hall and kick open the door. It crashes into the wall, and I march in.

Course, these are my top guys because they don't jump that easy. Only Storm and Blue even look up. Storm catches himself quickly and looks back down, but I know him better than that. He's been twitchy ever since he got back from Iraq. Blue's just twitchy by nature.

The rest sit at the long, wooden table I pulled out of the burning wreck of the very first MC I took down in varying states of attentiveness.

Thor, my VP, sits still as a statue with his arms crossed to show off his ink and the muscles underneath. Sin, my sergeant-at-arms, eyes me as he runs a hand through his dark hair. Normally, I'd just pull the two of them into my office and talk alone, but this problem's starting to spin out of control. Having a couple of enforcers around settles our next steps before the question's even asked. I also called Harley, my daughter, in tonight. She sprawls in one of the high wooden chairs, looking for all the world like she couldn't care less as she trims the ends off her dark hair with a pocket knife, but I

know better. I didn't raise a kid who shows up anywhere unprepared.

"Mac's missing." I slam the door shut behind me.

Thor leans back in his chair and stares at me. "Three runners in three months."

His steely gray eyes reflect my own frustration, but there's a reason only one of us got the name Beast. I'm the motherfucker who makes sure our concerns get heard.

"Three enforcers in a month." Reaper stares at me with hard eyes. "That doesn't happen unless we've got a rat."

Desert heat pounds down on my shoulders. I glance at Tongue, his VP, and wonder why I'm in this meeting. I've been working my way up, but nothing like this.

"It's not me," I say.

Reaper laughs, loud and long. "Shithead. If it was you, you'd already be rotting in a shallow grave."

Tongue crosses his arms. "We think it's your buddy, Dallas."

"Mac was new, right?" Sin frowns. "And the other two, Buzz and Rubble, them as well?"

"New enough." I sink into my deep red leather chair at the head of the table, a present to myself for my fortieth birthday. Harley calls it my throne, but that's just because she's still jealous that I got myself a better present than she did that year.

"Could they just've run?" Rebel ruffles his golden hair. "That ain't half as hard as people think it's gonna be."

"Running from your daddy was easy." Blade spins a throwing knife on the dark tabletop. "Running from us?"

"We'd have heard something by now," Thor notes as he looks to me. "And we haven't heard shit on any of them."

I sigh. “They got their colors six months back or less. They don’t have the skills to disappear like that without help.”

“Help?” Sin asks. “Or *help?*”

“That’s what I’m looking to find out.” I meet each man’s gaze in turn. “Mac was eighteen. The other two, not much older. We owe them better than a missing poster.”

Everyone nods. The Kings might be the sort of motorcycle club cagers tell their kids scary stories about, but we protect our own.

I pace back and forth in the crappy motel room I got for the night. Game shows blare from every other room on the hall, and a couple laughs drunkenly as they struggle with their key.

Couldn’t be Dallas. He wouldn’t turn on us, on me, like this. No fucking way. I’m gonna be Prez someday, and he’s gonna be my VP.

Someone pounds on my door. “Beast! I gotta explain!”

I grab my .45 and let him in. “Is it you?”

He swallows. “You gotta listen to me. It’s not like Reaper says it is.”

I cock the hammer and point the barrel at his skull. “Is it fucking you?”

He won’t meet my eyes. “I needed the money.”

“Thor, Sin, Storm. I want y’all on this.” I pull a USB drive out of my pocket and slide it across the table to Sin. “Supplier reports he picked the shipment up, but we lost him before the drop. That’s his bike GPS data. It cuts off suddenly, like somebody trashed the receiver. Trace him from there, if you can.”

Sin snatches the drive, plugs it into the laptop he always seems to have on hand, and puffs out a breath. “This is downtown.”

“You think I don’t know that?” I slam my hands on the table. “I gave the kid an easy run. He was a drag racer before he came to us, so I figured dodging fucking cops would be the one thing he could do. Instead, he got snatched in the middle of goddamn Houston. I didn’t say it’d be a cake walk, I said find him.”

Sin puts his hands up. “Just thought the room should know.”

I take a deep breath. My temper doesn’t flare quite as easily as it used to, but these disappearances have me on edge. They shouldn’t be possible, unless my men missed something big.

I run a hand over my short, graying hair and steady myself. I should’ve caught it as much as everyone else in this goddamn room.

“Now the room knows why I’m putting the whole club on red alert, and this house double.” I stare down at my daughter. “That includes you, Harley.”

She grins and lifts her pocket knife. “Ready to join the front lines, Pops.”

“Slow your roll.” I shake my head. “I meant I’m putting a detail on your free-wheeling ass, and a curfew.”

She lodges her knife into the tabletop. “Fuck no! A couple kids walk, and you put me under house arrest? I can take care of myself.”

“You know good and well they didn’t walk, and Mac was a year younger than you, so I’d watch who you’re calling kids.” I sigh. “You can still go to class, I just want you to come home right after.”

“Oh, how merciful.” She rolls her eyes. “I’m allowed to go to the college down the fucking road for a couple hours a day, I didn’t realize.”

I cross my arms and sink back into my throne. Harley can’t contradict me here and win. That’s why I invited her. If I told her about the detail anywhere else, I wouldn’t have stood a chance.

Sometimes I wonder what she inherited from whichever club slut dropped her off on my doorstep in the dead of night nineteen years ago. Her deep brown hair, maybe, though I half-remember my own mama having something like that before she disappeared in the night. Or her laughing brown eyes. Mine might be brown, but nobody's ever been stupid enough to accuse me of laughing.

Regardless, there's no denying her pigheadedness comes straight from me.

I cradle my phone against my ear, my gun still pointed at Dallas, fucking Dallas. "It's not like that!"

Reaper sighs heavily. "You disrespecting an order from your Prez, Beast?"

"You disrespecting an order from your Prez, Harley?" I ask quietly.

She screws up her mouth, glares at the table, and finally spits, "No."

"Good." I grin. "That's what I like to hear. Malo, Rook, Blade, she's all yours."

Harley glares at each of them. "Good luck."

"*Chingada.*" Malo makes the sign of the cross and raises his tawny brown hand up to God. "Thanks, boss."

"Seconded." Blade glares at me through a face even more scarred than my own. "You know I have a show this weekend."

Rook merely sighs and looks at his watch. "I can take 2400 to 0800 hours."

I smirk. I knew they'd bitch, but I picked those three for good reasons. Malo cooks when he's not needed for anything more important, so he spends most of the time around the compound and knows the place like the back of his hand. Rook's the most perceptive motherfucker I could spare, and all

his chess-playing sharpened his wits to a fine point. And Blade? Best case, he keeps Harley distracted by talking knives with her. Worst case, I've watched him put one of those little throwing daggers in somebody's shirt from a hundred feet off. If Harley runs, I trust him to catch her before she makes it to the chain link fence around the edge of my property.

"I'll consider this settled. Any other business?"

Harley raises her hand. "I motion to lift the red alert."

"Denied." I frown.

She grins and shrugs. "Seemed worth a shot."

I roll my eyes. More trouble than she's worth, but I don't know what I'd do without her.

The rest of the table sits in silence for a long moment. That means it's time for an old Ruthless King tradition.

In the silence between Reaper's question and my reply, I make eye contact with Dallas. Fucking traitor. Never should've listened to a goddamn word he said. Should've known from the first second we met in that bar on the way here.

But I didn't. And that's why, when I meet his eye, I nod instead of pulling the trigger.

He bolts.

I reach behind me toward the mini-fridge I had installed in here for occasions like this, open it up, and start sliding cold ones down the table. The glass bottles slip silently across the finely polished surface. Nobody misses their catch.

I set three on the table in front of me and stare at the homemade label for a moment. No point toasting with anything but the hops we brew ourselves on the edge of the property. Then, I grab one for myself and stand.

"Mac, Buzz, Rubble," I say. "Gone but not forgotten."

"Gone but not forgotten," everyone choruses.

We chug. I don't drink beer, especially not light crap like this, unless I'm doing a tribute anymore. I can't stand the taste. It's too much a reminder of moments like this. Moments we'll keep having as long as we don't run this town.

Everyone slides their empty bottles into the middle of the table when they're done, in front of the three unopened cans.

"Get to it." I wipe my mouth. "We need new prospects, but don't get serious on anyone 'til we know what's happening."

My men file out slowly. Harley lingers.

"You're kidding about the curfew, right?" she asks once everyone is gone.

"Not a chance in hell," I reply. "They're picking our people off the streets. Crowded streets, Harley, the sort we can count on not to look twice at us."

She huffs out a breath. "But I'm not some random runner. You trained me yourself. Isn't that enough?"

I take her chin in my hand, and her eyes go wide for a moment before softening. Dammit. She might've just seen that tiredness I tried to chase away in the mirror.

"I'm not losing you to some punks," I say. "I don't care how mad it makes you."

"I hear you, Pops." She pulls out of my grasp and kisses me on the cheek. "But you know I wouldn't be your daughter if I didn't try to get around this."

She waltzes out of the room, and I rub my eyes again. I know that far better than I'd like.

I head for my office behind the war room, sit down at the massive, mahogany desk the guys made fun of me for until I turned the Ruthless Kings into an MC with real potential, and pour myself a double of the bourbon I keep in the drawer just for myself. It burns down my throat as I sip it, chasing away the last of the hops.

I open the window and lean out into the night air. When I was picking a spot for the compound, I wanted to be near enough to the city to get there in times of trouble, but not so

close I couldn't hear the bugs at night. I grew up too lonely near the Oklahoma border not to miss it. It flows over me now, cicadas and katydids and god only knows what else. The lights of Houston shine to the east.

Harley's gonna bitch until this is over, and that's if she doesn't slip her guard, so I need to end it as quickly as possible. I can't have her disappearing on me, and I owe those kids better. Thor's supposed to be my ear on the streets. If he's not hearing shit, maybe there isn't shit to hear.

I shake my head. Three runners in three months. It's starting to look less like there isn't shit to hear and more like someone's operating quietly enough to slip under our radar.

And I don't intend to get tricked like that again.

"You dumb sonofabitch, of course he didn't leave the city!" Reaper hollers. "He turned right the fuck around and handed in a couple more of our names, yours included. Why the hell did you do that?"

I stare up into his eyes, hard with rage, and I know it's over. I can't come back from a fuckup like this. I figured I owed the bastard a head start for all our years together, and he used it to turn me over. It doesn't matter what I say anymore. My days in Vegas are done.

"Trusted him too long." I stand. "Don't worry, boss, that's a mistake I won't make again. You said you had a lead?"

I chug the rest of my bourbon and set the glass on my desk. I can't solve this staring out my window. Maybe some sleep'll make me look more like a Prez my men can rely on.

CHAPTER 2



Belle

Daddy's hand cracks across my cheek, spinning me toward the clock covered in cartoon animals Mama picked up when they bought this little house twenty years ago. Tears fill my eyes at the bright burst of pain, but I blink them away quick. Daddy doesn't like it when I cry at the first hit.

And I knew this was coming. It's pork chops-and-applesauce night, and I didn't leave the library early enough to make the applesauce from scratch how Daddy likes it.

"What does that say?" he demands.

"Two after," I snifle. A little bit of coppery blood makes its way out of my mouth, and I lick it up quickly.

He grabs my hair and drags me across the kitchen. I stumble to keep up with him and pray I tied my apron strings well enough that I won't trip this time. Only sloppy women trip.

"Two after six!" he bellows. "And when do I eat?"

"Six," I answer automatically.

He releases me, and I catch myself against the counter still covered in dishes. I haven't even gotten the egg mixture I used to bread his pork chops into the sink yet, and Daddy hates when eggs sit out. He says that's a surefire sign I want him to get sick.

When I turn back to face him, he's glaring at me with his arms crossed. His sheriff uniform is rumpled from a hard day's work, but his badge still gleams in the bright kitchen light.

“I know you don’t have a mama to bring you up right, but I thought I raised you better than that, Bella.” He shakes his head. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

I swallow down a sob. Sometimes, if I answer this question just right, he sits back down and doesn’t hit me again, and I know he won’t be happy if his food gets cold because he has to teach me a lesson.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I’m real sorry, Daddy. Katie Belmont was out sick today, so Miss Cunningham asked me to shelve and—”

Wrong answer. Storm clouds gather in his bright blue eyes, and I stop with a squeak.

“That sounds an awful lot like blaming others for your mistakes.” He grabs me by the throat. “You wanna try again?”

“I only meant to say I messed up, Daddy.” I swallow against his fingers, trying to get enough air. “I should’ve told Miss Cunningham no, that today was pork chops day, and that I need to be home right on time to take care of my daddy because my mama’s in the hospital again. She would’ve understood.”

“But you didn’t say that, did you?” He tightens his grip just a little. “No, you thought Miss Cunningham knew better than me, your own father.”

I gasp for air as he squeezes my throat. He throws me to the ground before I can reply.

Pain blooms in my scalp as I hit the black and white tile. The bright yellow walls of the kitchen spin around me as I suck in air. Mama said yellow kitchens invite happiness and decorated it with pictures of she and Daddy smiling together, then pictures of me as a baby smiling with them, before she got sick.

I don’t know if Daddy’s smiled in this house since she got sick.

He sneers down at me. “And now you’re too goddamn lazy to stand up and learn your lessons like an adult. Do you even

realize you're nineteen, Bella? Most girls have a man by now and are getting ready to leave their parents' home."

He kicks me in the stomach. My breath escapes in one big gust, and I curl into myself. He didn't take off his boots when he came in today, a sure sign of a hard day at work, and that means he'll get my apron all dirty if he reaches it again. Better he dirty my work clothes. I have a few sets of those, and only the one glistening white apron.

"I'm sorry, Daddy," I gasp.

"I guess it's better you're too ugly to ever attract a husband." He circles around me, and his next kick impacts my spine. "I couldn't stand it if anyone ever found out how truly useless you are."

My back sears, and tears press against the backs of my eyes. I squeeze them closed. It's not time to cry yet, but the spine is always the worst. Easy to hide, sure, but it hurts in my whole body. At least when he bruises my ribs or my face, I can keep that compartmentalized.

"What are you gonna tell Miss Cunningham next time she asks you to stay late?" He presses his boot against my lower back, a promise of what's to come if I don't learn my lesson well enough.

"That I can't," I gasp. "That my daddy needs me. That sheriff is too tough a job to hold down without a woman in the house, and I have to take care of him."

"Better." He rolls my spine under his foot. "But don't you dare say anything about me not being able to handle a damn thing in this life without a useless slip of girlhood like you."

He lands a flurry of kicks against my back and head, and I can't hold back anymore. My tears flow freely as desperate sobs part my lips. I try to focus on the pain, bright and brilliant. I should've told Miss Cunningham no, but she just looked so flustered. Katie Belmont is our part-time librarian, and we need her to manage shelving or we get overwhelmed. What I need to remember is that my duties at home come first. It doesn't matter if the library goes under, even if that means

I'll be out of a job and have to come up with some other way to contribute to the household. Daddy's told me that often enough that I should remember that at this point, and that's what I need to relearn.

I know it's awful, but I pretend to slip into unconsciousness as I lose track of the kicks. A bad day means he'll keep teaching me until he gets tired, and I don't want his dinner getting cold in the bargain. I'll have to remake it if that happens, and dinner won't get on the table until seven if I'm lucky. It's not respectful, but sometimes it's better for both of us.

After a few more blows, he notices that I've gone still.

"Hmph." He opens the fridge, and his plate and bottle of beer rattle against the table Mama got from her childhood home. "I can't eat looking at the results of my failed parenting."

As he walks away, he misses the spittoon we keep in the corner of the kitchen, and a globule of spit lands on my cheek. It stings where my skin split, but I don't dare move. Lying's one of the ten commandments, and if he figures out I faked it, I can't imagine what he'd do.

The TV in the living room blares the results of the latest basketball game. A few hosts talk over the defensive strategy of the Houston Rockets and how that might've clinched their win against the Pacers. He laughs as one man mocks the Pacers' comparatively weak offense, and I risk a deep breath.

A warm dinner and a basketball win should please Daddy, and a long day at work usually means he dozes off after only one beer. I open my eyes as his knife scrapes against his plate and stare up at the ceiling as I inventory my injuries.

My back will be in rough shape tomorrow, but everybody knows Katie Belmont's not actually sick, she just wanted to spend the day after enlistment with her boyfriend. She told me as much on Monday. So she'll be back, and I won't have to worry about shelving. My cheek split when he backhanded me, but I'm clumsy enough that I can explain that away easily enough. I just have to take a looksee in the mirror and make

sure it's not too scary-looking. My throat aches where he grabbed me, likely to bruise, and that's going to be the real hassle. I'll have to pull out my turtleneck and sweat through the day.

I sigh quietly. Nobody seems to understand that I don't learn unless my daddy leaves marks to remind me. That's why I keep making mistakes. All the cuts and bruises fade, and he needs to remind me all over again.

A few hours later, Daddy's snores echo through our little two-bedroom. I pry myself up off the floor. My legs ache from lying slumped in the same position for so long, but it's nothing I can't handle. I still have to clean up, and if there's enough time before I tumble dreamlessly into bed, I might make myself something to eat.

I place all the dishes in the sink, then go grab Daddy's plate delicately from his side table. He looks so peaceful asleep, his head lolling back against the recliner he helped me pick out for him for his most recent birthday. His blond hair falls into his eyes, and a soft smile graces his fine lips. I understand why Mama fell for him, when they were high school sweethearts so many years ago. Even with the lines of age and stress, he's still a handsome man.

And who could blame him for being stressed? He has a hard job. Houston's a big city, and he's the one man trying to keep everyone in line. If he sometimes reprimands me a little longer than he has to, it's only because he has so few outlets.

I kneel and unlace his boots, then slip them off and carry them to the door. He's not going to be pleased that he fell asleep in his uniform, but I can't change him without waking him, and he'll like that even less. I just drape his favorite blanket over him, a quilt his mama made, and carry his plate back into the kitchen.

Cleaning up the pork chops will be easy, but the applesauce takes a little more scrubbing, and the masher's a heck of a thing to clean. I square my shoulders, roll up my sleeves, and get to work.

Mama's little cartoon clock chimes midnight as I set the mop back in its closet. Late, but not so late as I feared. I put together a little cold-cut sandwich and eat it over the sink. Daddy says a dishwasher is an unnecessary expense when I'm so good at it, and I don't want to clean another plate at this point. The Houston night expands before my eyes from the window over the sink. Mama and Daddy got a little craftsman together right after they got married, but this close to the city, even quiet streets like ours are still awake. People walk back and forth, greeting each other, walking dogs, carrying groceries home from late-night trips.

On quiet nights like this, when I've got a few spare moments, sometimes I let myself imagine I'm one of them. A middle-aged lady with straw-colored hair like mine wraps a younger man with a dog on a leash in a hug. What if I went out at midnight and came across a friend? What if I smiled like she does and gestured to the open door of the house behind me? What if my friend nodded and walked in with his dog?

I chuckle to myself, though my cheek aches with it. My daddy keeps me in at night because he knows better than most how dangerous the streets of Houston can get. That woman has probably had horrible things happen to her, no matter how broadly she smiles. My daddy keeps me safe in here.

Before I go to sleep, I pull the cloth off the bathroom mirror Daddy hung there to keep me from getting vain and check my cheek. The bruise covers my whole cheekbone, and the cut is redder than I feared.

I sigh and head to bed. Maybe it'll be better in the morning. If not, I'll just call out sick, and Miss Cunningham can have Katie Belmont do my job.

CHAPTER 3



I slump against my pillows and throw another dart at the dartboard on my wall. Four points.

“Fuck,” I hiss.

Of course, the first day after my dad puts me on fucking house arrest, my English Lit professor cancels class. And of course, that was my only class today.

He’s flipping his lid over nothing. Sure, the Ruthless Kings mostly make corpses out of people before they lose them, and I’m sorry for these kids if they are dead, but what does that have to do with me? I’m not a runner. Pops wouldn’t let me get that close to anything interesting. So it’s not like there’s a reason for whatever shadowy group—if there even is one—to grab me.

I throw another dart. Two fucking points. It’s lame that I don’t get to be involved in any of the exciting parts of the MC because they’re “bad for my health,” but I still have to cave to his rules whenever he hands them down.

I know he’s been a little more reserved since my mom dumped me on his doorstep all those years ago, bringing less women around at least, but that doesn’t stop him from going out, guns blazing, when he thinks the problem calls for it. I tried asking Pops why he got to do MC stuff if it was so unhealthy once, and he just said he had less health to worry about.

I throw another dart. Nine points. Fuck, I have to get better at this before the tournament this year. Thor crushed me first-round last year, and I do not intend to let him smirk at me like that again.

The spray of holes around the dartboard shows I've improved, at least. But that's only because I've been put on house arrest.

I groan and throw myself back onto my bed. My ceiling stares back at me, covered in motorcycle posters I started sneakily putting up there when Pops grounded me for a week and a half in middle school for hanging things on the walls. He didn't even notice until after he realized he put more holes in the walls with his fists than I ever would with a tack and lifted the grounding, but I'd grown used to them.

You'd think living on an MC's compound would mean something interesting ever happened here, but no. No, it's just me melting in the prison of my bedroom until Pops wises up, yet again, and realizes he's just stressed.

Maybe he needs a little push. He did look tired last night.

I sit up. It's a little after noon, which means Bella should be at the library. I haven't seen her in a little over a week, and that's way too long for a girl to be without her best friend. It's only humane. Plus, Bella needs checking up on as much as I need a prison break. She's the nicest person I've ever met, and it's never long between when people realize that and when they try to hurt her. That's what she has me for.

I slide off my bed. We only graduated high school last year, but not seeing Bella every day has been way weirder than I would've guessed. Back in elementary school, when we met, she was the only kid who didn't back down when I wielded a crayon like a knife and warned everyone to stay away. Instead, she ducked under my arm and whispered in my ear that it was just a crayon. I laughed, and she laughed, and the whole class decided we were both insane. Teachers couldn't keep us apart after that. Luckily, our last names are close enough to each other in the alphabet, Goodwin and Grimes, that we usually

had a good excuse to sit together. She kept me grounded, and I kept her safe, all through the Houston public school system.

I snort. Yeah, I'm keeping her safe, letting her dad beat up on her. More and more these days, I don't care that he's the fucking sheriff. There's gotta be something I can do.

You could tell Pops, the voice in the back of my head reminds me. But I can't, not really. Pops'll ride off with a pack of guys strapped to the teeth with weapons and threaten the sheriff if we're lucky. If not, he'll take the motherfucker out. I'd be lying if I said I hadn't had a handful of great dreams that ended with Sheriff Grimes bloody at my feet, but I know the line an MC like ours has to walk. As long as we're not too obvious, and we scare out more, worse trouble than the trouble we bring, the law leaves us alone. Neither Pops nor I can hit the sheriff directly without risking war.

So I just have to go check on Bella. And once I come back safe and sound, Pops'll realize how crazy he's acting.

I hop up and start opening drawers in my desk. I convinced Malo to give me the watch schedule this morning when he switched off with Rook, and that means I know he's still on for another four hours. I get why Pops assigned him. If I left through the door, there's no way he wouldn't find me before I got out of the house. Motherfucker's got ears like a bat and an uncanny understanding of the clubhouse's winding hallways, so it's a good thing we're at my house on the edge of the compound instead. Just means I can't use the door.

I grab a fridge magnet with a cactus on it and head for my window. The frame has a squat, white alarm Pops installed a few years back when he got tired of not knowing if I snuck out. It doesn't beep or anything, just sends an alert to his phone that my window's open. But after what I said last night, he'll know exactly what that means.

Which is why it's good he picked a magnetic sensor. I line up the cactus magnet with the bottom of the sensor and slide the window up with one hand, keeping my spare magnet aligned the whole time.

Once it's open, I lean out the window. Pops's voice floats to me on the wind, along with the *crack* of pool balls. I can't make out the words, but he doesn't stop to check his phone.

It's almost too easy. I grab a strip of tape and stick the magnet in place, then go listen at the door.

They're a little far, but I can just hear Malo flirting with the new housekeeper, the one he's been staring at for weeks. Rosie, I think? Whoever it is, I blow her a kiss for providing the perfect distraction and pull on my leathers.

I shimmy down a creeper-covered trellis Pops leaves up mostly because he knows I'd do something even stupider if he didn't and duck away from the outdoor pool table. From this angle, I'm going to have to take the side gate and my third-best bike.

I grin. Third-best is still a bike.

I creep across the massive lawn dotted with outbuildings for business, use the keycard I swiped ages ago, and I'm gone. My bike's only a block or two away, in a little cluster of oaks. I skip most of the way, laughing and gulping down free air. House arrest? More like enrichment for a daughter who hasn't had to sneak out in way too long.

My bike gleams purple and green from the depths of the trees. It's a Honda Rebel 500, a cruiser and a sports bike's red-headed stepchild, but it'll more than get me where I need to go. I grab the helmet I stored in the underbrush, roll the bike to the road, and mount up.

It starts with one kick, rumbling to life underneath me. I take a deep breath, like I haven't been able to since I got locked inside, don my helmet, and ride.

The road disappears underneath me, mile after mile. My bike bends to my every touch, and the green flames on the front flicker in the noonday sun like they're actually burning. That's how I feel on the back of a bike. Like fire. Beautiful and dangerous. I wish I didn't have to wear a helmet. If I could let my hair stream behind me, pulled this way and that by the breeze, I think I'd actually know what it felt like to fly.

Way too soon, I pull up outside the Houston Public Library Central, a big, weird concrete structure that always looked like a stone spider to me as a kid, and remove my helmet. My hair tumbles free. I'm sure it's a wreck, but Bella's not gonna say shit. That's one of the first things I liked about her. She doesn't talk about stuff that doesn't matter.

I park my bike and head in, past the front desk librarian, and to the teen section where Bella just got assigned.

She has her back to me when I walk up, but I recognize her by the long, curly blonde hair she's had since we were kids.

"Bell!" I head over with a grin.

She turns to face me, and my smile drops. She's wearing a turtleneck. In fucking July. In a Texas fucking July, when the weather this morning said it'd get up to well over a hundred. Worse than that, her cheek splits over one hell of a bruise.

I see red, and all thoughts of my Pops and his rules fly out of my head. Bella's been my best friend since elementary school, and she's been showing up places looking like this with half-assed stories about tripping for nearly as long. I've been telling her for years she doesn't deserve it, that she outta do something, but what the hell are either of us gonna do? Her mom's been in and out of the hospital for the last decade, so I know it's her dad, and he's the fucking sheriff.

I stalk up to the desk and lean in. This close, I can see bruises that look suspiciously like fingers around her neck, where the turtleneck doesn't quite cover them.

My stomach flips. I knew it was bad, but I didn't know it had gotten that bad. Jesus Christ.

"What the hell happened?" I hiss.

Bella's hand flutters to her cheek, and she glances around the low, colorful shelves. "Oh, you know me. I stumbled while I was washing up and knocked my head against the sink."

I could spit. I know that she lies to everyone, but I at least thought we were past the point where she lied to me.

“NuNun-uhh-uh.” I cross my arms and nod at her neck. “Sink ain’t got thumbs.”

She flushes bright red, like she has since we were kids whenever she got caught.

“Harley,” she whispers. “Please don’t do this here.”

I purse my lips. I don’t want to risk her job. It’s the only time of day she gets away from *him*. But I can’t keep letting this slide and calling myself her friend.

“Where else do you want to do it?” I ask. “At your house, where you can’t call me? At school, which you don’t go to anymore? The middle of goddamn town, which you’re not allowed to go to unless you’re buying him groceries?”

“You know I can’t tell him about you,” she murmurs as she checks in a book.

Yeah, I know. I don’t know if it’s because he wouldn’t approve of me, or because he wouldn’t approve of Bella having a friend, but I know.

I puff out a long breath. “We can’t keep doing this, Bell. I can’t keep looking the other way.”

“You have to.” Bella’s voice suddenly sounds tight with some emotion I’ve never felt.

My Pops might lay down the law every now and again, but he’s never touched me in anything other than love.

“You have to,” she repeats a little steadier, “because you’re my best friend, and I don’t know what I’d do if I lost you.”

I scrape a hand through my hair, shoving brown curls out of my eyes. “You’re not gonna lose me. I just wish you’d let me do something.” I lean on the desk and meet her bright-blue gaze. “I wish you’d stop lying to me.”

She freezes for a moment. She’s always had a thing about lying, and God, do I hate pushing on it, but I have to.

“Fine.” She sounds small, and sad. “You’re right. I didn’t fall. But I did mess up, and I needed to learn my lesson.”

CHAPTER 4



I lean against the shiny new bar Beast just installed in the clubhouse den and lift my beer to my lips. Three runners in three months, and not a whisper of what happened to them. I got together a group of our finest last night, gave them the details and sent them out to comb the streets. If they come up empty, I'll have to hit the streets myself. I stay around the clubhouse when I can, handling reqs and being Beast's ears.

I take another swig. Three runners in three months. If I didn't know the Ruthless Kings kicked half the other gangs out of the city and scared the rest of them so bad they wouldn't come near us, I'd guess we were at war.

Guys don't drop like that unless trouble's knocking on our door. I take a few swigs of the stout and smack my lips.

"*Maldito hijo de puta,*" Malo shouts from a few rooms away.

I frown. He only lapses into Spanish when his emotions get the best of him.

I'm about to cross my fingers he's finally talked the new housekeeper around when Spider, my right hand, darts into the den with a serious expression on his face. I sit up. I told everyone they should find me here if they had anything.

"You want the bad news, or the worse news?" he rasps.

I set down my beer. "Bad."

"Harley slipped her guard."

“*Carajo!*”

“Which was Malo, I’d bet.” I sigh. “I’ll tell Beast.”

Spider visibly relaxes. The Prez’s temper is legendary, and I doubt he’s looking forward to facing it. I’ve got a little more practice.

“Wait a minute.” My stomach sinks to my toes. “I asked for the bad news first.”

Spider grimaces. “And I gave it to you.”

“Mother—” I roll my shoulders out. “Okay. What’s worse than losing Beast’s daughter?”

“I found the runner.” Spider wipes his hands on his pants. “Or at least, what’s left of him.”

I exhale, long and slow. That’s what we expected. Kids like that don’t disappear like this. But it still stings to know for sure.

I grab my beer and tip it to the sky before taking a deep swig.

“Think the rest of them might be there?” I ask.

Spider barks a laugh. “Hard to say, but I’d be an idiot to tell you no.”

“Fine.” I set the bottle down. “Contact everyone else. Have them meet us—where?”

“Suburban development still under construction, east side of town.” Spider rattles off an address.

I know the area by reputation more than anything else. Another rough part of the city they’re trying to turn into yuppie paradise.

“Jesus.” I shake my head. “Have them meet us there, but don’t cross the site fence until I show. And take Malo. He needs the out.” I glance at the back door. “I’ll handle things around here.”

Spider nods and scurries off.

I stand up and head for the pool table we installed on the covered porch out back. Beast's been floating between there and his reinforced office all day, alternately collecting reports and trying to put together some kind of theory. Last I saw him, he was shaking down a couple of runners who went out with Rubble before his last run for any details they might've forgotten.

He's still there with one of the kids when I slide open the back door, but it looks like the interrogation is over. He leans over the pool table, lining up a shot, while the kid leans against a post nearby.

"I thought you said you were good, old man," he heckles.

Beast rolls his eyes. "I've been playing since before you were a twinkle in your daddy's eye. Watch this."

He twitches the cue, and two striped balls land in two separate pockets. The kid gapes.

I smile. I'd worked with and for other MCs before joining the Ruthless Kings, but no one cares about his people quite like Beast. Day after a red alert, he still finds time to school some newbie in pool.

Reluctantly, I clear my throat. "Prez?"

Beast straightens instantly, and as always, I straighten with him as he becomes the Prez. I don't know how he goes anywhere. Some cager off the street looking at him right now would know he's not the kind of guy you fuck with.

"It's Harley." No point beating around the bush with him. He likes his bad news fast, as much as he likes it at all.

He grabs the cue in both hands, snaps it, and throws the halves onto the table without a flicker in his expression. "What'd she do?"

The kid scatters.

"Slipped her guard." I cross my arms. "And we got a lead on the missing runners."

He takes a long, deep breath. Despite that, he snarls, "Harley's mine. Chase the fucking runners."

I nod and stride back inside. I know better than to hang around while Beast solves a family problem. Harley'll be fine, but my eardrums might not.

The garage's out front, so I shoot my beer a longing look as I grab my jacket and head for my bike. Somebody'll drink down the wounded soldiers before I get back, I'm sure.

My bike stands out in the line of hogs, and not just for its vibrant paint job. I grin as I mount up. Too many of these knuckleheads think the only thing that matters is how big your ride is, but I pulled my first bike, a K5 Gixxer painted an awful lime green that no shop could get off no matter how they tried, out of the boneyard, and I've never looked back. I even painted all my new bikes the same lime green in the old girl's honor.

I mount up, start the bike, pull on my helmet, and tear away from the clubhouse to the address Spider told me.

When I arrive, I find several bikes belonging to the guys I sent out, as well as Malo's buck-horned monstrosity, parked at the mouth of a cul-de-sac, but only Malo stands there. I pull up at the end of the line, yank my helmet off, and stare at him.

"What the hell?" I demand.

He shakes his head. "Ain't no site fence, and the men wanted to see what Spider found."

I glance around. A few of the cutesy little single-families have chain-link around them, but the mouth of the development is open. "Fuck."

Malo shrugs. "I was supposed to tell you they're not disobeying if you're wrong."

I park, hop off, and smack him in the shoulder. "I saved your ass, you know? Beast was gonna tear you a new one when he found out Harley disappeared, and I thought you might like your ass, so I pulled you out with me." I shake my head. "Traitor."

Malo grins. He knows as well as I do that I'm not going to do anything to him or the others, as long as they haven't actually fucked up.

I sigh. “Which house?”

He points at a pastel pink one, and I march forward.

Past the mouth of the road, it’s obvious this cul-de-sac is the beginning of something bigger. Mud stretches away from the ring of finished houses like this is just the display area. I shake my head.

These finished ones look like postcard material. Each a different pastel color, with green grass—an achievement, at the height of Houston summer—and perfect round bushes. They’ve even got the same curtains in the fucking windows.

The door to the pink house stands slightly open. I shoulder my way in without knocking.

The first thing that worries me is the smell. I gag and almost take a step back as the scent of sweet rot punches me in the face. Malo covers his mouth and steps back outside. But I didn’t get to be sergeant-at-arms by fucking flinching.

I plunge forward, through the living room with little yellow couches, down the mint-green hall lined with photographs of beaches and sunsets.

That’s when I realize the second thing. Mac disappeared two days ago. I don’t exactly spend time around dead bodies, but I know he shouldn’t be this ripe already.

My eyes water, and I wipe them with my sleeve.

I round the corner into the soft blue kitchen, and this time, I do stumble back a step.

Mac, bluish and bloated, lies in a pile of cat litter in the middle of the kitchen floor. Another hand, more desiccated still, leans out of the hole in the drywall they obviously pulled him out of.

My stomach churns, and bile reaches burning fingers up my throat, but I swallow it down. A few stand around the body, Spider at their head, looking equally shocked and disgusted.

I square my shoulders and step forward. I’ve faced violence like this before, just not on the scale implied by the

hand dangling out of the hole.

“Report,” I bark.

Spider startles forward. “We don’t know how many are in here, but the rest of the guys went to go check out the other houses.”

The sprawling expanse of mud beyond these first five breaks over my mind like a wave. God fucking knows how many bodies they could hide in that many houses.

I squat next to Mac, trying and failing to ignore the smell. There’s no ignoring the massive, deep red gash across his throat, either. He’s still wearing his cut, the Ruthless Kings patch crusted with blood and cat litter. But he’s completely barefoot.

A lot of what I do for Beast is supervise the runners, and I implemented a new policy a few months back. On the off chance we get a little shorted by our suppliers, each runner is given a pair of the handstitched cowboy boots we use to move most of our product, with enough sewn into the lining to cover a little weight difference here and there. The difference comes out of the suppliers, of course, but it keeps our guys from getting shot in the head by an antsy dealer.

“Fuck.” I stand. “They’ve figured our op, to some extent.”

A tall, dark man called Spade busts in. “Got more. Yellow house.”

Another follows after him, a lanky kid I plucked out of the Boy Scouts for his tracking skills Beast calls Patches. “And the green one.”

One by one, the men report that every single house is occupied. We find Buzz, and something we’re pretty sure used to be Rubble. Some other MC-types I’ve seen in the bar scene, each bearing different club colors. Some dark-haired guys in suits I’d guess used to be Cafarelli soldiers. We’ll turn those over, maybe score a discount on our next deal. And a few bodies in simple jeans and T-shirts that I can’t place until I think about it a little more.

Just before I joined the Ruthless Kings, they had a problem with an upstart cartel over the border from Mexico, *Las Rosas Negras*—The Black Roses. Thor used to tell war stories about kicking their asses out of the city and claiming it for the Kings, once and for all.

And in every single one of those stories, Las Rosas Negras killed by slitting their victims' throats.

“Check them,” I spit. “The ones that look like civilians. Look for a tattoo of a black rose with blood dripping off its petals.”

The men scatter to check the bodies as carefully as they can. None of us want to know what happens if you puncture a body left to sit this long.

One by one, they return and nod.

Cartel. Okay. We can handle cartel.

I crack my knuckles. “Get the owner and the foreman. Bring them to the compound for...questioning.”

CHAPTER 5



Beast

“Get me Malo!” I bellow as I storm into my office. Fucking Harley. She warned me, I warned her guards, and it still wasn’t enough to keep her ass in the house. Day fucking one, she ditches. Day one!

I swing open the door to the war room as Thor walks up.

“Sin took Malo to investigate,” he says evenly.

“Fuck!” I turn and slam my fist into the wall. Pain lances up my knuckles.

Had to be in the fucking war room. Fucking reinforced the walls with steel. The only ones in this stupid house that wouldn’t crunch like I wanted them to.

“Fine,” I spit. “But collar him when he gets back and tell him I’m not pleased.”

Thor nods and walks away. He’s been around for too long to be impressed by the Beast anymore. The rest of the clubhouse lays silent as I stalk into the war room. They had the good sense to disappear, at least. Leave me with my fucking reinforced walls.

I burst into my office, grab the bottle of bourbon I left on my desk last night, and knock back a swig. It calms my temper enough to sit in my chair and open my computer, at least.

Harley thinks she’s so goddamn smart, but I’ve been doing this longer than she’s been alive. Every time she buys a new bike—and I know every time, even the ones she thinks she’s buying in secret from the chop shops she thinks don’t know

me—I stick a GPS tracker on it. I love her more than I imagined I was capable of before I heard her crying on my front step, but that doesn't mean she doesn't make some damn foolish choices. One time, she complained she couldn't do anything fun to rebel because I was already an MC Prez. I know that's why she sneaks out, to feel like she's more trouble than I expected. She is, of course, but not in any way she cares about.

I open up the GPS program, and my conscience doesn't even twinge. Somebody's hunting my people. There's no other way to explain three runners disappearing in three months. I will not let Harley become a fourth.

It loads slowly. Her top two favorite bikes are exactly where she left them, but number three's dot blinks softly green in the middle of downtown Houston. Right about where Mac went missing.

“Motherfucker,” I spit.

I download the coordinates onto my phone and race out to the garage. My hog stands tall and proud within the line, the Ruthless Kings symbol painted in clean white lines on the side. I sling myself onto its back and very nearly rocket off without my helmet.

I growl and pull back in. The Ruthless Kings aren't gonna become roadkill on the side of the highway, and that includes the Prez, no matter how much my temper burns at me.

Helmet on, I thunder out of the lot toward the coordinates.

When I pull up in front of the Houston Public Library Central and see Harley's crotch rocket parked bold as brass on the side of the road, I nearly snarl. I storm into the library, describe her to the quivering front desk lady, and get pointed toward the teen section.

Teens? Harley broke out in the middle of a red alert to read kids' books?

I spot her before long, bent over some blonde librarian's hand at some desk. She better not think a public location is going to keep her from getting the hiding of her life. Before

we even step back onto compound grounds, Harley is going to understand exactly how serious I am.

“What in the *hell* do you think you’re doing?” I shout.

The blonde librarian startles back, knocking a pile of books onto the floor in front of the desk, but I barely notice her as Harley rounds on me with fire in her eyes.

“Back off, Pops.” She crosses her arms. “Before you make this even worse.”

“Before *I* make it worse?” I bellow.

Harley tilts her head very slightly at the blonde librarian behind her, and I look only to make sure I know exactly who to tell my daughter wasn’t worth risking her life over.

What I see stops me in my tracks. She’s flattened herself against the wall like she could melt into it, and her eyes—her clear, deep brown eyes—have gone so wide I can see the whites. A bruise darkens her cheek with a deep red spot at the middle like blood. Her chest rises and falls with panicked breaths under a black, long-sleeved turtleneck, exposing a hint of bruises against the porcelain-pale skin of her neck.

My stomach twists, and my heart thuds. All the anger boiling in my veins about Harley’s disobedience turns instantly to whoever laid hands on this girl. She trembles against the wall.

I drop to my knees and begin gathering the books she spilled. Harley was right. I don’t want to make this any worse. Neon covers with cheesy titles stack up quickly in my hands.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, you don’t have to—” the librarian babbles as she dives to the floor to help me.

I look up to try to tell her it was all my fault anyway, and my forehead knocks directly into hers. She yelps and wobbles to the ground.

Before I can stop myself, I reach out and catch her by the shoulder. Even through the material of her sweater, I can tell her skin is cold like she’s been outside in a thunderstorm. She

flinches away from my touch and looks up at me, checking to see if I'm angry.

I smother my temper as quickly as I can manage. It still simmers, low in my veins, but I meet her eyes as evenly as a man like me could be expected to under these circumstances.

Something in my heart breaks when I see the fear and pain in those doe eyes of hers. She holds my gaze for a long moment, searching for something, and I look right back at her. This close, I can see a sprinkle of freckles across her cheeks like cinnamon dust. Her skin looks soft, and a few curls tumble out of her bun.

After a long moment, she bites her plush, pink lower lip and murmurs, "I'm so sorry. Please, let me pick these up."

My head clears slowly once I'm freed of her gaze. I could slap myself. This girl is clearly scared witless of men, or maybe men like me. I shouldn't be looking twice at her as anything more than a girl in need of help.

"No need," I say firmly. "I may as well have knocked them over myself with all that yelling."

"That was my fault." She shakes her head and looks at the floor. "I shouldn't have jumped. It's ridiculous to be so sensitive to something so simple."

If I didn't know good and well exactly what was happening to this girl already, that would've clinched it for me. My temper bubbles back to life, begging me to go find whoever made her look at herself like that and hurt him at least as bad as he hurt her, but I'm at least smart enough not to make the same mistake twice. Any explosion'll send this girl running, that I know.

"I got a friend, Storm, who jumps sometimes," I say slowly. "He's also one of the toughest bastards I've ever met."

I gather a few more books while she stares at me, but I don't look at her again. My protective instinct's gone too far. It's just gotta be that, and as long as I keep my eyes on these ridiculous books, I ain't got nothing to worry about.

She remains silent, so I just pile every book into a single stack and stand. She bolts up with me, like my movement reminded her she has a body.

“Oh, um, I’m sorry, I should’ve helped you.” Her hands flutter over her shirt, or maybe her neck. “But I guess you can just put them back where they were, over there.”

I drop the books onto the corner of the desk. Harley stares at me as I do, trying to see if she’s wriggled out of trouble by having a worse-off friend. When the librarian turns to get herself back behind her desk, I scowl at Harley and shake my head to let her know I very much have not forgotten why I’m here in the first place. She grimaces.

I turn back to the desk and put on my people-pleasing smile. It hasn’t worked quite as well since my face got scarred, which is to say it never really worked. “Well, Miss uh…”

I look for a name tag, but there’s nothing on her shirt or on the desk.

“B-Bella,” she supplies. “You can call me Bella.”

I smile and extend my hand. “Miss Bella, you can call me Beast.”

She stares at my hand for a moment like it’s a wild animal about to bite her. Harley shakes her head, and I feel goddamn ridiculous.

But she takes it. Her palm is tiny, her skin so pale and untouched by the wrinkles and scars on mine. Her skin is just as cold as I thought it would be, and clammy as well, but I’d hold on just as long as she wants me to. She shakes my hand up and down once, like she’s fulfilling an obligation, and pulls back as quickly as possible.

I jam my hand in my pocket. Protective instincts on overdrive, nothing more. Nothing is going to happen here unless I can figure out who made her so scared.

My knuckles graze against something sharp-cornered, and I breathe a sigh of relief. Between my cut and my yelling, I don’t know how I wouldn’t have spooked the kid, but the business cards I left in my pocket ought to convince her I’m

more than just a caveman. Man's got to have a calling card, even in an MC.

I pull one out. The matte black paper sucks up the light, but the steel-colored scrawl across the middle shines.

"I gotta get Harley home," I say. "But if you ever need anything, darlin', don't hesitate to call."

CHAPTER 6



Belle

I stare up at the massive man in front of me. In his dark pants and leather vest, with his motorcycle helmet tucked under his arm, he looks like everything Daddy ever warned me about. Mama would say he's built like a brick house. He's broader than any man I've seen except one of Daddy's deputies, and despite the lines on his face and his graying hair, he looks strong. I've been a little jumpy lately, but his hollering shook the whole library.

It's not hard to imagine why a man like him might be called Beast. It's even less hard to imagine why Harley never introduced me to her pops.

My heart thuds in my throat, and my skin hums with awareness of him. I know I shouldn't take the black rectangle of paper he holds out. If it's a business card like I think, and Daddy finds it, there's gonna be trouble. I can hear him now.

You slut! Why on God's green Earth would you need the phone number of someone named Beast if you weren't breaking your vow of chastity?

I push a trembling hand through what feels like molasses between us and wrap my fingers around it. I don't want Mr. Beast to yell again. The ink on his card glitters silver in the yellow library lights as I lay it on the counter in front of me. That relaxes me a little. Maybe a man with a card like that isn't the brute he looks like.

"Thank you, Bella." He smiles and puts a hand on Harley's shoulder. "Now, we've got somewhere else we *really oughta*

be.”

My pulse pounds. I know that grab. I know that tone. I look at Harley in mute panic. She’s been saying for years I shouldn’t let Daddy treat me the way I do, but now Harley, who really doesn’t deserve it, is going to get the same. I was right to be scared of Mr. Beast.

She shakes her head and smiles a little sadly. “It’s not like that, Bell. He’s just gonna tear me a new one for sneaking out.”

“Damn right,” he growls. Then, he shakes his head and furrows his eyebrows. “She means I’m gonna yell at her.”

I look between the two. Harley’s shoulders are tense in the way they get when she’s irritated or disappointed, but she’s not fiddling with that knife of hers like she’s bored or panicky. Mr. Beast...

I look up, up, up at him. He towers over the counter, over me, and it’s almost impossible to read his expression through the thick rope of scar tissue over one dark eye. At least the scar looks old, years upon years old, like the ones I barely remember crisscrossing my thighs.

He smiles again, and the way it pulls his face, I can tell he smiles near as often as he frowns. That calms my racing heart a little.

“I asked Harley to stay home today, to keep her safe, and she scared me by leaving,” he murmurs. “I yelled on account of that scare.”

I look at Harley once more, and she shrugs unrepentantly. That does sound like my wild-haired best friend. She’s always had more excitement than sense. All my best memories, all the times I felt a little more like the people I see outside my kitchen window at night or read about in my books, always start with Harley taking my hand and pulling me somewhere I know I ought not to be.

I nod meekly and go to grab the top few books off the stack of check-ins I knocked over when Mr. Beast yelled. I need to get them to a shelving cart before someone notices

how much time I'm taking, but holding the whole stack made my back burn.

"Oh, let me." Mr. Beast grabs the whole stack before I can.

I skitter back, heat racing, and then flush. He moves too fast for a man so big.

"They—" My voice rasps out of my throat, and I swallow. Good women don't show so much emotion in public. "They go on that cart over there." I point.

He lifts them and carries them over without so much as a grunt. If I hadn't already noticed how strong he was, I'd have to now. When he turns back, another smile softens his dark eyes and rough-hewn chin. Mr. Beast looks a bit like a wood carving, a man chiseled out of the land, but when he smiles, he looks like one of the older ones, softened by age into something a little gentler.

My pulse flutters, and I look quickly away. I shouldn't be looking twice at a man like Mr. Beast. I am far vainer than my plainness should let me be, and Daddy says he'll pick me out a man once I become a good enough housekeep that a real man wouldn't laugh me out the door. These little flutterings are just my natural wickedness encouraging me away from what I know is right.

"Have a good afternoon, Harley, Mr. Beast," I say.

He chuckles. "Just Beast is fine."

"Beast," I repeat with a small smile.

Slut, Daddy whispers in my mind.

Harley leans over the counter. "I'll be back when I can. Don't do anything too exciting without me." She pushes her pops' card a little closer, and they walk out together.

As they leave, I hear Beast say, "What part of a motherfucking red alert isn't tracking? Or are you just trying to send me to an early goddamn grave?"

Harley laughs, and something in my chest aches. She's not the same sort of girl as me. I've known that for a long time. As much as I love the fire in her eyes and the way she struts into

situations with the total confidence that she can take them on, I could never have that. I'm the sheriff's daughter. It's my job to take care of Daddy and the house while Mama's in the hospital and marry a good man when she gets better. Houston has its eyes on me, on us, and I can't mess that up. That's why I need to be reminded of my lessons so often, and Harley only needs to be told.

I take a deep breath and turn to the return cart, but not before I notice how many patrons turn away as I move.

My stomach sinks. Everybody noticed. Everybody was watching. They saw me fawning over a man who looks like all kinds of trouble and making a mess of my work in the process. Somebody's gonna tell Daddy, I know. They always do. And it's only macaroni and cheese night, which he likes reasonably well, but not nearly so much as some of the trickier dishes I make. I got good at the homemade cheese sauce too quickly. It doesn't impress him anymore.

I could talk to Miss Cunningham, maybe leave early to make up for yesterday, and pick up a pack of bacon at the store on the way. A little surprise like that might soften today's events.

Or it'll be taken as another sign that my listening ears have fallen off. He told me not to make another mistake at work today, and talking to Beast like that has mistake written all over it.

I take a shaky breath. Sometimes Deputy Holt comes in with his little boy on his lunch break on Thursdays, and sometimes he'll tell me a little of what's going on at the station. It's Thursday today. I'll just wait 'til then and see. If Daddy's having a good day at work, I'll leave early and grab the bacon. If not, routine might be better than any apology I can come up with.

Beast's card still gleams on the desk. I should tear it up and throw it away. Bringing it home is just asking for trouble. But my hands don't listen. Instead, I pick it up and read it for the first time. It doesn't say anything but *Beast* and a phone

number. No affiliation, no indication of what a man like him might do.

All my daddy's stories float through my mind. Murderers, thieves, rapists. Beast could be any one of those, scarred and leathered like that.

But he didn't look at Harley like a villain. I duck down as if to check the lowest shelf of the cart and tuck the card in my bra. More often than not, Daddy doesn't look there. And I can't give up the card with Beast's soft smile at the top of my memory.

I push the cart toward the YA Romance. When Central opened up the new kids and teens section, I hoped for weeks I might get assigned here. I know all the classics, Shakespeare, Dickens, and Austen, and I learned to love them here. I remember walking with Mama to the little branch right by our house over the summers—when she wasn't too sick—and checking out as many books as I could carry. I tore through them in the three weeks before they were due back, and Mama would laugh as I turned them in for a whole new stack. But when I got a little older and started having to take out books from the school library because Mama was too sick to escort me anywhere, I fell in love with romance. Handsome heroes sweeping beautiful heroines away from their lives to something a little more magical, showering them in presents and compliments all the while. I wanted to be assigned here for all the girls like me in search of a little magic.

Daddy says I should stop reading books like that because they give me false ideas of what marriage is going to be like, so I haven't picked up an adult romance yet. The only books we keep in our house are a couple of well-thumbed Bibles and Daddy's regulation manuals for work. He says I get enough fluff at work, and I can't disagree. Miss Cunningham isn't exactly a hard-driving boss. She lets me keep a book at the desk because she says the only thing a librarian should be doing other than working is reading. She likes me to stay updated on the latest releases to give out recommendations.

I sigh and slide a regular old high school romance onto the shelf. The writing in that one didn't much impress me, but I

liked the hero. He had his own tragic past to match the heroine's struggles. Miss Cunningham and Daddy too often say opposite things, and the cut on my cheek stings just in time to remind me that I ought to be listening to Daddy first and foremost. Mama, too, but her sickness keeps her in the hospital more often than not these days, stretching our finances thinner than Daddy prefers. I offered to pick up a few extra shifts to cover the difference, but he says that's his job as a man. Mine is just to keep the house in enough shape that he doesn't go wild with hunger or filth while he's working himself to the bone to keep our family afloat.

I haven't told Daddy yet, but Miss Cunningham offered to give me a longer lunch break one of these days to go see Mama. The doctors don't have any idea what's wrong with her, but she keeps getting sicker. Daddy and I visit her once a month, but I'd like to see her a little more often. She always looks so pale, and I'm starting to worry that one of these days, she's never going to come home again.

I shelve the last book and roll back out to the circulation desk. Miss Cunningham has reappeared from the back and is at her computer. She nods as I approach, but I can feel her eyes lingering on me, just like the rest of the patrons. They can't stop thinking about how I whored myself out as soon as a man walked into the library.

Maybe, if I can just behave well enough, tonight will be all right.

CHAPTER 7



Pops hassles me all the way out of the library, but there's no real heat in it. By the time we reach our bikes, he's fallen silent. I peer up at him.

He looks tired, like he did last night, but there's something else. His eyebrows draw together in the sort of concern I'm only used to seeing before we do a toast. He looks like he's already mourning something.

"What's—" I start.

He waves his hand and pulls on his helmet. "We'll talk when we get back to the clubhouse. Hop on, and I want you in front of me the whole way back. Park that crotch rocket in the garage when we get there."

I mount up with a frown. He's way too serious. I expected him to blow up like usual and cool down just as quickly. He seemed awkward in there with Bella, and that ain't something I've ever seen in my pops before. Whether he's suited up or not, the thing I always wanted most to learn from him was how he marches into a room and owns it. The apologies, the helping? Pops isn't a shithead, but he doesn't fumble like that with anyone.

I kick my bike into gear and peel off toward the compound. His hog rumbles after me at a brief distance, enough not to ram me if I stop short, but not enough I could hairpin away from him if I wanted to.

Part of me is worried they found something on those runners already, something bad that means my jailbreak can't be counted as a stunt anymore. Something that means he's going to crack down, and that maybe I risked the whole MC by busting out. Pops's temper is legendary, but when shit gets serious, he gets scary quiet, and that's when I know I've really fucked up.

The library disappears behind us, but I can't connect to the road and the bike like earlier. Instead, I can only think about what the hell could've gone this wrong.

The feeling of dread only intensifies when we pull up to the clubhouse and he marches inside without a backwards glance. I race after him as he stalks toward his office. I'm in deep shit.

I shut the door behind us just as he drops into the more casual black leather chair behind his massive desk and turn to him, ready for the tongue-lashing of a lifetime.

"How long has your friend been showing up with bruises like that?" he asks quietly.

All the air rushes out of my lungs. Bella? That's why we rode back to the clubhouse in the most nerve-wracking silence of my life? Goddammit, I knew Pops would take it personally. This is his calm-before-the-storm quiet before he attempts to rain down hell on Sheriff Grimes and gets locked up—at absolute best.

I think.

When I look closer, I register a sadness in his eyes. That's not an emotion I see in Pops often. I don't know how to guess what comes next. Maybe I can talk him out of starting the type of war he'll never come back from.

I drop into the chair across from him, the stiff brocade monstrosity Sin prefers for some godforsaken reason. He and Thor both have their own seats in here, but it always feels strange to take Thor's much comfier flannel wingback.

"Nearly as long as I can remember," I answer honestly. Lying to Pops isn't going to get me anywhere if he's stuck on

this.

He grunts. “And how long’s that?”

I run a finger over the dense, veinlike pattern of the chair. I’ve been keeping my best friend from Pops for years. Hell, I didn’t even talk about school much because of it. There was so little to say that wasn’t about Bella, or featured Bella, that I just clammed up. Pops got my grades at the end of the semester, and he didn’t ask any further questions. Now, years of effort slip through my fingers.

I should’ve known. Pops always finds out.

“Since sixth grade.” I swallow. “She’s my best friend.”

“Your best—” Pops shoots out of his seat and runs a hand over his hair. “Harley, you know what those bruises are about, don’t you? Haven’t I taught you that well, at least?”

I squirm uncomfortably. He sounds too much like the voice in my head that keeps telling me I’m fucking up for not doing something about this already. “I know, Pops.”

He leans against his desk. “I need to hear you say it, Harley, because otherwise I don’t know how I’m gonna believe my daughter let this happen to her best friend for so long.”

My own anger, inherited from him, blazes in my veins. I dig my nails into the chair. “Someone’s beating up on her, okay! But what did you want me to do? I was a fucking kid when I figured it out!”

“You know a whole MC of big, bad motherfuckers who would’ve happily gone to scare off this bastard as soon as you caught the first whiff of trouble!” He drops back into his seat. “You could’ve told me.”

And there it is. The thing that’s been eating me up inside for years. I could’ve told him. I could’ve traded my pops for Bella’s safety, but I just couldn’t make myself do it. Maybe I was selfish for wanting to keep my pops safe, or just a dumb kid who thought I could talk Bella into finally leaving her abusive father’s clutches.

I cross my arms and shrug. I can't tell him I was doing it to protect him. I'll get the whole lecture about how he can take care of his big goddamn self again, and he won't let me get a word in edgewise. Sometimes, I just wish I could sit him down and tell him I'm allowed to worry about him as much as he's allowed to worry about me, especially as he starts getting up there in age. But I know he'd only laugh and tell me he knows what he's doing.

Stubborn goddamn bastard.

"I can't let this continue." He opens up his laptop. "And I thought you would've felt the same."

That stings. Tears press against the backs of my eyes. I'm a bad fucking friend, and now my pops is gonna rake me over the coals for it. I'd have preferred the tongue-lashing at this point. At least I know sneaking out ain't a goddamn moral failing.

"You said someone." He types something in. "Do you know who's beating her?"

He looks at me, and his eyes burn into mine. I'm used to anger. I know how to hold out against that. But this concern, this disappointment? It finds all the chinks in my armor and cuts right to my stupid, fragile core.

"Her mom's in the hospital all the time," I say. "Not for injuries. Bastard's more careful than that. She's sick in some kinda way they can't figure out or fix." I shrug. Bella's never really been able to explain what's going on with her mom, just that she started wasting away one day and never quite recovered.

Pops looks at me and nods slowly. "And who else lives with her?"

I pick at the seam on the arm of the chair. "Pops, I really don't know if you wanna go charging headfirst into this one."

He leans back in his chair, suddenly cautious. "And why's that?"

"I didn't do *nothing* for no good reason." The words sound sulky even to my own ears, like I'm thirteen again instead of

nearly twenty, but I need him to know I'm not just some monster.

He puffs out a long sigh and smiles a little ruefully. "I guess that makes more sense than that I raised you wrong enough not to care."

I exhale slowly, and tension I didn't notice oozes out of my shoulders. Pops doesn't think I'm totally awful, at least.

"I still need to know, though." He shakes his head. "There's a chance the decision you made in middle school won't hold up anymore, or from where I'm sitting, even if I'm sure you did your best."

Tears well in my eyes, and I swipe them away as subtly as I can with Pops looking right at me. I owe Bella better. I've been owing her better for years now. Pops is taking the choice out of my hands whether he bashes his stubborn skull against the law or not. All I can do is what I can for Bella.

Even if saying this next part makes my skin crawl with the knowledge of what's going to come next.

"She only lives with her dad." I swallow against a lump in my throat. I don't know if the library posts their employees online, but I know enough about the Ruthless Kings to be certain Pops'll find out what he wants to know, even with the red alert in place. "And her dad is Sheriff Grimes."

Pops frowns. A thundercloud gathers on his brow as his anger starts to brew all over again. He types a few things into his computer and turns back to me.

In that moment, in the set of his shoulders and the severe line of his brow, I know his decision is made. I suck in a deep, slow breath and pray I haven't fucked up, either in letting my best friend get beat up for years for no good reason, or in sending my pops to his death to save her.

Someone bangs on the door to his office, and he stands.

"This conversation isn't over." He shakes his head and glances back at whatever he's got on his computer screen. Then, he marches to the door and opens it.

I scrub the evidence of my tears away and stand.

Sin stands outlined in the doorway, his dark hair flattened in the way it only gets when he doesn't fix it after a ride. He does a double-take when he gets a look at our faces.

"Am I interrupting?" he asks.

Pops doesn't look back at me as he shakes his head. Whatever he's going to do about Bella can wait.

Maybe he doesn't know how much his appearance at the library might affect her.

"Then I need you in the back shed." Sin glances at me like I haven't been around long enough to know the back shed means they've got some wet work on their plate. "I've got information on the missing runners."

Pops gestures out the door. "Give me a moment, and I'll meet you there."

Sin nods, and both of them leave.

I should go with them. There's nothing in Pops's office for me but the bottle of good bourbon he thinks no one knows about in his desk drawer. But that decision hangs over my head. With the way he looked at his computer, it might hold the key to guessing what's going on in that thick skull of his.

I circle around his desk to the still-glowing monitor. He left the Harris County Sheriff's Department website open to Sheriff Grimes's personal page.

The sheriff grins out of the screen, flawless white teeth below perfect blue eyes and impeccable blond hair. My temper coils in my gut, and I think I know what Pops has decided.

At least, I don't know how I could look at this picture and not want to knock the smile off his fucking face.

CHAPTER 8



Beast

I scrub a hand down my face and try to steady myself. Her dad, the sheriff. That's the reason why Harley never told me. She's got this idea in her head that I'm just a stupid animal, and if anybody waves a red flag in the right direction, I'll go bolting off without regard for life or limb. But there's a reason I've been around for so long, and there's a reason I'm Prez of this organization.

That doesn't mean it doesn't burn me. The sheriff's been a pain in our ass for years now, and I'd love a reason to catch him alone in a dark alley. Hell, I'd love a reason to march into his office with a shotgun and a bandolier of shells. Making a girl like that so scared, he deserves nothing less. That look in her big, brown eyes...

I huff out a breath and square my shoulders. I needed this moment to pull myself the fuck together and become the Prez those runners deserved, which means I need to banish all thoughts of Bella Grimes, protective or otherwise.

And if I don't turn my ringer off on my cell phone before I slide it into my pocket, that could be just as well chalked up to needing to know if Harley attempts another escape as anything else.

I stalk across the sun drenched grounds of my property to the back shed. My mentor in Vegas, Reaper, helped me scoop up enough acreage to put up a few valuable outbuildings around the clubhouse, and the back shed was one of my best ideas. I loved the club in Vegas, but MCs are going the way of

the dinosaurs as slicker, more technologically-literate gangs swallow up our territory and spit us out. I want to innovate. The back shed means we can hire mostly regular cleaners for the main clubhouse and the stills, and a special team for anywhere we don't want pigs with black lights.

I open the door into a dimly lit room where Thor and Sin already sit in the clear plastic chairs our special team suggested we keep out here around the matching table. There's something in their coating that makes them easier to get any mess off.

I sling myself into the chair at the head of the table. "What have you got?"

Sin clicks something onto his laptop, and an image appears on the screen. A bloated body, loosely identifiable as the young runner we sent out only a few days ago, in what looks like the middle of a suburban kitchen.

"What the fuck is this?" Thor asks, echoing my thoughts.

"Where we found him." Sin hits another button, and the image shifts to a hole in the wall of that same suburban kitchen big enough to show bits of three other bodies in there with Mac framed in the foreground.

"Jesus," I mutter. Each body shows increasingly advanced decomposition. Mac is obviously the newest.

Sin nods. "Just be glad you weren't there. They were packed into the display houses in a new development on the other side of town with a mountain of fucking cat litter."

"To cover the smell." Thor frowns. "So we're dealing with a half-intelligent party, at least."

Sin snorts. "It didn't cover the smell once we unpacked them all, let me tell you."

I keep my eyes trained on Mac's face. His eyes are blown wide, and his mouth is slightly open, like his last moments held nothing but fear. Absently, I wish I could bring a drink into the back shed. Kid like that deserves another toast.

“We found the other two in there as well, and over a dozen other bodies.” Sin clicks quickly through other images in various colored suburban kitchens. “Men from other MCs, and others that look like cartel, mostly.”

I shake my head. This shouldn't have happened under our fucking noses, but I'll be ending it before whoever these motherfuckers are can realize we overturned their graveyard.

“Suspects?” I bark.

Sin grins. “Why do you think we're in the back shed? I brought gifts.”

He snaps his fingers, and Spade steps through the door to the second room, where we keep anyone we might need more from later. A man in a bloody suit and tie falls to his knees through it with a grunt, and Spider walks over him, dragging another man in a hi-vis vest by his hair. Both look like they've been roughed up a little, but they've got a long way to go before unconsciousness.

I crack my knuckles and stand. Thor stands with me.

“The development owner”—Sin nods to the man in the suit—“and the foreman.” He nudges the other man with the toe of his boot. “I figured they might have some idea how all those poor dead motherfuckers ended up in their goddamn walls.”

I incline my head toward Spider and Spade. “I think we got it from here, boys.”

They back into the other room, on hand if something goes south but giving us a little space to work.

“I don't know anything!” The foreman spits blood onto the floor. “This asshole paid me extra to come in late a few days, and that's it!”

Thor meets my eye, and I smile. He can have this one.

My VP sinks a fist into the foreman's gut, and the man crumples.

“Please, I swear!” he gasps. “I don't know shit!”

I cock my head to the side and pull out the long hunting knife I keep strapped to my belt. “But did you see shit? Because I’m inclined to believe a working man such as yourself if you saw anything that’ll make this asshole, as you called him, a little chattier.”

He scrambles forward on his knees. “A car! I saw a car once. Black SUV, pulling out as I was pulling in. I didn’t get a plate or nothing, but Rick was standing in the middle of the development instead of being in his office like usual, so I know they were talking. And the guy driving wasn’t wearing a suit or nothing. A brown shirt, I think?”

“Hmmm...” I pretend to think to myself. While we focus on the foreman, the site owner, Rick, seems to be gathering himself for some kind of break for the door. I could stop him now with a word, but all that rage from earlier burns through me fast and hot. I could use a little bit of an outlet.

“Well—” I start just as Rick launches himself for the door.

Jackass. I intercept him without even having to hurry and let him catch himself on my boot. The steel toe clips his forehead, and a thin trickle of blood oozes down from over his eyebrow.

“Now, that’s the sort of behavior that makes me think you know a little more, Rick.” I grab him by the collar and lift him to eye level. This close, I can only see his blond hair and blue eyes through the bruises. For a moment, he turns into Sheriff Grimes in my grip.

My temper surges, and I toss the man across the room like he weighs no more than a sack of potatoes. He slams into the wall, and I’m on him before he has a chance to get back up with a boot pressed to his chin.

I suck in a deep breath. This is Rick, the development owner, and I need to figure out who killed my men.

“What do you say, Rick?” I lean down. “Remember a black SUV?”

He nods against the sole of my shoe.

“Much better.” I move my boot to his chest. “Who was driving it? Are they the ones who gave you the bodies?”

“I don’t know who drove.” Tears well in his eyes as I press a little harder on his chest. “I don’t! I only know the crew they brought in and who made the payout.”

“Payout?” Sin asks.

“A couple hundred thousand dollars.” Rick swallows. “My boy’s headed to college soon, and my daughter not long after that. I couldn’t say no.”

I lean back into his line of sight. “Losing the plot, Ricky. I don’t care about your kids, but if you ever want to see them again, I’d focus. Who paid you?”

“Some Mexican guy!” he yelps. “Never met him, just talked to him on the phone and gave him my bank details. I’ll g-give them to you, too, if you want.”

I nod, and Sin takes them down.

“And the crew, Ricky? What about the crew?”

“I think they were all Mexican, too?” He looks around in a panic, like one of us might take pity on him.

I take my boot off his chest, and he sucks in a breath gratefully. As he starts to relax, I kick him hard in the ribs and listen to them crunch. He gasps in pain.

“Mother—they all had tattoos. Matching tattoos. A fucking flower, a black flower!”

I look at Thor. He was already my VP when we last drove Las Rosas Negras out of Houston, a long and bloody battle neither of us care to remember.

“Seems like we’ve got cartel on our territory again,” he muses. “Turnover there is so fast I doubt they have the generational memory to know what they’re getting into.”

I sigh. Smaller cartels like Las Rosas tend to lose members quickly, but they recruit even faster. We’re going to have to get rid of them before they sink their roots in.

At the same moment as I have the thought, Sin leans back in his chair and says, “How did a fine, upstanding man like you get involved with this kind of work, Rick?”

Rick pales. “I’m not fine or upstanding. I’m the sort of guy Mexicans looking to dump bodies always go to.”

“He’s lying!” the foreman yells, like I couldn’t see that clear as day.

“And here I thought we could be friends.” I tsk and shake my head. “Thor, you want to explain to this man how we feel about liars?”

I sit back down in my chair and watch Thor “negotiate” with Rick for several more minutes. The way the old story went, people called me Beast because of my temper, but you had to watch out for Thor because when the time came, he knew how to drop the fucking hammer. Rick learns just how accurate that is, but all we get out of him is a couple of molars.

“Fuck it,” I say after the third tooth scatters over the floor. At best, Rick is a third-string problem. There are always going to be guys like him, willing to turn a blind eye for the right price. We can’t take them all out and still have a city to rule. “Y’all ain’t gonna talk now, are you?”

Both men shake their heads vigorously.

“Cut ’em loose.” I look back at the pictures displayed on the table.

Spider and Spade scuttle out of the second room and drag the men away to escort them off the property in such a way that they couldn’t talk even if they wanted to.

When the door closes behind them, I meet Sin’s gaze. “I want teams on both of them. I want to know who they’re contacting, and when, and if we’re actually dealing with the fucking Black Roses or if it’s some shitheads trying to spook people with their iconography.”

Thor shakes his head. “I doubt that. Copycats wouldn’t have had the sophistication to put together the development op. We’re looking at something established, and no established cartel would parade another’s colors.”

Sin clicks forward a few pictures to show a single body, bearing its own distorted black rose tattoo. “If it’s them, they’re killing their own as much as they are ours.”

“That’s these little cartels.” Thor shakes his head. “No loyalty.”

“Whoever they are, get to the fucking bottom of this.” I stand. “Pull whatever resources you have to pull and tell me the second you hear something. I want them gone yesterday.”

I storm out of the shed, the sun glistening off the blood on the toes of my boots.

CHAPTER 9



Belle

Deputy Holt never came in, so I stayed until my shift was done and not a second longer. My spine aches as I bike the fifteen minutes back home, but if I walk—which only hurts a little less, anyway—I’ll be almost as late as I was yesterday, and I really don’t want to make any mistakes.

As I pedal, the business card in my bra burns against my skin. Keeping a secret from Daddy is stupid. He always, always finds out. But I just can’t throw it away.

I know I’m in deep when I round the corner onto our street. Daddy’s patrol car is already parked in our driveway. Not even in the garage, like he prefers, but in the driveway. He always says people who park in driveways are sending messages to their neighbors. One day, he sat me down and translated all our neighbors’ cars. One wanted everyone to know he had money, another kids, and a third, time to go driving on the weekends. I asked him what it would mean if he ever left the patrol car in the driveway.

He looked me dead in the eyes and told me it would be a warning.

My stomach sinks to my toes, and I go cold all over. He heard. He heard about the library, and it made him mad enough to come home early. Daddy hates coming home early worse than almost anything else in the universe. He says it makes him look like a quitter, and that’s the worst thing a man can be in this world.

The worst thing a woman can be, I know all too well, is sloppy.

But waiting out here won't save me. No, if Daddy finds me waiting out here, it'll be much, much worse.

I pedal up to the house and pull my bicycle into the garage. A bicycle doesn't mean anything but tactlessness if you leave it outside.

In the closed, muggy confines of the garage, emotions start to overwhelm me. My skin tingles, and the card in my bra burns. He might do a full search to make sure I'm not sneaking anything into his house. The bruises around my throat ache just at the thought of going inside and a cold, dark feeling gathers in my stomach. Most often, he punishes me with as much calmness as could be expected of a man with such a worthless daughter as me, but when he's mad, there's no telling.

Tears press against the backs of my eyes, and my breaths rasp out of my throat. Breaking down here is only going to make it worse. Then, he'd have to come out and get me, and that would infuriate him.

I square my quivering shoulders—but not so square as to seem defiant—and walk inside.

Daddy stands right inside the door with his uniform still on, save his belt. That, he holds curled in his hand.

Distantly, as my pulse begins to race, I notice that his holstered service weapon sticks jauntily out of one pocket.

“Hi, Daddy,” I whisper.

“Hi, Daddy,” he repeats mockingly. “That's all you've got say to me? I rush home early from work like a fucking quitter to try to save my daughter, and all she's got to say is hi?”

I close the door behind me. There's no running for a girl like me. I just have to take what I've earned.

“I'm sorry.” I drop my gaze to the floor. Boots inside, again. Another night of mopping.

“What the hell are you sorry for?”

“Making you come home—”

He scoffs. “I know you’re stupid, girl, but do you really expect me to think you’re so dumb that you don’t know what you did?”

I flush. “I-I’m sorry, I don’t—”

“Bella!” He whips his belt against the wall next to him. It knocks a picture frame off the wall, one of Mama, Daddy, and me in a pumpkin patch, and the glass shatters as it hits the floor.

“Clean that up,” he snaps.

I grab the dustpan from the hall closet and drop to my knees, praying none of the shards are underneath me as I go. Luckily, I only feel hardwood as I land.

“Maybe now you can answer me.” Daddy circles around me. “What the *hell* were you doing associating with Beast’s daughter?”

I blink tears out of my eyes and stare up at him. “Harley? Why is that—?”

The belt snaps out before I can protect myself, and it catches me on the side of my head in a bright burst of pain. A rivulet of blood runs into my eye, and I blink it away with my tears.

“So, you admit you know her name.” Daddy winds the belt back into his hand. “What were you doing with her? Are you working against me?”

My stomach sinks to my toes. Through the ringing in my ears, I can just about tell something’s going on here I don’t know about. Harley’s a college student. But her dad? Harley hasn’t told me anything, but I doubt that wall of leather and muscle would cut the mustard at an accounting agency. The first thing I thought when he walked in was that he looked like all the men Daddy warned me about.

And I have his card in my bra. My skin goes cold.

I scooch back as I sweep up some glass to brace myself against the door. Whatever else happens, Daddy can’t find the

card. I don't know what he'd do if he did, but I know it would be bad.

"I'm not working against you. I'd never do that." I swallow and let my tears flow, trying to seem repentant. I am repentant. I wish to God I'd never taken the card.

He snaps the belt out again, and it catches me in the shoulder. I tilt off-balance, remembering Beast catching me earlier, and forget to catch myself. The broken glass cuts through the sleeve of my turtleneck and into my arm. I'm going to need a new one before I go to work again.

"You lying bitch." He coils the belt slowly. "Look at you. You landed in the glass on purpose to try to make me feel bad. You're trying to get me off your case because you are working with them."

"I'm not, I swear!" I swallow down the tears and try to sit up, but I only succeed in cutting my hand.

"Oh, and now the brave act." He snorts. "Poor little Bella, trying to be strong." He whips the belt at my legs, which were exposed by my calf-length skirt when I hit the floor. "You can't trick me out of this. I know what I heard. I know you weren't just talking to the enemy, you were smiling at 'em, letting 'em touch you right in the middle of a public place."

Harley only touched my hand, and Beast, my shoulder. I know I was fawning over Beast like the slut my daddy thinks I am, but there wasn't any of the sort of untoward touching he warned me about. But I can't convince him now.

I look up into his eyes and see a deep chasm full of anger, deeper than I've ever seen before. Whoever, or whatever Beast is, I was wrong. He has to be the absolute worst sort of criminal for Daddy to treat me like this just for picking up a few books with him. I'd destroy the card right now if I thought that would change anything.

"I'm so sorry, I didn't—"

He stomps on my left hand, and I feel a few fingers crunch. "You'd only be sorry if you had something to be sorry for."

“Daddy, I’d never,” I gasp around the pain. Every part of me burns, but somehow the card still burns worst of all. There’s still a way this could get worse. “I’m really just sorry I upset you!”

“I’ll give you something to be really sorry for.” He slams his fist against my face, and I can only be grateful he knocks me into the door instead of the glass.

“You lying, backstabbing bitch.” He pulls me up by my hair and drags me over to a picture of him and Mama while she was pregnant with me. “Do you see how fucking happy we are there? Your mama was a good woman.” He tosses me back to the floor, and I bite down on a scream as I land on my back near the stairs. “Sometimes I think you got swapped at the hospital. There’s no way a man as good as me and a woman as good as your mother could make a two-faced, underhanded slut like you!”

He towers over me, his face alive with fury. No, worse than fury. Daddy looks down at me with hate. Whatever Beast is, whatever else he did, he made my daddy hate me over a few minutes’ conversation.

“I’m gonna give you one last chance to show me you’re the daughter I’ve spent nineteen years raising.” Daddy snuffles, and I realize he’s crying, too. I’ve really hurt him this time. “That you are my real child, not a mistake your mama would be embarrassed to see if she could get up out of that hospital bed.”

I nod. I’ll do anything.

“Tell me what I did to make you backstab me like this.”

I open my mouth and close it again. I can’t explain a choice I didn’t make, but I can’t disagree with him either. Obstinate women disagree, and obstinate women make terrible wives.

“It wasn’t anything you did,” I whisper.

Daddy draws back into himself in one great and terrible breath. All his tears vanish, and he scowls down at me. “So you really are just a liar.”

He grabs my ankle and pulls me up the stairs. My head hits one step, then another, and then my whole world goes dark.

I blink awake in my bed on top of the covers. The sunset light filters in through the lacy curtains Mama made for me when I was ten. Pain throbs behind my eyes, but that's nothing compared to what rockets through my system when I try to move anything. My last two fingers on my left hand won't respond at all, but everything else jumps when I ask it to, no matter how much it hurts.

I suck in a searing breath and look at myself. My turtleneck and the yellow skirt I paired with it are ruined, but I'm still wearing them. Daddy carried me here, and he didn't search me.

Sometimes, when he has real fits of temper like this, he's apologetic for the next few days. He doesn't mean to act out. I just push him too far. Carrying me upstairs could well be the start of that. Maybe he'll even get me new clothes.

My next sharp inhale presses the corner of Beast's business card into my breast. I'd throw it out the window if I didn't think Daddy would find it in the lawn. For now, I wedge it in the lifted piece of wood of my windowsill, where I used to hide notes from Harley.

Harley.

I slide my phone out of my skirt pocket and slip to the floor, intent on blocking her number. I can't be part of her life if she makes my daddy react like this. I open her contact and remember Harley on the first day we met, threatening the rest of the class away. Her laughing face, and the way she always looked out for me.

As I press "call" instead, I can't help thinking this is why Daddy said I never should've been allowed out in the world in the first place.

CHAPTER 10



I stand on a windswept beach, grayer and colder than any I've ever seen before, between Pops and Bella.

“Harley, you know you can trust me,” Pops says. He holds out his hands as if beckoning me in for a hug. “I know my limits. I’m not gonna shoot off half-cocked like I did when I was younger.”

“Don’t trust him,” Bella whispers. “I told you, I need this. I deserve it. Nothing’s happening to me that wouldn’t happen anywhere else because it’s about who I am.”

I look down at my hands and find the Smith & Wesson 9mm Pops bought me for my fourteenth birthday and taught me to shoot. My arms raise of their own accord, taking aim at the people in front of me. I try to force them down as panic claws at my throat, but they don’t budge. The only thing I can do is aim between Bella and Pops.

My phone trills with a whining pop song Bella and I were both obsessed with in middle school, the ringtone we set for each other then and promised we would always keep. I bolt upright, drenched in sweat. It was a dream. A stupid dream. I thought a nap would stop me from obsessing over whatever Pops is going to do once he handles whatever came out of the back shed, but it seems to have done the opposite.

I’m completely overthinking this. No one’s going to die, and I’m not going to lose either of them. I just need to go to class tomorrow. A little bit of time outside the clubhouse will do wonders for my stability, I’m sure.

Wait, my phone really is ringing. Bella's calling me? I scramble for my phone on the coffee table as the song begins its second refrain. More often than not, her dad makes her charge her phone in the kitchen as soon as she gets home from work. I peer at the orange-and-purple sunset sky outside the den window. She should be well out of work by now, and she never calls me at this time of day because she's usually cooking.

The rest of the guys in the den stare at me as I pick up the call. I flip them the bird. It's not my fault Pops bought the world's comfiest couch and put it here.

A voice hisses over the line, but I can't make out the words amidst the general haze of drinking and laughing in the den. I roll my eyes and head for out the door for my house. Bella always has to whisper when her dad's home.

Thor trails silently after me, my shadow until Pops figures out what to do about the Malo problem.

"Hey, Bell," I say. "What's up?"

I'm halfway to the house before I can really make out anything she's saying. The soft snuffles and groans that punctuate her increasingly intense requests for me to confirm I can hear her make my blood run cold.

Even before she started showing up covered in bruises, I knew something was up with Bella. I remember back in middle school, both of us got stuck in remedial math, so the teacher kept giving us stupid projects like it'd make the numbers go down any easier. On Halloween, we got to make a pumpkin pie in home ec. Bella took pity on my cooking-illiterate ass and helped when the teacher wasn't looking.

The teacher came around just as her oven timer went off, and I won't forget the smell of burning flesh until the day I die. She grabbed the potholder wrong and set her thumb right on the metal pie tin, but she only sucked in a quick breath, and set the pie down without so much as dislodging a crumb from the crust.

If Bella sounds like she's in pain, something awful happened.

"What did he do to you?" I demand as I enter the house and head up the stairs to my room

"No," Bella says in a sharp tone.

That, somehow, makes my blood run even colder. I don't think I've ever heard Bella say no before, and certainly not in that iron tone that brooks no disagreement. I sprint the rest of the way to my room and begin rifling through my desk drawers. If Pops is so mad about what's happening to Bella, he can't be mad at me for breaking a red alert to help her.

"Harley, I need you to tell me something."

Her voice sounds thick and strange, like she's crying or choking on something. He never used to hit her in the face until recently, and even then, he only hit her in ways he knew wouldn't scar. Wouldn't do for the perfect sheriff to have an imperfect daughter. But she sounds way too much like Pops did that one time he broke his nose for me to believe her dad wouldn't have crossed that line.

"Anything." I ignore Thor standing in the open doorway of my room with his arms crossed. He won't interrupt me until he's sure I'm doing something Pops won't like.

"Harley." She sniffles. "Who's your pops? What does he do?"

My stomach tumbles to my toes. Pops came into the library, made a scene, and some fucking snitch reported back to her fucking dad. Someone told him they spotted his precious daughter within spitting distance of somebody without a public service pedigree. They probably knew what it would do, too. All the kids in school gossiped about Beat-Up Bella. She was never quite as subtle as she thought, though that didn't make any of the teachers do anything. I can't imagine it's any different now that those kids are adults working alongside her. And that's assuming it wasn't one of Sheriff Grimes's pig buddies who probably cheered him on.

I cover my phone, bury my face in my pillow, and scream. I've been keeping Bella and Pops apart for damn near a decade, and now everything is colliding in the worst way.

"Please," she whispers. "I've gotta know."

My heart aches. She sounds so fragile, and I can just picture her big eyes welling up with tears. She's asked me for so little over the course of our friendship.

I pull my face out of the pillow. "He's the president of the Ruthless Kings MC."

"What?"

I can practically hear her furrowing her eyebrows across the phone, and I almost giggle. Bella's so naïve I used to think she was putting me on, but I know better now.

"They're a motorcycle club." I swallow. "Or, as you'd probably call it, a motorcycle gang."

A soft, broken sob leaks over the line, then another. My heart sinks. Clearly, that's not the answer she was hoping for when she asked the question.

"Please, Bella, just talk to me." I cradle the phone closer to my face and glare at Thor. "I can help you if you tell me what's going on."

"No, no, no." She sucks in a rattling breath. "No, you really can't."

I don't like the finality in her voice under all the panic and pain.

"Can you tell me why you asked about Pops?"

She laughs a wet laugh, then groans.

"Okay, don't worry about that." I stand up and walk back to my desk. I know Malo took my cactus magnet, but I've got to have another in here fucking somewhere. "Just stay on the line with me. Do you need to go to the hospital?"

"Hospital's are for sick people," she replies. "I'm just hurt, and doctors will never understand why."

I can't count how many times I've heard her say that or something nearly identical anymore. I yank a drawer out of my desk and dump it upside down. Nothing but pens and paper. My pulse races, just like in the dream, and panic sinks its claws into my throat. I have to have a fucking magnet.

"And I can't stay on the line, Harley." She sobs again, that same quiet, broken sound.

Jesus Christ, she trained herself to cry quietly. I upend another drawer and find eight different USB sticks, but no goddamn magnets.

Her voice wavers across the line, sharp and soft at once. "Because we can't be friends anymore."

I freeze. Everything else falls away. That's not how this is supposed to go. I'm supposed to try to talk her into turning her dad in, she's supposed to refuse, and then we return to the status quo. I go back to worrying about what my pops is going to do, and she faces another day in a hell I can't save her from.

She's not supposed to say we can't be friends. I can't lose her, not like this.

"I'm blocking your number." She snuffles, and tears well in my eyes.

My fucking mouth won't work. I have a billion and one arguments as to why she can't do this, should never do this, why she needs me and I need her, but they all gum up in my throat into a big ball of nothing.

"Don't try to contact me again." She hangs up the call with a single, resounding *click*.

I launch my phone across the room, and it lodges halfway into my deep green wall. I tear it out and flip over the rest of my drawers frenetically, knowing there's not going to be a fucking magnet in any of them. When I'm out of drawers, I sweep the top as well, sending classwork and a desk lamp clattering to the ground.

Thor raises an eyebrow at me, and I nearly launch myself at him. I would, if I didn't know he'd take me to the ground in four seconds flat. A sick cocktail of emotions burns through

me, fear and grief and fury and a dozen others I can't name all blending into this nameless *need*.

All those stupid fucking years keeping Pops and Bella separate. All those stupid fucking hours convincing myself I didn't waste those years keeping quiet and it's all gonna turn out. All that time, and all I'm going to have to show for it is a pair of twin holes, where my best friend and my dad used to be. I'm going to lose them because of one stupid jailbreak, the first day after Pops asked me to stick around the compound.

When I crack through the plaster next to my phone with my knuckles, I think I finally understand how Pops feels when his temper takes him over. I'm a thing above and beyond and away from myself. I'm a whirling tornado, ready to trash everything in my path after today's events.

I try to shove past Thor to storm into Pops's home office, but he catches me with an iron hand on my shoulder.

“Motherfucker!”

I struggle against his grip, but he merely watches me impassively. Every second of self-defense training Pops ever put me through flies out of my mind. I bite and claw and scratch, but Thor never moves. I draw blood on his skin, kick him in the shins, even scrabble at his face in desperation. He just stares at me with the same even, almost tired expression.

After what feels like hours of fighting, the cocktail of emotions runs dry. I slump against his grip, completely exhausted. I can't even fight back the tears when they come.

When I begin sobbing, he folds his arms around me. I cry there until evening turns to night.

CHAPTER 11



Belle

I sink into a bathtub of ice water and choke down a whimper. Daddy doesn't believe in painkillers other than whiskey, and good women don't drink whiskey, so I've gotten real good at tolerating the ice. The ice freezes my aching skin, and a few of my worst pains start to dull.

I lean back with a shiver. Before she got sick, Mama painted a mural of the ocean on the walls in here, full of boats. When I was little, she used to tell me stories about where the boats were going when she gave me my evening bath.

A tear slips down my cheek. Maybe Daddy's right to feel hurt. He did raise me better than this. And I didn't lie to him, exactly, but I didn't do half as well as I could've at making Harley and Beast leave today.

Beast. That should've been my first indication something bad was happening. Daddy always says I don't have the smarts to make it in this world, and I've never felt how right he is before.

The lowest stair creaks as he walks upstairs. No, he's stomping, and he's moving fast.

I wince, and that makes my head hurt worse. He's not done being hurt just yet. But despite the fact he says bathroom locks are just an excuse to get up to no good, he usually leaves me alone when I shut the door. I have a few more minutes in the ice before I owe him an explanation.

The bathroom door explodes inward, sending chunks of wood flying. Daddy stands in the doorway. He's shed his uniform for the pastel-colored polo shirt and jeans he prefers to wear around the house, but his face is red with rage. He holds a mostly empty beer bottle in one hand, and the bright orange extension cord from the garage in the other.

I yelp. I can't help it. He only brings out the extension cord when he means business. I felt its bite once, when I didn't tell Daddy a boy asked me to the eighth-grade formal until I'd already turned him down. A good girl lets her father evaluate a suitor before she does.

He scoffs. "Poor, poor, pitiful Bella. Are you ready to tell the truth yet?"

I scramble to cover myself with my arms and sit up, but my vision goes slightly gray when I move. "I am, Daddy, but can I get dressed first?"

The only lesson I've learned well enough is to keep my body hidden, but I know that's conditional. Sometimes, it's a father's job to make sure his daughter isn't hiding anything. But every time, my cheeks grow hot, and I can't help but squirm in embarrassment.

He advances a step. "No, I think this is just right for a lying slut like you. Nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide. Maybe we'll actually get somewhere."

I cup my broken fingers around one of my breasts and swallow down a scream. "Okay. Whatever you think is best."

"Now"—he sets his beer bottle down and walks up to the edge of the tub—"why the hell were you working with my enemies?"

I take a shaky breath. "Harley was in my sixth-grade class. We became friends."

He slaps the bundle of extension cord against one palm. I almost flinch.

Daddy hates it when I flinch. He says I shouldn't be afraid of my punishment if I've earned it. It's his job to decide just how much punishment I need.

“So, you’ve been working against me for damn near a decade?” he says, slow and dangerous.

I shake my head. “No! I didn’t know what Harley’s family did until today!”

“Liar!” He drops most of the bundle and whips the cord against the wall behind me. A tile cracks, and porcelain dust rains down.

I freeze.

“I don’t want to believe you’re a liar, Bella.” He shakes his head. “I thought that was the one lesson you learned right off. And teaching a woman of nineteen not to lie is gonna take some tough work from both of us, work I don’t want to do unless we have to. So I want you to sit up, put your arms by your goddamn sides so I know you’re not hiding anything, and tell me the fucking truth.”

I push up slowly, aching, and leave my arms at my sides. He leans behind me and pulls the tub stopper to start draining it. My skin burns with humiliation as the cold water drains away, but I’ll do anything to make Daddy believe me. I’m not a liar. I am a good girl. I’ll just tell him more and more of the truth until the end makes sense.

“I knew Harley couldn’t have had the sort of parents you’d like.” I swallow. “But I thought they might’ve been hippies.” Daddy hates hippies, says they should’ve died in the sixties with their movement. “And I know I should’ve stopped being friends with her just for that, but I thought I might be able to save her from her upbringing.”

“But you never told me about her.” He narrows his eyes. “Why?”

My body trembles as the last of the water drains away, leaving me cold and exposed. He seems to be starting to believe me.

“I only wanted to tell you when I could show you I’d saved her.” But Harley didn’t want to be saved. And as more and more years passed, I couldn’t help thinking maybe she was the sort of girl who didn’t need to be.

“Bella...” He shakes his head. “That’s still a fucking lie.”

The extension cord whips out and cracks against my shoulder in a starburst of pain.

“How can I protect you”—the cord hits my hip, and I watch the welt bloom instantly—“if you don’t tell me”—the cord hits my inner thigh, and I hiss—“when you let danger into your life?”

He winds the cord back slowly. “The problem is, you’re too goddamn stupid not to be influenced. You can’t have people like that in your life and not betray me.”

I shake my head. “I haven’t, real—”

But my words catch in my throat. Harley knows about the ways I need to be taught my lessons, and Daddy always said no one could know because no one would understand. She hasn’t told anyone, but she knows.

Daddy’s eyes grow wide. “You can’t say it. You are keeping something from me.” The cord lands on my sternum, my ribs, my knee. “You backstabbing bitch, what have you done?”

I blanch.

“You know what my job is like. You know how I struggle against the hordes of criminals in this godforsaken county. If I can’t relax when I come home, this job is going to fucking kill me.” He grabs the extension cord in both hands and wraps it around my neck, dragging me halfway out of the tub with the force of his grasp.

The extension cord is a bright bar of pain across my throat. I claw at it out of pure instinct, and he knocks my hands away.

“I’m sorry,” I rasp with what little air I can suck down.

“You know that, and you try to kill me anyway.” He leans down next to my ear. “I would rather have a dead daughter than a fucking backstabber.”

I writhe in his grip, my hands at my sides, and cough out apology after apology. My lungs burn for air. The edges of my vision start to go gray.

Suddenly, Daddy releases his grip and steps back. I slump against the edge of the tub.

“But I wouldn’t stoop so low as to kill my own blood.” He shakes his head, then grabs a towel off the rack and throws it at me. “Put on some clothes, you fucking slut.”

He storms out and down the stairs, taking the beer bottle and the extension cord with him but leaving the bathroom door wide open.

I crawl over the edge of the tub and wrap myself in the towel. My breath rattles unevenly in my chest as I lay on the cool bathroom floor trying to gather myself.

All the boats on the wall dance between spots in my vision. So many of them leaving never to return in Mama’s stories. I swallow, and my throat burns like it never has before.

For the first time, I don’t believe Daddy’s word. Someday, I’m going to make a bad enough mistake that he’s going to kill me. Tears pour down my cheeks. Daddy’s going to kill me, and I’m going to deserve it because I just don’t learn. But sitting here on the floor, hurting all over and thinking about Mama’s boats, I don’t want to die. There are so many places outside of Houston I’ve only read about. A small fire lights in my chest at the thought of the world beyond Daddy’s reach.

Daddy says I’ve always been selfish. Inconsiderate. It’s the hardest lesson for me to learn, and I can feel it rising up in me again.

It’s so hard to fight knowing I’m gonna die in these four walls if I stay.

I push to my feet. My vision goes gray again, and the dizziness gets even worse. The sounds of ESPN float up the stairs as I wobble into my room.

First, I dress with aching fingers. A long sleeve T-shirt, to cover as much of the bruising as I can without overheating. A long, blue patchwork skirt I inherited from Mama. Then, I pull out one of my spare pillowcases from under my bed.

Nausea claws at my throat. This is the ultimate betrayal. The ultimate selfishness. But that fire in my chest just won’t

go out. I don't want to die.

I shove clothes into the pillowcase, as much as I can fit. Socks and underwear, shirts and pants. A phone charger. My deodorant. No point in taking my wallet. I haven't got any cash, and Daddy always said it was a father's job to manage his daughter's money until she got married, so he's the primary name on the account the library deposits my checks into. Besides, he talks enough about work that I know he could find me if I used any plastic, and if I leave this place, I can't ever be found. Doing something this selfish means Daddy would kill me if he ever laid hands on me again, and he'd be right to do so.

I look at the one picture in my room, in a painted popsicle-stick frame I made myself at summer camp. The picture inside is of Mama, Daddy, and me on the last day of camp where I made the frame. I'm seven, tanner than I ever remember being, and grinning like a wild thing at something just off to the side of the lens. Mama stands on my right, smiling down at me without a thought for the picture being taken, her dark hair pulled up in an easy ponytail. It was the last summer before she started getting sick real bad, and I can see in the bags under her eyes that the trip drained her, but the smile on her face says there isn't anywhere in the world she'd rather be. Daddy stands on my left, clutching a plastic trophy I got for spending the most time at the craft tent of any of the camps. Unlike Mama and me, he looks right at the camera like there ain't nothing else in the world.

Daddy thinks pictures are for everyone to see, so he doesn't believe in keeping them in bedrooms, but I begged him for months to let me have this one on my nightstand. None of the other ones we have remind me so much of the good times when Mama was around. He finally gave in because he said it's not a very good picture of Mama and me.

After a long moment, I pick it up and lay it on top of everything else in the pillowcase. I might be the most selfish creature alive, betraying my family to sate my own desires, but even in the depths of my selfish heart, I love my parents too much to leave every memory of them behind,

I stuff the pillowcase back under my bed, crack my door, sit on my bed, and listen.

Hours pass, but eventually, Daddy's snores float up the stairs.

I rise on shaking legs. Every part of my body hurts. I can't stop crying, and the new bruises on my neck make every breath sear down my throat. But I grab the pillowcase and my phone out of the drawer in my nightstand.

In the windowsill sits the matte black business card Beast gave me this afternoon. I have no money, no friends, and no place to go. Daddy always checks the bus stations first when he loses somebody without a lot of means, so I can't go there. If I hadn't made such a mess that Beast had to help me clean up, he might never have noticed me in the first place, and I could've kept living as I always have.

It burns like another betrayal, but I pull the card out and tuck it back in my bra. Maybe I can convince Beast to get me out of town.

I creep down the stairs, skipping the creaky one at the bottom, and over to Daddy's work jacket. He likes to lock the door from the inside with a key because it's safer that way, he says, and he keeps that key on a ring in his jacket for extra protection. I pull a sock from my pillowcase and grab the keys with that to cushion the jingling. I never planned to sneak out, but the years I spent learning how to clean up without waking Daddy have given me the skills I need.

His service weapon catches the light as I step away. My heart jumps into my throat. Daddy never taught me how to shoot and insisted you should never handle a firearm unless you know what you're doing, but Houston at night is full of rapists and thieves. I should take protection.

No, if I'm going to betray Daddy like this, I deserve whatever's coming for me. I turn away without the pistol to see the broken glass still lying on the hall floor, slick with my blood, next to the dust pan I abandoned.

I bite my lip and glance through the doorway. Daddy hasn't even moved. I owe him one last apology for the bright flame in my chest that insists I can't die.

I sweep up the glass, pull the picture carefully out of the broken frame, then bag up the glass and the frame to throw in the garbage on my way out. Then, at least, Daddy will know I don't hate him. I'm just selfish and scared.

Once the hall is clean enough you could eat off it, I grab my pillowcase, the garbage bag, and the keys. This is it. I either turn back around and see what happens when he wakes, or I walk out the door.

That bright, hot flame warms me like a hug. I unlock the front door and open it.

The night air wafts in. I've never felt it on my skin. Daddy always insisted I be inside by nightfall.

I set the keys on the floor behind me, close the door, and walk on aching legs. I only need enough distance that I can figure out what to do next, but I walk until my legs almost give out underneath me. Our pretty neighbors' houses turn into a lush, green park, and warm rain glues my clothes to my skin.

I sit on a wooden bench, wipe away tears I don't remember crying from my face, and pull out Beast's card.

CHAPTER 12



Beast

I nurse a glass of bourbon and stare out the window of my office long after club business has mostly ended for the night. A storm has just kicked up, and I hope its rhythm might calm my racing thoughts before bed.

The Black Roses, back in Houston. They were a bitch to uproot the first time, and I'm not looking forward to figuring out how deep they've taken root this time around.

My cell phone rings on the desk behind me. I spin my chair and grab it, expecting more bad news, but the number isn't one of my contacts.

I frown. An unknown call at two in the morning sounds like it might be the Roses telling me to back off before I get hurt, but I've never been one to back down from a fight. I set down my glass, pull up a voice analysis program on my laptop, and pick up the call.

The rain comes through first, like whoever called is standing out in the storm. Then, I pick out a pattern of upticks in the wet noises on the program. Someone's crying in soft, feminine sobs.

My heart drops to my toes. "Bella?"

Something like words mumble across the line. Even my state-of-the-art program can't make sense of it. I turn away from the laptop and listen to the sounds in my ears.

"Are you hurt?"

At the end of a string of garbled words, I make out a soft “help.”

My heart rockets up from my toes and into my mouth. I walked away, and now this girl is hurting worse than when I left her. Hurt bad enough she’d come to a motherfucker like me.

“Anything. Anything at all.” I glance out the window. “Tell me where you are, and I’ll come get you out of this rain.”

She sniffles loudly, then groans like it hurts her. “West Eleventh Park, I think.”

I swallow down a curse. West Eleventh is a big fucking park, and finding one lost girl in there is going to take more than a little luck.

To Bella, I say, “I’ll be there soon.”

She mumbles something else, then hangs up.

Adrenaline pounds through my body as I race across the compound to find Harley. In this kind of shape, Bella’s going to need a friendly face, and I have no illusions about how friendly my face can be.

Thor stands outside Harley’s door with his arms crossed.

“She’s broken up about a friend,” he says.

I freeze. “She give a name?”

“Bella.” Thor shrugs. “Apparently, they can’t be friends no more.”

My heart hammers unevenly. Whatever happened to Bella is about us, about today in the library.

“I’m gonna fix that.” I pound on Harley’s door.

After a long moment, she opens up. She’s wearing pajamas, and her eyes look puffy, but the headphones around her neck show she couldn’t sleep.

“What, Pops?” she asks tiredly.

“Get dressed as quick as you can.” I shake my head. “I’ll explain in the car. We gotta move.”

Harley straightens, nods, and shuts the door. It opens before I even have time to worry and reveals her in exactly the same outfit as before with a sweatshirt over top and socks in her hand.

“Let’s move,” she says.

“Club business?” Thor asks.

“Not yet.” I reply darkly.

Harley and I race down the stairs and outside to the garage. I learned long ago that there’s no MC without at least one grocery-runner at the clubhouse, and I keep a new-model slate-gray Chevy Colorado around for just that purpose.

I slide into the driver’s seat and start the car before Harley can even climb in, though I don’t move until we’re both belted.

“Bella called,” I say as I buzz open the gate and we peel out of the driveway.

Harley pales. “She called you?”

“She needs help.” I push the pedal almost to the floor of the car, moving as fast as we can in this rain. “She’s in a park, and we’re going to get her.”

“Fuck.” Harley shakes her head.

The empty road disappears in front of us.

“Thor said she called you?” I ask.

Harley chuckles wetly, bitterly. “She said we couldn’t be friends anymore because of what you do. Pops, she sounded real hurt.”

I tighten my grip on the wheel. “More than usual?”

“Bella never lets on how hurt she is.” Harley shakes her head, looking more panicky than I’ve ever seen my unflappable daughter before. “If I could tell over the phone, it’s bad.”

That motherfucker’s grinning picture leaps back into my mind, and I slam my hand down on the wheel. “Fuck.”

Harley twists her fingers into a knot. “I think we made a big mistake by going to the library today. I think something changed, and it’s our—my fault.”

I glance at her. The puffiness around her eyes no longer looks like sleep, but the result of a long while spent crying. I don’t know when Bella called, but clearly it was long enough ago that Harley’s been beating herself up about it for a while.

I put a hand on her shoulder. “I’m gonna tell you something not so comforting.”

She shakes her head. “That’s what I need right now, thanks.”

“If she’s been getting beat up on as long as you say or longer,” I say, staring out at the wet road in front of me, “then we might’ve kicked this off, but it was always gonna blow.”

A tear slips down my daughter’s face, barely visible in the dark. “It’s been getting worse for a while.”

I nod. “A man like that always needs more. More control, more pain, more violence.” I can’t keep the growl out of my voice. “Anybody who hits a kid that bad for that long and gets away with it can’t help himself from always making it a little worse.”

Harley swallows. “I still don’t want to be the reason Bella got hurt.”

“The reason Bella got hurt was her shithead father. Not you, not her, not anyone else.” We round into the neighborhood of the park. “And neither of you can forget that.”

I can’t forget it either. I’ve seen more than my share of battered kids and wives, done what I can where I can, but it always gets harder when your help hurts.

Harley nods mutely, but when the park comes into view, she straightens up. Emotions later. Finding Bella now is what’s important.

“Any idea where she lives? If she walked out, we can narrow our search by that.” I ask.

Harley puffs out a long breath. “Greater Heights, I think, but I don’t know where exactly.”

I nod and pull around to the other side of the park. “Flashlights in the glovebox, but don’t go yelling her name.”

When Harley doesn’t move I park the car and pull out the flashlights. “We’re gonna find her, right, Pops?”

I take her by the shoulders. “I am not leaving this park without her.”

She nods resolutely, and we get out to begin the search in the warm summer rain. I head north, and Harley south.

Back in the Ruthless Kings in Vegas, I started as a runner and made my way through the ranks too quickly to ever get put on search-and-rescue, but it happened. People went missing sometimes, important people, and with all that desert, there was nothing to do but send as many people out to find them as possible. I know in theory how to keep from recovering the same ground, how to keep from losing my head. But all that melts away when I’m alone in the dark, sweeping my flashlight beam over logs and roots and benches, just praying we didn’t get here too late.

I meant what I said to Harley. Whatever happens tonight falls squarely on the shoulders of Sheriff Grimes, and I intend to make him pay, but when I think about this girl dying out here, it feels like my fault.

The night presses down on me the farther I walk. It’s not like I haven’t killed before. I don’t have a taste for it, exactly, but I don’t mind shedding a little blood when push comes to shove. This, though...

I can’t stop thinking about the first time she met my gaze, her wide, soft brown eyes full of fear. If she died out here, it would feel like taking a totally innocent life before it even got the chance to live.

I play the flashlight over the next bench, and my breath catches in my throat. Slumped limply over the bench, Bella lies soaked to the bone in nothing more than a skirt and a T-

shirt. A pale pink pillowcase, just as soaked and muddy to boot, sits between her feet.

“Bella?” I ask softly.

No response. My heart pounds. I take a step closer and call her name a little louder. Still nothing.

She has to be unconscious. I close the distance between us and take her wrist in one hand to press my fingers to her pulse point.

Her pulse flutters under her clammy skin, weak but not thready like it would be if she were dying. Her lips look pale, but they don’t have the blue tint you see if someone’s too far gone in the cold.

I breathe a sigh of relief, pull out my phone, and call Harley.

“Got her,” I say as soon as she picks up. “Unconscious but alive.”

“Thank Christ.” Harley sounds wrecked. “Main path?”

“Right up it.” I hang up. Harley can ask more questions when we’ve got this girl out of the rain.

I circle around the side of the bench and slide my arms underneath her, lifting Bella in a delicate bridal carry. She groans low in her throat but doesn’t wake.

This close, it’s impossible to miss how beautiful she is. Her cheekbones cut a fine sharpness into her face that her full mouth rounds back out. Her blonde hair, which reaches her waist in this undone state, shines a warm gold even in the dark of the night. Her body—

Harley pounds down the path towards me and pales when she catches sight of Bella. “Are you sure she’s okay?”

I tamp down my response to her beauty and look at her more closely. The high scoop neck of her shirt reveals not only the finger-shaped bruises I saw in the library earlier, but a new, dark bar of bruising across her throat that spiders upward.

If that motherfucker sustained that pressure for any length of time, he walked right up to the line of killing her.

My vision goes red, and all the other bruises and cuts fade away. If he hurt her any worse than that, she wouldn't have walked away.

"I'm sure she's well enough to take somewhere else." I begin walking back toward the car.

"The hospital?" Harley jogs to keep up with me, holding the stuffed pink pillowcase.

"No," I answer quickly. She's got more than hospital-level injuries, but any sheriff worth his salt would know how hurt he left her and check hospitals first because of it. If Bella didn't have us to call, she probably would've ended up there when some Good Samaritan found her and called it in, if her motherfucker of a father didn't somehow hit the scene first.

"You sure?" She frowns. "Staying unconscious like this seems bad."

I smile, but the expression feels thin on my face. "We haven't been at war in a while. You don't know the kind of fixer-uppers we've got for the bad stuff."

Harley nods and races for the back door of the truck as we approach. She opens it, and I lift Bella in delicately. I belt her in as best I can, then shrug off my marginally less damp jacket and lay it over her.

Harley leaves to hop back in the truck, and I smooth a lock of golden hair off Bella's forehead. "We're gonna get you taken care of, don't worry."

Then, I shut the door and throw myself back into the driver's seat. I put the truck in gear and pull out my phone to dial a number I haven't needed in a long time. My personal fixer-upper, a doc we just call Stitches.

CHAPTER 13



I whip past a middle-aged man in a suit nursing a bottle of something in a brown paper bag, pull off my helmet, and throw it to the pavement. He doesn't look up, and I need the kind of visibility I can't get through my visor. The benefit of a red-eye run, Sin told me when I first joined, was that if something goes south, all the people who give a shit are home in bed.

Sin didn't tell me what to do if something went south like this.

My world shrinks to the sound of boots on concrete and my own raspy breathing. The only thing I can think about is the sidewalk in front of me. I have to run, I have to keep running, or they're going to catch me.

We've all heard the rumors lately. The new kids, the ones who just got their colors who go into the middle of the city, aren't coming back like they used to. I fucking laughed, first time I heard it. Of course, it's the new kids. They're the only idiots who'd get caught, who'd make the sort of fuck-up that gets you disappeared in the middle of downtown. A more experienced runner like me would never be that fucking stupid.

I shouldn't have laughed. I didn't know how these guys appear out of the mist like fucking ghosts, how they bring more guys than you could ever imagine bringing to take down one runner.

"Ven aquí, cabrón," one of them yells from behind me.

The only thing I've got going for me is growing up in this city. They've got the stamina, and none of them dumped their bikes like I did when they came out of the dark. The only reason I've survived this long is because I forced them into a part of town where their bikes will do more harm than good.

Boots on the ground. Breath in my ears. More guys than I could possibly hope to fight behind me.

I check my pocket anyway. If I'm going to die, I want to die on my feet. I keep my piece on my bike when I'm running, a stupid, showboating-ass habit I picked up in my racing days and never quite broke. If these motherfuckers pull out guns, I'm shit out of luck. But I keep a hunting knife strapped to my calf, and a switchblade inside my jacket in case anybody tries to disarm me.

I still have them both, but it feels less and less like that's going to make any kind of difference.

"Maldito Rey," another hollers, closer this time. *"Regresa y muere!"*

I know just enough Spanish to catch that one as I whirl around another corner and into an alleyway. I have to put more distance between us. They're closing in.

I joined the Ruthless Kings just out of high school, nearly a decade ago now. I didn't have the cash for trade school or college, and it seemed a little more dignified than running cashiers or bussing tables until the day I died. A friend's older brother ran with them, and he swore up and down that I'd get better treatment there than any other gang I could find. Wasn't wrong, either. The Prez scares the piss outta me, but I barely ever see him, and I've never heard about him taking it out on us when we do wrong. I just tell people I'm in importing and they don't blink an eye. Never had much of an eye for the politics, no drive to move up the ranks. My couple of runs get me home to my old lady and provide enough cash to take care of our son. I used to tell her I never thought a life of crime would be so goddamn easy.

But that was back when the Kings ran this city. I shouldn't have laughed when I heard about the other runners because it

seems like they fucking don't anymore.

I turn another corner just a tad too slow. Rough fingers brush the back of my neck, clearly trying to grab the collar of my jacket. The contact makes me stumble, but I catch myself with my hands on the ground and shove back up into my sprint.

We're trying to get pregnant again, my old lady and me. We thought our boy could use a sister, and I could use more to do in the day when I'm not running. She's waiting at home for me right now to give it another shot. I can picture her, laid out in bed in the lingerie I got her for our last anniversary.

I dig deep and find another burst of speed. I need to get home to her. I was out late last night drinking, forgot we were on some kind of schedule now, and I need to make it up to her.

Boots on the ground. Breath in my ears. Those Mexican motherfuckers don't matter if I'm gonna outrun them, and I'm gonna do it unless they kill me first. They don't call me a runner for no goddamn reason. They caught the new kids because they didn't know what I do, didn't feel this city like a piece of them, didn't have nearly a decade running from motherfuckers just as tough, if not half as well organized.

I dodge right and turn left, down an industrial alleyway. I'm running away from home now, but there's nothing for it. I gotta go where they chase me, and I'll 'fess up to the Prez in the morning and get him to track down my bike or give me one of the loaners. There's a few grand in aftermarket on mine, but that don't weigh shit in comparison to my life.

"Hijo de puta!" one of them snarls.

I duck into a dead end and flatten myself behind a utility box. You can see the end of the alley from the opening, so anybody worth their salt would assume I kept running.

Sure enough, the boots pound past, and the Spanish grows faint.

I've just breathed a sigh of relief when a hand grabs me by my hair and pulls back my neck. Something warm pours down

my front, and the last thing I'm aware of is a surprised gurgle oozing out of my own throat.

CHAPTER 14



Belle

Daddy stands in front of me with a bright orange gun in his hands, the same orange as the extension cord.

“This is gonna kill one of us, Bella,” he says. “It always had to. What do you think?”

He points the gun at me. I stare down its eye. He’s right, of course. I should’ve realized a long time ago that one of us was going to have to die. I always thought it would be decades down the line, Daddy in a hospital bed like Mama with wrinkles painting his face, but this makes as much sense as anything else.

“This is your last chance. We’ve only got one bullet. You”—he turns the gun slowly and presses it to his stomach—“or me?”

Behind him, boats bob softly in a harbor. If I pick him, I realize, I’ll be able to walk onto whichever boat I choose and sail away. I won’t have to worry about Daddy and his lessons anymore.

And I’ll have failed the final, more important test. I close the distance between us, wrap my hands over his on the gun, and press the tip against my chest.

“I love you, Daddy,” I whisper. “We both knew it was always gonna be me. That’s what a good woman would do, right? Like Mama?”

He smiles that beautiful smile of his, the one he keeps starched and pressed in the back of his mind for campaign

trails and photoshoots. I don't know if he's ever smiled that smile for me, but it warms me now, like sunshine on a cloudy day.

“I knew you were still my little girl.”

He pulls the trigger, and everything goes black.

No, not black, gray. My eyelids flutter, and a dim room comes into shape around me. A few walls, tan, I think, a heavy door, and a few windows with curtains blocking out most of the light. Only a little filters in around their edges, bright in contrast to the darkness of the room. I can't turn my head. It hurts too much, and my vision goes spotty when I try. I close my eyes instead.

Last night comes back to me in pieces. The stairs. The extension cord. The screaming.

And then, worst of all, the fact that after denying it all night I went and betrayed my Daddy exactly like he thought I would to the exact people he suspected. He was right, and I should've listened to him. I should've stayed.

A shiver wracks my body and calls all my injuries into screaming focus. Every breath burns me in eight or ten different places. My head swims, and my skin hurts from just the pressure of the light blanket over the top of me. I can feel a needle, like one of the IVs they're always giving Mama, in the crook of my left arm. I try to twitch my broken fingers, but they don't move.

My joints scream as I pull my good hand out from under the blanket and pat aimlessly around the top. The only answer that makes any type of sense is that someone found me and took me to a hospital. This one doesn't have the same antiseptic smell most of the ones Mama's been in, more like a darker alcohol, but who else would go putting needles in my arms? That means I know one thing for certain, and it's that there's got to be some kind of remote with a call button on the top of these blankets. I just need to find it, and then I can explain to the nice nurses that they need to send me home.

This blanket's uncommonly fine for a hospital. Soft, unlike a lot of the awful, scratchy things new nurses give Mama when no one tells them where her personal things are. I must be in a nice hospital. Better than I deserve for running out on my daddy like that. Whatever sort of lessons he sees fit to teach when I get home is all I deserve.

I touch something, but it's not a remote by any stretch of the imagination. No, it's skin. Warm, human skin, stretched over the edge of a thumb and a wrist.

My stomach flips. Daddy already found me, and he's just waiting for me to wake up well enough to go home.

No, that can't be right. Daddy would've said something as soon as my eyes opened, as soon as my hand moved. Carefully, I trace the ridge of the thumb, where I know Daddy cut himself on a gangbanger's broken glass bottle once. Nothing.

I open my eyes once again. First, I check my broken fingers that won't move. They've been splinted with glimmering pieces of metal and bandages. I breathe a small sigh of relief. At least I haven't lost those. Then, I force myself to turn my head, despite the way it feels, and stare up into the deep, dark eyes of the man who introduced himself as Beast.

I freeze. Even though I called him, even though this means he came, when he towers over me like this, it feels like there's nothing in the world to be but scared.

But still, just like last time, I notice the way his stubble cups the line of his jaw, the jagged, previously broken line of his nose, the air of experience his scar lends. Whatever else he is, Beast is nice enough to look at. And he's looking down at me, his gaze tracing all the cuts and bumps and bruises I can feel. His eyes look soft in the dim light, but not quite like they have that pity people always look at me with when they catch me off guard and I don't have time to hide my lessons well enough.

Despite everything, I start to relax under his gaze.

Like he was waiting for a cue, he takes the hand I forgot about in both of his. His skin is rough, callused in the way Daddy always said showed a man didn't have the smarts to make something of himself, but he's warm, and his grip is strong. I don't remember the last time I touched someone other than Harley and Daddy. Even Mama's in such rough shape that we have to put on protective gear like gloves and masks—for her sake—when we see her these days.

The warm pressure on my hand brings tears to my eyes, and I'm too tired to do anything but let them fall.

"It's okay," Beast murmurs. "It's okay, you're okay. You're safe here."

"Where is here?" I manage to rasp out. My throat burns, and if it wouldn't make everything hurt worse, I'd put my hand to my neck to check the damage the extension cord did. I never even looked before I walked outside what I assume was last night.

"My...compound," Beast says slowly. "You can also call it the clubhouse, if you like. Do you want some water?"

My pulse pounds. I am not safe here. I cannot be safe here, not if "compound" and "clubhouse" mean what I think they mean, which is to say, secret criminal hideout. It doesn't matter how decent Beast might be, you can't trust criminals. They lie, and cheat, and steal, and they'll do it to you if you don't pay enough attention.

I squirm to escape his grip on my hand, but that sends a wave of nausea crashing through me. I bend over the side of the bed and retch, but nothing comes up. The movement only dislodges my blanket, sending another shiver through my body. I slump back onto the bed weakly. It doesn't matter if I'm safe here. I couldn't leave if I wanted to.

"Oh, honey." Beast stands, runs a tap for a little while, then returns to my side and swings a C-shaped table over the bed to set a plastic cup of water on.

I eye the cup suspiciously while he bends below the edge of the bed, and then a motor whirs and the bed forces me into a

reclined sitting position. The blanket falls down nearly to my waist, exposing a sweatshirt I don't recognize. When I shift my legs, in addition to the pain, I can feel some kind of comfy pants clinging to the blanket and the sheets. I pull the blanket back up as quickly as I can. This clubhouse is as cold a place as I've ever been in.

"What happened?" I ask instead of drinking the water. Beast is acting like Daddy when he's sorry. It unnerves me, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"Harley and I found you unconscious on a park bench. We brought you back here and called in a doctor I trust to be totally discreet." He sighs. "I can give you a rundown of what all is broken, but suffice it to say, you're gonna be recovering for a while. You've been in and out for a day already, feverish, but we got you on a drip for hydration. Stitches says you've got a good prognosis."

Panic stabs my gut. I lost a whole day. A day I could've been running, or running home. A day I didn't get to think about if I was right for leaving, and a day Daddy will count against me when I go back.

"You're wearing Harley's clothes." He rubs the back of his neck. "When we brought you in, you were soaked to the bone, and your pillowcase, too. Stitches said you needed something warm and dry, and Harley did the changing."

I blush. No one is supposed to see my body. Not doctors, not Harley, not anyone.

"We got your things cleaned up, though, and put them in a dresser in here you can see when it's brighter."

I shake my head, despite the second wave of nausea that brings on. At least now I know there's nothing in me to throw up. A whole day gone, and I didn't eat when I got home last night.

"I'm sorry," I whisper. "I'll be gone as soon as I can."

He takes my hand in his again, dwarfing it with his size. My skin sticks to his, and I realize despite the fact that I'm freezing, I'm also drenched in sweat.

“You asked for help, and I’m helping. No need to rush getting better.” He gives me that soft look again.

Something deep within me I can’t quite explain warms, and tears roll down my face anew.

“I can’t do that to you.” I meet his gaze, trying to show how much I mean what I say when everything hurts too much to move. “I’ll be one hell of a burden. You’ve already been nice enough. All I need is—”

I can’t finish the sentence. I don’t know what I need. Sitting here in the dim light, being tended to by a man twice my size who looks like he’s been in more fights than even Daddy, I halfway forget that I’m the most selfish creature that ever lived, that I fled the house of a man who never did anything but love me and try to make me ready for the world. I don’t know if I should leave town or go home, but I know I can’t stay in the clubhouse.

A sob claws its way free of my throat.

“I’m sorry,” I gasp. “I’m so, so sorry.”

Beast shakes his head. “Do what you gotta. You’ve had a rough time of it, I think—”

“No, you don’t understand.” I cut him off. This, suddenly, feels important. Beast is a father. Once he hears what I did, he’ll know. He’ll get it. He’ll tell me that I *should* go home, honor my father, and then the choice will be made.

“Daddy got mad last night because he heard about the library. He found out I betrayed him, and I got scared he was gonna kill me because I finally made a mistake bad enough to deserve it. That’s why I ran.” I squeeze Beast’s hand with all the strength I have. “I didn’t want to die, but that’s selfish, right? I should’ve stayed with my daddy no matter what.”

Beast looks at me for a long moment. His gaze strays over the still-healing split in my cheek, the place where Harley’s sweatshirt dips so low in the neck I start to worry he might be able to see a bit of cleavage. He’s probably looking at the ruin of my neck, but I warm under his gaze even as I shiver.

“How did you betray him?” Beast asks slowly. There’s a set to his mouth I haven’t seen before, a tension in his eyebrows.

Good. He’s realizing that he never should’ve helped me. This whole dream will be over soon, and I’ll be back home where I belong.

I smile as best I can. “I let myself get too close to Harley.”

CHAPTER 15



Beast

I take a deep breath, then another, and stare at our intertwined hands. Her tiny, pale palm disappears in my grasp. I can't look at her eyes. I can't watch Bella beg me to tell her she should've let her father murder her. Rage coils in my veins, a living thing, begging me to tear away from her and go beat the honorable Sheriff Grimes into a pulp before he even thinks to start searching for this girl I can hardly imagine calling his daughter.

But Bella, so small and pale in the hospital bed Stitches suggested we install for his visits a while back, doesn't need a crusader right now. She's seen more than enough violence in her life, painted all over her skin in crimson strokes. Harley came out looking pale after she changed Bella's clothes, but she wouldn't say anything other than that it was worse than she thought. Even in Harley's sweatshirt, which shows barely an inch or two more of skin than her own T-shirt, I can see the white of old scars in a few places.

When my men lose their nerve, I fall back on a conversation I had with Reaper right before I left to start my own chapter back here in my home state. I asked him if he was upset I was blowing him off to go do my own thing, and he smacked me on the back of the head. A person's job in life, he told me, was to make themselves happy. Anybody who gets in the way of that can get fucked.

The old advice dances on the tip of my tongue, but Bella isn't at a point where she can even talk about happiness yet. No, I know the look in her eyes. I see it in half the prospects

we pull off the streets these days. She's just trying to figure out a way to survive.

"It's not selfish to want to live," I say firmly. "That's never gonna be selfish, no matter what anyone says."

The taut smile on her face falters. "I don't know if you heard me right. I left him. I'm his daughter, and I abandoned him."

"You didn't abandon him," I reply a little too forcefully. "You fled a lethal situation and then damn near died on a bench anyway."

She flinches back a little, then winces, and I suck down another breath. I'm glad she didn't push me for details on her injuries, no matter what it says about how used to getting injured she is. I couldn't sit here and repeat the litany Stitches gave me, not without losing my temper even worse than I'm on the edge of right now. She has more broken bones than I've walked away from some crashes with, and that's before the concussion and the possible pneumonia Stitches thinks she might've got wandering around in the rain. But I'm not the doctor. My only job is to make sure she's comfortable enough to stay in bed at least until Harley gets home from her classes in a couple of hours and can calm her back down.

"All I mean to say is, you can't be faulted for anything you did trying to protect your life. It's human instinct." I sigh. "And your father should never make you feel like that."

She smiles a little sadly. "I know why you think that. It's 'cause Harley's a good daughter. I'm not a good daughter. I let my daddy down all the time with my stupid mistakes."

I can't help but laugh. "Harley, a good daughter? She's a hellion. I can't turn around without her disobeying. Hell, I was at the library because I told her to stay home for her safety, and she refused!"

Bella frowns. "If she doesn't listen, why don't you teach her more firmly?"

I look back at her, and I know instantly I've made a mistake. Her soft brown eyes are full of confusion, and worse,

those bright red bloodshot lines Stitches said mean her father tried to strangle her. Petechiae, he called them. I've seen them on more than a dozen corpses, but they never looked so vivid as in her wide, worried eyes.

That part of my brain where the protective instinct spins out of control takes over. It wants to cup her face, smooth away the tracks of her tears, and pull her long, blonde hair out of her face. It wants to soothe every injury, press kisses to cuts and bruises, and learn the lows of Bella's life as I take her to new heights.

But I don't listen to that part. It'll wear off soon enough, especially if she sticks around for the months Stitches suggested. Because I can't be attracted to a girl my daughter's age, and certainly not one in a position this vulnerable.

Instead, I run my thumb over the back of her unbroken hand and try to keep things simple. "Because I like to think of myself as a good father, and when you're a good father, there's nothing in the world your kids could do that would make you hit them."

Bella seems to bristle. "My daddy did the best he could. Do you know my mama's sick? The doctors don't know what's wrong with her, but she's just wasting away. And he's got an awfully hard job, dealing with all the no-goods that can't come up with anything better to do with themselves but terrorize the good folks of the county." She glares at me and moves as if she wants to cross her arms but can't because it would hurt too bad.

My temper flashes up with no warning. This girl is covered in injuries her father caused, this is the longest she's been conscious in twenty-four hours, and she still defends him. Any father should be honored to have a daughter who loves him that much, but instead, that fucking snake of a man crawled deep into her brain and dripped poison into her ears until she couldn't love anybody but him. After everything I've heard, I wouldn't be surprised if he found a way to put her mama in the hospital all this time.

"That's no excuse," I growl.

Bella falls abruptly silent and looks at the door on the far side of the room. She's not listening to me anymore. She can't. My pops had a temper on him, yelled when he got drunk sometimes, but that's nothing compared to being alone in a house with a man like her father for so many years. She can't see past the worldview he set up for her just yet, and no amount of snapping at her is going to make it come any easier.

Damned if I know what will, though. Stitches might be able to put her back together physically, but I don't know what fixes this kind of brainwashing.

We spend several long minutes in silence. She doesn't move, and despite my promise that she will never be alone, I start to wonder if maybe I should just go stand outside the door or something. Just as I glance at the clock on the wall I can barely read through the dim light to check when Harley will be back, I realize Bella still hasn't let go of my hand.

Here, in the dark and the quiet, that feels like as big a step as I could hope for. Stitches said with everything she has to heal up from, and her immune system being weakened by whatever's causing the fever, he'd guess six months before she's able to resume normal life without setting her healing back. That's six months sitting around the clubhouse, surrounded by motherfuckers who came from situations sometimes just as bad as hers, who got out and turned themselves into the sort of people no one would ever fuck with again. I made myself tough to make it in this life I loved, but maybe talking to someone who got tough so no one hurt them again would help her.

I'd been kicking around leaving Harley's guard intact and just replacing Malo, but maybe I should switch out Malo and Blade. I doubt she's going to break out again so soon after the results of her last stunt, and I think Blade, for all his rough edges, might be a comforting presence for Bella. I never got the specifics of his childhood, but I know if someone with his last name ever comes asking around, the whole club goes on red alert until they're gone or dead.

I glance back at Bella and find that my silence has allowed her enough peace to fall back into unconsciousness. I readjust

my hand so I can touch her pulse point without letting go. Unlike in the park, it beats steadily, if a little fast, against my skin. It comforts me more than I would've expected. Whatever war she might be fighting in her head, she's sleeping comfortably now, not the terrifying comatose state Harley and I brought her home in.

The little wrinkle between her eyebrows finally smooths out. She doesn't worry like this. Sleep leaves her looking serene, almost angelic. Her hair tumbles over one shoulder in a golden wave, but it's starting to look a little limp. Changing her clothes was one thing, but aside from the disinfecting Stitches had to do on some of her wounds, we haven't been able to clean her up. Maybe next time she wakes up, I'll try to get her into a bath.

Those protective instincts gone wild spin out when I think about putting Bella into the bath, but I clamp down on those thoughts. This proximity, the low lighting, it's messing with my head. I need a little space to remind myself why I'm here. I need something to do. I can't just keep sitting here, waiting for my chance to talk to her.

I disentangle myself from her hand and place it gently on the blanket. She stirs, but only enough to murmur something and lapse back into sleep. I exhale and stand. She didn't drink any of the water, seemed to distrust why I might even get her such a thing, but Stitches said it would be important. I leave the cup. I can always refill it later or make some of that tea he recommended. Instead, I wander to the dresser I tried to point out to her and open the bottom drawer, where Harley stuffed all the blankets. Bella kept shivering, and I know she's burning up, but if a fever tells you to get warmer, you gotta listen. I pull out another light blanket, then unearth the wool quilt my own grandmama made for me before I left my hometown. It was the last thing she ever knit, just before her mind went. She swore up and down I'd need something to keep me warm on those lonely nights. She hadn't been wrong, either.

I grab the quilt and bring it over to Bella's bed. The vibrant reds and blues my grandmama picked for me seem out of place with her pale coloring, and I can't even imagine how

ridiculous the two of us would look next to each other, her in her pastels and me in my blacks and dark grays. But that's not worth thinking. I spread the quilt over her, and she sighs and snuggles deeper in. She has high, red spots on her cheeks, certainly a sign of the fever, but altogether she looks like a cozy winter portrait.

I smooth a corner of the quilt down. "I didn't answer when you asked me if I thought you should've stayed."

Bella doesn't move, doesn't give any sign that she's listening. Despite my better instincts, I perch on the edge of her bed. Even through two blankets, I can feel the heat of her knee against my thigh.

"Of course, I don't think you should have stayed." I grit my teeth to keep my temper from escaping around the things I want to say to her, the things I don't think she's ready to hear just yet. "He tried to kill you. But it's also worth saying, I think you're a damn sight braver than some of my men. A life like yours has ways of keeping you trapped. I've seen it too often. And even if it took him stepping right up to the line of destroying you outright, you found the courage to leave." I swallow as an unfamiliar emotion takes root in my chest, and I run a thumb over the red spot on her cheek. "I know I'm supposed to be the badass, but that might beat all my years of being Prez."

The door opens behind me, allowing a shaft of yellow light into the room, and I leap to my feet. Whoever the hell thinks they can walk into this room without knocking is about to have another thing coming.

CHAPTER 16



I hurry to the infirmary in the clubhouse with my laptop open in one hand. This evening's rounds found a different runner, an older guy named Jaguar I wouldn't have expected to get caught that easily, propped up in front of one of our supplier's door with his throat slit. That kind of escalation means they know we found the bodies. They have to know we're onto them.

Normally, I'd head straight for Beast's office, or just ask around the den for who last saw him, but he's been in one place lately. Right by the side of that girl he and Harley showed up with in the middle of the night. I only got bits of the story in between Stitches arriving, Harley crying, and Thor telling me everything he knew. As far as anyone can tell, the girl is Harley's secret best friend, Bella Grimes, the only daughter of Harris County's sheriff.

I groaned when I learned that. With Las Rosas on the move, the last thing we need right now is the law breathing down our necks. Then, I saw the girl. Just a glimpse, between a veritable army of men, doctors, and Harley, who might as well be an army in herself. And I knew exactly why she'd ended up in our care. She looked beat up as all hell, and beat up in the way you only get when you let the person get real close first. Beast only has a couple of hard rules for us Kings: Don't snitch, wear your gear every time you ride, and if you hit your wife or kid, it's your life. It's part of the reason everyone's so happy to follow him to the ends of the Earth. His men come first, until they're hurting somebody weaker. I

know good and well why this girl is here, why we're risking the law. What I don't know is why Beast hasn't left her side.

I swing open the door and Beast leaps up out of a low, wooden chair I don't remember seeing in the infirmary, suddenly a tower of muscle and fury.

"What in the hell do you think you're doing?" he hisses.

I glance at the girl, now halfway behind him. This is the closest I've been yet. A cloud of blonde hair keeps her head up off the pillow, and high, red spots color her cheeks in addition to all the bruises. The only information that's easy to get is that she's sick. Feverish, I heard, from being out in the cold and rain without any type of jacket. She seems to be sleeping restlessly. There's a furrow between her eyebrows, and her fingers twitch on top of the blanket.

"I have news," I murmur. If he's keeping the volume down for her sake, the least I can do is oblige.

"Not in here you don't." Beast crosses his arms and leans a little further between me and Bella.

I put up my free hand and step back outside the door I left open behind me. "Now can we talk?"

He turns and looks at the girl for a long moment. His posture softens, turning him from the Prez everyone loves and fears in equal measure to just a man. I frown. Most of the time, even when he's not the Prez, he's an MC man. He's Beast. Here, in the low light of the infirmary, he looks more like any old cager off the streets.

"Fine." Beast squares his shoulders and marches out the door. He closes it most of the way behind him and positions himself in such a way that he can see through the narrow crack of the opening. "What?"

I glance around the wood-paneled hall. We're near the back of the clubhouse, but I don't want to spook anyone with news like this. Then, I get a look at Beast's body language. He's no longer the man I saw in the room, though he remains somewhere between him and the Ruthless Prez I've grown used to. I get the sense a change of venue isn't in the cards.

“This evening’s run turned up a body.” I click onto the gallery on my laptop. Luckily, the person who found him had the good sense to take a few pictures of the body before he loaded Jaguar up to bring him home. We had to wipe his phone after, and the kid bitched like I wouldn’t have believed from someone with the stones to take the shots he did, but he did it. Red alert means tightening security, and Bella Grimes has turned our red alert well and truly crimson.

I open the first picture of Jaguar’s body so Beast can clearly see the fountain of blood, Jaguar’s face, and the message spray-painted in brilliant red on the wall behind him, then turn my laptop around.

Beast peers at the image. “What’s that behind him, in Spanish?”

I smile grimly. I speak a passable amount of the language, but I pulled Malo in just in case I’d gotten my translation wrong.

I hadn’t.

“It says—”

Bella makes a small sound, low in her throat. Beast whips around and throws open the door before flying to her side. From here, I can see that twitching’s getting worse. Her other hand moves under the covers, awkwardly because of those two splinted fingers she’s got, and her shoulders shake a little.

Beast scoops up her hand laying on top of the covers and rubs his thumb softly over her skin, murmuring something I can’t hear from the door.

I hesitate. Suddenly, it feels like I’m standing on the edge of something personal, something private.

I’ve seen the Prez spend time with a club slut or two. He indulges less than most of the Kings—less than myself by far—but he’s no saint. I’ve seen him getting handsy in bars, dragging women into dark corners and quiet rooms neither of them emerge from for hours at a time. And every time, I’ve laughed and teased him when he came back, just like every

other motherfucker with Ruthless King colors. I don't want to laugh right now.

I've seen him with Harley, too. Ruffling her hair, handing down edicts, giving fatherly advice. This has that same feeling of something I'm supposed to keep on the outside of. I was told very firmly when I joined up that we were to treat Harley like any other club member except in asking her to do stuff, but I've never seen Beast hold Harley's hand like this. I've never seen him look at her with this softness in the set of his shoulders.

I have no goddamn clue what's going on between the Prez and this girl, but I know it's nothing like I've ever seen from him before.

After a long moment, her twitching starts to subside. She sucks in a shaky breath, and when she breathes out, it comes a little more evenly. Bella seems to have fallen back into a slightly more comfortable sleep. Beast leans back in his low wooden chair and starts a little when he sees me still standing in the doorway. He drops her hand and marches back to the door. This time, though, he doesn't exit. He just blocks the entryway with his bulk, and any view I had of Bella Grimes disappears.

"Am I right in thinking this is real trouble?" He scowls down at me like I did something wrong by continuing to be here.

I look at the picture still open on my laptop. In lurid, dripping red letters, the brick wall above Jaguar's body reads, *Muerte a todos los Reyes. Esta ciudad pertenece a Las Rosas Negras!*

"Mostly likely." I frown down at the screen.

He sighs and scrubs a hand over his face. "Call church for eight tonight."

"Eight?" I raise an eyebrow. That's three hours from now, and I came to find Beast because a threat like this needs to be dealt with immediately.

“Eight.” He clenches his jaw and looks behind him. “She’s in and out, and I don’t know how much she’s remembering each time. Harley’ll be home from her study session then to sit with her.”

That strange moment when he went to her feels even more poignant in my mind. Beast is sitting by this girl’s side, holding her hand and re-explaining the world to her every time she wakes up. He’s doing for his daughter’s best friend the same thing his daughter is doing for her.

I purse my lips. “We can get another of the guys, or someone’s old lady—”

Beast snarls and grabs the lapel of my cut. “No one other than Harley or me is to step into this room without my permission until she’s fully conscious. Not you, not Thor, not even Stitches. Do you hear me?”

It’s only because I’ve spent years building up a resistance to the Prez’s temper that I don’t wince or drop my laptop when he gets in my face. He is an imposing man, and he knows how to use it. The jagged scar on his face catches the light of the hallway. But this close, I can see deep bags under his eyes, and I wonder how much he’s slept since he brought this girl into our lives.

“I’ll tell the rest of the club,” I reply evenly.

He drops me, and I brush off my cut.

I snap my laptop shut. “I’ll see you at eight.”

He doesn’t say anything as he stalks back into the infirmary, but what really surprises me is how quietly he closes the door behind him.

I shake my head. Whatever is happening with the girl is going to be all kinds of trouble. I just know it.

CHAPTER 17



Beast

“—a nd the graffiti reads, Death to all Kings. This city belongs to Las Rosas Negras.” Sin crosses his arms and stares at me. “Malo confirmed my translation.”

I exhale a long, slow breath. Thor, Sin, Storm, and all the others watch me, waiting for whatever genius pronouncement I have to solve this problem in one fell swoop. I sip my glass of the rye I keep at the bar in the den for everyone to drink. Its spicy bite makes me long for my bourbon, but I don't make a face.

“I wasn't aware they had territory in Houston.” I snort. “In fact, I distinctly remember kicking their asses out.”

Thor crosses his arms. “I guess they're back for another ass-kicking.”

Blue nods his agreement. “You want 'em torched? I got all sorts of new ways to bomb them back to the Stone Age.”

I run my finger around the rim of my glass and try not to let my thoughts drift back to Bella, small and pale in her hospital bed. Harley has her now. She'll take good care of her, and the place is crawling with my men. Nothing's going to happen just because I'm not at her side.

“Torching them's a decent way to send a message, but we need an in first.” Storm taps his fingers on the table. “They left Jag's body where they knew we'd find it. A message's no good if the intended never gets it.”

Blue frowns. “That makes sense.”

“You can start working on something big.” I incline my head in his direction. I wanted the ex-SWAT demolitions expert in on this because I thought a big message might just be the way to kick something off. Plus, the kid hasn’t had anything to do in a while, and the last thing I need is him picking up another new hobby to do at the clubhouse. Our walls are still stained from his disastrous attempt at screen-printing, and if he gives another instrument a try, I’m going to have to build a soundproof room.

Blue grins at me with a sparkle in the ice-blue irises he was named for.

“I can set my top guys on getting that.” Sin types something into his laptop. “Cartels always deal, which means they need suppliers and dealers. They got any type of branding on their stuff?”

“Just a thorn.” Thor’s gruff voice echoes through the room. “Bright red, on every bag.”

Sin nods.

The four men volley ideas back and forth while I listen. I’ve built up a good crew over the last decade. It took a fucking lot of work, so I’m glad they’re good. A few solid prospects washed out, and my sergeant-at-arms before Sin was a total waste, but I’ve made it. I’d trust every man in here with my life, but it’s more than that. I chose them all for their brains as much as their brawn or their loyalty. If I just let them spin, they’d come up with a plan nearly as good as any I could come up with myself.

Knowing that allows me to drift. I sip the rye again and think about how Bella’s skin has gone from clammy to burning hot, how she murmurs things under her breath when her fever dreams take her. She talks about her daddy more often than not, asking him not to teach her any more lessons, apologizing, sometimes even crying out. When she’s resting easy, she’s beautiful like a woman in a storybook, like Sleeping Beauty plucked right off the pages, but when the dreams take her, it’s impossible to forget what she’s running from.

“What do you think, Prez?” Sin asks suddenly.

I turn to him and find a strange glint in his eyes, like he knows exactly what I was thinking about.

I cast back through my memory. Las Rosas were one of the last motherfuckers we had to clear out of Houston before we could call the place well and truly ours, and they were a bitch to take out. They wouldn't come to any kind of negotiation table like most of the final few, so we had to hit them the old-fashioned way. But they were ready for that. If there's one thing I know about cartels, it's that a few deaths in the roster ain't gonna scare them away for shit.

“I think this isn't the sort of game we can play slow,” I answer, hoping against hope that makes sense with what they were talking about. Being tired is one thing, but zoning out during meetings is the behavior of a Prez on his way out the door, and I don't intend to give up my throne any time soon.

Thor nods slowly. “Last time, every time we hit one spot, they'd pop up in another like weeds. Hitting their dealers and suppliers, no matter how hard we hit them, didn't ever do quite what we hoped.”

“Then what?” Sin asks. “If traditional warfare isn't gonna do it, we have to come up with something new.”

“Can we pump up the cost of operation?” Storm stares down at the table, distant like he always gets when he thinks about his time overseas. “Best way I've ever found to flush out undesirables is to make what they're doing not worth it anymore, to them or the community harboring them.”

The table falls silent for a moment, thinking about where Storm learned that.

“Last time, Las Rosas kept a rotating base of operations through different Mexican immigrant communities in the city.” Thor sighs. “And we can't exactly stop selling to all of them without crushing our own profits into the dust.”

“And we're not using violence on civilians.” I cross my arms. “No matter how effective it is. We want a city to rule at the end of this.”

“So that leaves driving up their own operating costs,” Blue chimes in. “Which seems easier anyway.”

“What does a cartel need?” I muse.

“Weapons,” says Thor. “Doubt we can stop ’em from getting those fucking knives, but guns may be something.”

“Cash,” Storm offers. “They gotta buy supplies, places to stay. If they’re this new, they probably have a hell of a lot of bribes to make.”

Sin frowns and stares down at his laptop, suddenly pensive. I lean into his line of sight to catch his eye, but he just shakes his head.

At the very least, he’s not looking at me like he knows I’m thinking about Bella anymore. Anything else I can get out of him later.

“Suppliers!” Blue says.

We all look at him for a moment.

“That’s the traditional shit we just dismissed,” I say.

He shakes his head. “Suppliers with supplies, I mean. They can’t cook if there’s nothing to cook with, y’know?”

“Now you might just be onto something.” I lean back in my throne. It slides smoothly under my weight, and I smile. For the first time since I saw her on that bench, Bella isn’t the first thought on my mind. Instead, all my thoughts bend toward the shape of a whole new way to handle this upstart cartel.

“We still have an in with Border Patrol?” I ask Thor. Sin’s my man in the city, but Thor keeps track of most of our outside relationships.

“Yes and no.” He sighs. “Our guy’s still there, but there’ve been crackdowns on letting the right stuff slip through. It’s tightening our pipeline a little.”

I grin. “That’s perfect.”

Thor raises an eyebrow. “Boss?”

I lean forward and spread my hands in front of me. Everyone leans in, though Sin moves a beat behind the rest.

“Plan’s real simple.” I smile. “We start with their suppliers, like Blue suggested.”

He grins, and I nod.

“Have our guy become a model citizen.” I nod at Thor. “We still want as many of our packages as possible, but I want him on the ball for everything else. Hell, if we’ve got the leverage, have him try to convince his coworkers to tighten up.” I look at Storm. “And if we just happen to start finding a few more of their coyotes and start reporting them in, the better.”

Thor’s steely gray eyes darken as he begins to see my vision, and a slow smile spreads over his face. “Choke them out.”

“Exactly.” I slam my fist on the table.

Storm cracks his knuckles. “Hide-and-seek just so happens to be my specialty.”

The only thing I know about the light-haired man’s military record is that, unlike Rook, he was a boots-on-the-ground infantryman. If anyone can snag enough Rosas off the streets to get worthwhile information and make sense of the sprawling desert at the lip of the country, it’s him.

“When they get hungry, they’re gonna start eating what they can in the city. They can’t turn to us, so they’re gonna have to look to the only other op we’ve left running.” I make eye contact with Sin, but he still seems distant. “Think we can convince the Cafarellis to freeze them out?”

Sin blinks a few times, then seems to come back to Earth. “We’ve got chips we can play, but I wouldn’t say it’s definite.”

I sigh. Whoever said Italians keep to the East Coast and Chicago just hasn’t spent enough time down South to spot them yet. The Cafarellis, and their don, Gustavo, were the first to the table when I decided I wanted Houston for myself. In exchange for that, we have more of a partnership with them than we do any other organization in the city. They manage

most of the casinos around the city, a racket I burnt out on during my Vegas days so I was happy to let them keep running it, and in exchange for a few favors here and there, we let them deal whatever they want on-property. We don't even take a cut. I can't stand the Old-World fucks, so I'd rather deal with them as little as possible. The whole matching suits and slicked-back hair thing makes them seem more like robots than a person I could actually deal with, but they haven't stirred up trouble in a while now, and they have a man named Vincenzo who can get any weapon you're looking for from after the Bronze Age. Knix gave me his number when he helped set up our arms connections and I wouldn't lose access to that bastard for love or money.

"Offer them a favor if need be. We need to arm up our runners since our stock is low." I swig my drink. The favor stings like the rye, but there's nothing those mafia-types like better. "This plan don't work if they snitch on us."

Sin nods. "We might have to deliver a few bodies. I'll go along, set it up."

"Perfect." I swirl my glass.

"Where do I come in, Prez?" Blue asks.

"Oh, that's easy." I smile a hungry smile. "Once they realize there's nowhere to turn, we send them a message we're happy to deal, if they let us come to them. We agree to whatever terms we gotta to learn their whole op from top to bottom, shake hands, and leave. And then? We come back and burn it all to the ground."

Blue laughs. "I got something that can do that, no problem."

I clap my hands. "Sound like a plan?"

Everyone nods.

"Drink to it." I raise the last sip of my drink.

Around the table, everyone lifts half-finished beers and matching glasses of liquor.

“To Rose-killin’.” I tip the last sip back and savor it as my men chorus my refrain. The smile that finds its way onto my face is easy, comfortable. The only thing that could go wrong in this plan is the Cafarelli element, and I know Sin won’t let me down.

“That’s it for tonight.” I stand. “Sin, Thor, stay back a moment. I have something I want to discuss with you.”

Everyone file out as Sin and Thor follow me into my office. I pour myself a glass of my favorite bourbon and savor it. The two of them stare at me for a long moment.

I set my glass on the desk. “Well, Sin, what’s your fucking problem?”

Sin bristles. “What the fuck do you mean, Prez?”

Thor watches me with careful eyes, like he doesn’t quite know what I’m going to say next.

I don’t quite know either. I called Sin in to ask about how distant he got when Storm mentioned the cartel needing cash, but now that it’s just the three of us, I’m having a hard time thinking of anything but that glint in his eyes when he caught me thinking about Bella. I run a hand over the wood of my desk and remind myself of four runners we’ve already lost.

“You got real quiet at the end there,” I say. “After Storm mentioned needing cash. What the hell was that?”

Thor nods. “I caught that, too. Some problem?”

Sin exhales quietly. “I was just thinking about needing cash for bribes, and how quickly these motherfuckers seemed to pop up with all their pieces already in place.”

“You think we’re missing something.” I lean forward. “What?”

He shakes his head. “Could just be I got law enforcement on my mind, what with our honored guest.”

Thor grimaces. “You think they got pigs on their payroll?”

I clutch the desk. Everybody knows paying off cops is the easiest way to operate in any city, but I’ve never had a taste for

it. The way I see things, the pigs are the enemy of any self-respecting organization, and any dollar in their pocket is another one they can spend against you later. That's another thing I can't stand about the Cafarellis. They're up to their elbows in cop payoffs.

“Think about it.” Sin shrugs. “Who would a development owner be too afraid to tell us about, but willing to talk to? Who would be able to turn eyes away from a development getting regular, suspicious drop-offs? Hell, who could make sure Jaguar sat out long enough for us to find him?”

I drop into my seat with a sigh. Someone is helping the cartel gain footing in Houston. And finding out who just might call the law to our doorstep.

CHAPTER 18



Sheriff Grimes

I sign my name at the bottom of the paperwork I'm working on and smile. If I didn't have such a good heart, such a strong drive to take care of others, I always thought I would have become a movie star. A looping, distinctive signature like that would be perfect for a movie star.

My phone beeps once, and my skin runs cold. Noon. Time for me to take my "lunch break."

I stand, leave my office, and nod to Rhoda at the front desk.

"Lunch already, Sheriff Grimes?" she asks amiably.

I chuckle. "I swear, it comes sooner every day!"

I leave her laughing behind me as I exit the station, but quickly, the smile drops from my face. Noon on Fridays means one thing. Instead of walking to the greasy spoon I've been eating lunch at for half my life across the street, I walk into the alley next to it, around the back, and wait for the black SUV to pick me up.

Today, I thread between a rat and a discarded needle with a sneer. I've requested not to be picked up like this on multiple occasions, and every time, I've been offered a pick-up in front of the station, the one thing they know I can't accept.

"Bastards," I hiss under my breath.

I wish I could cut this fucking arrangement off. If I called the FBI tomorrow, I could get the kind of WitSec deal that ends with me in a mansion in Malibu. But with that bitch Bella

gone, I need the fat wad of cash that lines my pockets at the end of each of these weekly meetings.

I kick an empty glass bottle out of the way, and it shatters against a wall. I can't believe she betrayed me to those fucking bikers. I spend all my time and all my energy taking care of her, trying to turn her into the sort of woman her mother would be proud to have raised herself, and she turned her fucking back on me. Fucking bitch. There's a bit of devil in her, I know, and she's never fought hard enough against it.

This morning, I nearly reported her missing, but if there's one thing I know about Bella, it's that she doesn't have the good sense God gave a rock. With elections on the horizon, I don't need the bad press of losing her. I emailed her boss, told her Bella came down with pneumonia. I'm going to find her my goddamn self. If this meeting goes well enough, maybe I'll ask for a hand.

The black SUV shows up. I swallow. The door opens, and I bow my head. As I've grown irritatingly used to, they put a hood that reeks of pot smoke over my head and usher me into the car.

When they finally take the hood off, I'm not in the usual room. My stomach drops. I always meet with their leader, El Serpiente, in a pretty slick private office with no windows. I can hear men moving around outside, probably armed, but it's always just the two of us. Today, I'm shoved roughly into a folding chair at the foot of a long, plastic table in a room full of tattooed men armed to the teeth.

Instincts honed by my time in law enforcement kick in, and I start counting weapons, but when I reach double-digits I give it up. Fucking cartel bastards. They never do anything halfway. I can't just meet with them once a week, I have to do this cloak-and-dagger bullshit. They can't just threaten me with a single weapon, they have to use several dozen.

Well, I've always worked best under pressure. I offer El Serpiente, a young man with curly, dark hair and a wife-beater exposing full sleeves of tattoos, my most charming smile.

“Afternoon.” I incline my head. “Any reason for this change in venue?”

El Serpiente spits. “Are you stupid, or are you antagonizing me on purpose?”

I grit my teeth. Scum like him shouldn’t talk to me that way, but I can’t say anything about it in this roomful of goons, so I just need to figure out how to make him stop. Something’s happened. I spent all morning on my paperwork, but I told my deputies to get me if anything big changed. I couldn’t have missed something to piss him off this bad.

“I assure you, I have no idea what you’re talking about.” I spread my hands on the table in front of me. “I would never intentionally harm you.”

El Serpiente jerks his chin at one of his many underlings, and the man presses a button on the wall. A voice crackles through white plastic speakers I hadn’t noticed overhead.

“911, how may I help you?” The young woman sounds bored.

“Hi, uh, yeah, I’ve seen something.” This voice is low, and clearly whispering. “The development, the new one on the east side with all those colorful houses? Yeah, I saw a trail of blood leading into the cul-de-sac, and I followed it to make sure no one was hurt, and I found—”

El Serpiente gestures again, and the recording cuts off abruptly.

“That’s yesterday afternoon. We intercepted it, but you know as well as I do that we can’t do that permanently. And do you know what we found when we investigated? Dozens of bodies pulled out of the walls.” He folds his hands on the table in front of him. “Some of them missing, others left piled where they found them.”

I swallow. The call hasn’t reached the station, or I’d have heard about it for sure. I just need to get back and solve the problem as quickly as possible.

“I distinctly remember you promising to have that construction site watched,” he grinds out quietly.

Sweat beads on my forehead. When El Serpiente gets quiet, that's when he's about to strike. He's never used that tone and not followed it up with action.

"I installed cameras on the department's dime," I say, hoping my voice sounds steadier than I feel. "And had a night patrol in addition to the site's basic security."

El Serpiente purses his lips. "I'm well aware of your cameras, *Mr. Grimes*."

I squeeze my hands under the table. No one is allowed to call me Mr. Grimes anymore. I know this criminal fuck does it just to push my buttons. I'm Sheriff Grimes to everyone. I earned it.

"We used them to figure out exactly who waltzed into the construction site you were supposedly protecting." He gestures to a different underling, who pulls out a glossy picture and hands it over. El Serpiente slides it down the table, and I catch it.

In full color, I see nearly a dozen bikers clustered at the mouth of one of the cul-de-sac.

"Motherfucker," I hiss. Fucking bikers wear their stupid vests for the world to see, and I'd recognize that emblem anywhere. The same gang who's turned the rest of my life upside-down.

The Ruthless Kings.

El Serpiente stands. Unlike the rest of the trash in the room, he moves like a predator, like a snake, as he prowls around the crowded table toward me.

"Someone is bound to call it in again when they realize the police haven't investigated. When that happens you're going to take the case and fix this." He smiles slowly. "If you think you can keep yourself from tripping and stumbling into revealing just how deeply the county's beloved sheriff has fallen."

My blood roars in my ears. How dare he threaten my reputation! Now, with elections on the horizon and my useless whore of a daughter in the wind!

I fight to restrain my rage as the nearest goon twitches for a blade on his belt. *Not here, Eric. Later.*

“I can’t,” I say through gritted teeth. “My caseload is full, and I promised my staff I wouldn’t take on any more until I won the election.”

El Serpiente grabs me by the chin, twisting my head until I’m staring up at him. I seethe.

“Then get someone else to do it,” he spits. “We both want this to go away quickly and quietly.”

“Martinez and Dogwood.” I barely resist the urge to tear out of his grasp. “Dogwood’s been on the take so long he doesn’t even know what a real deputy’s salary looks like anymore, and Martinez is so stupid he doesn’t know Dogwood’s on the take. I can work it out using those two.”

El Serpiente releases me carelessly. I jar back into my seat and catch myself as quickly as I can. The cartel leader has rapidly increased his manhandling to get what he wants, and the humiliation of the ease with which he does it burns even brighter in this roomful of onlookers.

Not even onlookers. Criminals. I am the law. All of these men should be scattering at my approach, whispering stories of me to each other around campfires and struggling to fall asleep at night. Any one of them would be a career-making bust for me, if my career wasn’t already so well made that I didn’t need them. I should walk out and turn state’s evidence right now.

El Serpiente gestures to a third underling, who produces three rubber-banded stacks of bills from one of the pockets of his sagging cargo pants. Together, they’re thicker than my usual payoff by a fair bit. El Serpiente accepts the pile and flicks through it. At this distance, I can see how many of the bills are hundreds.

“You bring up an interesting thought, Mr. Grimes.” He hums to himself. “The election is only a few months away.”

I nod. With a stack of cash like that, I wouldn’t need help finding Bella. Hell, I’d barely need Bella. I could get a

housekeeper to do twice the work she did with half the fucking backtalk.

El Serpiente drops one stack on the table. “This is your payment for the week.”

That, I know, is far less than usual. I can’t stop myself. I turn to him in outrage and—

He backhands me. Not hard, just enough to remind me who holds all the weapons in this room.

I rub my jaw and turn back sullenly.

“Say thank you,” he murmurs, “or we’ll both regret what comes next.”

“Thank you,” I spit. *Thank you, scum under my boots, trash under my heels, for these fucking scraps.*

“Better.” He pats my cheek and drops the second rubber-banded stack. “This is...a campaign contribution.”

That’s much better. At least my regular rate, if not a little more. This time, the words come easier.

“Thank you.” I try to smile at him despite the ache in my jaw. “And the final third?”

El Serpiente glances at the cash in his hand like he’d forgotten about it. “Oh, that? That’s for your wife’s medical bills if you fuck this up.”

It lands on the table with a hollow thud. Several of the men in the room leer at me, and a few others chuckle.

“Let’s get one thing straight, Mr. Grimes.” El Serpiente spins my chair so I have to face him and leans in close. “When I ask you to do something, you do it. You don’t do your best. You don’t do well enough. You fucking do it, or I make a lot of lives a lot harder.”

A thin line of cold metal presses against my throat. I’ve seen the corpses they hid in that development. I know how these cartels kill. I swallow against the blade.

El Serpiente grins. “I think we may be beginning to understand each other.”

I nod. The razor-sharp edge scrapes against my skin, just far enough away to keep from drawing blood. It'll look like nothing more than razor burn when they drop me back off.

“So when I ask you to win the election?” El Serpiente asks.

“I fucking win it,” I hiss.

CHAPTER 19



Belle

The next time I open my eyes, little has changed. My body still aches. The room around me remains dim, though I can't see even the outline of light around the curtains anymore. And, most surprisingly, Beast still sits in the chair next to me.

He's repositioned so I can see him easily this time, but I can also move my head easier than I did before. The room is less chilly.

I twist to look at him fully. "Beast?"

He doesn't respond. Fear strikes through my heart, and I try to peer through the darkness for any sign of injury or harm. He can't be dead. The only way he'd be dead was if Daddy found me, and if Daddy had found me, I'd have woken up with him by my side rather than Beast.

Beast snores, and my racing heart slows. He's just asleep.

Asleep with his warm, large hand set loosely over mine on the blankets. My eyes start to adjust to the dim light, and I can make out more details. He sits in the same chair, and the vest I've always seen him wearing is slung over its back, making him seem oddly vulnerable in just a fitted white T-shirt and jeans.

The fit of the T-shirt reveals what I suspected from the first moment I saw him: Beast is all muscle, a wall of a man. But that doesn't dispel the strange quiet of this moment.

I look at his sleeping face. His hair is shot through with gray like Daddy always feared, but I can't help thinking it

looks sort of dashing on Beast. Dignified. Like he's not afraid to tell the world that he's seen an awful lot. And it's starting to grow out a little from that almost military crop, softening his features a little. His craggy eyebrows have the same grays, but in sleep, they're unfurrowed. It gives him an ease I've seen in him only rarely. He still has that look of being carved, but by a kind sculptor with an eye for the beautiful. Even the jagged scar along the side of his face looks like it was placed by a gentle hand to cup his face.

I blush, even though he can't see me. These are awful personal thoughts to be having about a man I hardly know, a man twice my age Daddy would've warned me away from something fierce. But in the low light, I think he really is quite handsome.

His presence by my side is more comforting than I'd have guessed. I've woken up a few times to find Harley in the chair instead, and while I love seeing her, she doesn't make my chest warm in the same way Beast does. It feels a bit like someone keeping watch over me, not because of anything I might do, but because the world might do something to me.

Suddenly, he stirs and blinks his eyes open. I freeze, and our gazes lock. My blush deepens, burning along my skin. Here he is, doing me this great favor, and I repay him by staring at him in his sleep!

He stretches, and I look away, though I notice the way his T-shirt pulls a bit up from the top of his pants to reveal a thin sliver of stomach.

"Good morning to me, I guess." He smiles. "How're you feeling? You still look pretty flushed."

I press my unbroken hand to my flaming cheek and try to will the blush away. That freezing feeling seems to have been the fever. All my joints ache a little less than they did when I last woke, and my thoughts feel clear. I can even feel the split on my cheek under my fingers, and it's mostly healed.

"Much better," I murmur and try to sit up. "Thank you."

Beast adjusts the bed automatically, and the blankets fall away from my chest again. I haven't been able to change out of Harley's clothes yet, but maybe someone will help me now that my fever's broken. Daddy says girls should shower every day, and I know I haven't been doing that. Worse, I keep moving in my sleep, and my sweatshirt keeps falling off my shoulder to reveal the strap of Harley's too-large sports bra, her best plan to deal with my soaked underwear.

"Good, good," he says. "The doc, Stitches, said you were on the mend, but I'm much gladder to hear it from the horse's mouth."

I offer him a small smile, but my heart sinks. I don't remember the doctor coming. I don't know how much time I've lost, or how mad Daddy is that he hasn't found me. I kept dreaming of Beast's words, his insistence that I didn't do anything wrong by choosing to live, and I've decided to follow them at least out of Houston.

But that means leaving Harley, and the warm feeling in my chest when I see Beast at my bedside. Sometime in the last few days, that thought has started hurting almost more than the thought of going home.

I take a deep breath. I know the rules. I haven't been invited to stay, and just about the rudest thing someone can do is overstay their welcome. For all I know, Beast is watching me for the moment I'm ready to leave. I could be some awful burden on him, and I'd never know from the inside of this small, dark room.

"Thank you for everything, really," I say quietly. "But I don't want to be a burden, I can..." I can't go back to my job at the library. Daddy will know to look for me there, and if he's already ruled it out, word would surely get back to him. "Do you maybe have some work I could do? I can cook and clean all right, if you're not too particular. Just until I can save up enough money to get out of Houston."

Beast freezes. "What? You're no burden."

I shake my head. "I've just been lazing around for days, and I don't even know how much your doctor costs you."

Please. Let me pay you back, and then I can save up to leave as quickly as possible. I'm sure Daddy will have already checked all the buses, and a ticket to Dallas can't be more than a couple hundred dollars."

Beast inhales slowly. "No."

"What?" I furrow my eyebrows.

"No." He swallows. "There's no need to pay me back, and no rush to leave. In fact"—he glances at the door, then back at me—"you can live in my house with Harley and me for keeps."

My mouth falls slightly open. Stay with him and Harley forever? He can't possibly mean that. And this close to Houston, there's always a chance Daddy will come knocking.

"I can't." Tears press against the back of my eyes as I say it, but it needs to be said. "That's very sweet, but I just can't. Daddy will find me, or you'll get tired of me, or—"

I press the back of my hand to my mouth and try to stave off my emotions.

Beast smiles softly. "Then stay with us until I can put you out of your father's reach properly. But you've been"—he shakes his head disbelievingly—"a delight to have around. Really. And I know Harley's missed you like crazy. Just... don't worry about all that. Stick around, focus on getting better. I want you safe, Bella."

His dark gaze connects with mine, and the tears burst forth. I sob out thank you after thank you. It feels like a dream. I get to live with Beast and Harley. I get to talk to my best friend every day. I get to feel this warmth in my chest every day. I will stop learning my lessons in bruises on my skin and stop counting the minutes until Daddy needs something from me. It's an awful, uncharitable thought, but in the torrent of tears I can't help thinking it. Nobody's laid a hand on me in anything other than kindness in days, and it's disrespectful, but I can't bring myself to miss the life Daddy built for us in our little house.

The side of my bed groans, and I shuffle slightly to the side as Beast sits. Harley's sat on my bed, cramming herself in with me so we could both watch trashy TV I apparently missed growing up on her laptop, but Beast has only ever stood or sat in his chair. His sudden closeness startles me, but not more than when he leans forward and cups my cheek.

"Hey, Beauty." He brushes his thumb along my skin, wiping away my tears. "Don't cry."

My brain stutters, and for a moment, I think I'm back in one of those horrible dreams I had in my fever, like any moment Daddy's going to pop out with a gun and I'm going to wake up feeling a hole in my chest again. But this is too real for that. Beast's palm, callused and lined, scrapes gently against my cheek. His skin is warm to the touch. He stares at me with that same soft smile, but there's something deep in his eyes that I don't quite understand. Whatever it is races through me, kicking up that warmth in my chest a few degrees higher.

I sniffle and find the tears don't flow as quickly as they did a moment ago.

"Everyone calls you Beast," I say for something to fill the quiet. "That's not your real name, is it?"

He chuckles. "No, it's not. My real name is John."

"John." I roll it over my tongue, compare it to the man in front of me. When he smiles like this, he looks like he could've been called John once. "That's a nice name."

John wets his lips and rubs his thumb over my cheek again. I can feel his warmth seeping into me, soothing something deep inside I never thought Daddy might've injured with all his lessons. John's eyes flicker down to my lips for half a second, then back up to my eyes, and another blush warms my cheek.

He clears his throat and pulls his hand away. "Rest up." He moves back to his chair by my side. "I'll be here when you wake up."

I swallow and close my eyes. My cheek, the place on the bed where his legs brushed mine, they all feel awfully cold

without his presence. He sighs next to me, and that glowing warmth in my chest reminds me that even if he doesn't want to touch me like that again, he's not leaving.

I imagine myself back in that moment, his hand on my cheek, my skin warming under the weight of his gaze. Instead of backing away, he moves forward. His other hand comes up to cup my face, and I'm surrounded by him.

"Tell me to stop, Beauty," he whispers.

I shake my head as best I can in his grip. I don't want him to stop anything. That warmth in my chest is slinking lower, and I want to see how low he can chase it.

He leans in. Our breath mixing in the air between us. I've never been this close to a man before. I can see his five o'clock shadow, a small scar bracketing the right side of his mouth, his dark, dark eyes. And then his mouth is on mine, and my eyes slide shut.

I drift off to sleep as my imagination falters. I've read more than enough books. I know it's supposed to feel like flying. I know it's supposed to taste like chocolate and freedom. But somehow, none of those romance novel boys seem like the right comparison for John. He's not a boy. He's a man.

I have no idea how he would kiss a girl like me.

CHAPTER 20



Beast

Bella's breathing finally evens out, and I scrub a hand over my face. I can still feel the roundness of her cheek in my palm. It fucking tingles, like something out of a movie.

I wipe my hand on my jeans to try to get rid of the feeling.

Protective instinct on overdrive. Protective instinct on overdrive. I should be thinking fatherly thoughts about her. She's the same age as my goddamn daughter, and she's having the worst week of her goddamn life. The last thing she needs is an old man thinking about how soft her skin feels.

But, God, it does.

I don't even know if staying was a stupid thing to offer anymore. She obviously needs somewhere to go, but if I can't get myself in order, maybe she'd be better off on her own.

No, I can't think that. I can't even imagine something that cruel. Not when her face keeps lighting up when she spots me. Not when I caught her staring at me when I woke up.

I take a deep breath. I promised her I'd be here when she wakes up, but I have no idea when that's going to be. I have no choice but to spend the night in this room, in this chair. Maybe that's a great opportunity to scrub all these thoughts out of my head. She did look much better, and if she's going to be around the compound for keeps, I have to be able to look at her without losing my head.

I glance at her face. Her plush, pouty mouth has fallen slightly open in her sleep, revealing a sheen of wetness that I

just want to sink my teeth into. When I had her in my hands, I thought for a moment she might be waiting for me to kiss her. I almost did. I want to know what those lips taste like, what little gasps she'd make when I handled her. Her skin was silky smooth, so soft I never wanted to stop touching it. Could she possibly be that soft everywhere? If I reached into the places no one is supposed to see, would she be softer still?

She's my daughter's best friend. I should not be thinking thoughts like this.

Bella shifts slightly to the side, and Harley's oversized sweatshirt plummets off her shoulder. It doesn't expose anything worse than the strap of her bra, but my mouth waters as I lock eyes on the razor-sharp expanse of her collarbone. It juts out of her skin, decorated with more of those cinnamon-sugar freckles, and my mind instantly covers it with hickeys. I want to run my tongue over her skin, show her all the pleasure she could imagine after a lifetime of pain.

I shut my eyes. This is not helping it only drives these thoughts deeper, encouraging fantasies I never should've had in the first place.

My mind spins away out of my control. I picture Bella healthy and whole, begging for my touch.

I pull the sweatshirt further down her shoulder, kissing every new inch of exposed skin. The bra I know she's wearing disappears, and when I pull the sweatshirt down far enough, I reveal her breasts. I spend minutes there, hours, worshipping every inch. She claws at my back, pulls on my hair, and I don't move from the spot until I've driven her so delirious she can only remember my name. I kiss down her body to the apex of her thighs and begin wringing orgasm after orgasm out of her. Screaming, squirming, sweaty orgasms, as long as she can go until she collapses under my tongue, fully nude and tangled in her bright white bedsheets.

Bright white because she isn't healthy, she's still in the doc's infirmary, and I've never seen her without a bruise her daddy put on her marring her skin. My fantasy shatters. I leap out of my chair and pace the floor to burn off a little of my

energy, but that only makes it clear how just daydreaming about Bella already has me half-hard.

Motherfucker, Clearly, indulging these thoughts was a goddamn mistake. I need to go back to plan A, crushing them all into a little box in the back of my brain that I'm just never going to look at. I pace the room until I've dispelled all the images of her from my mind, then drop back into my chair.

I should go to my room. My jeans chafe after wearing them all day, and I've got an expensive mattress waiting for me back at the house. But I don't like the idea of breaking a promise to her, despite everything. I hunker down in the chair and pray sleep takes me quickly.

Soon enough, exhaustion wins out, and sleep takes me too swiftly to worry about where my dreams will lead before I go.

Luckily, when I wake with the sunrise after a night of acrobatic dreams, she's still dozing. I look at her face, and I can only picture her with my name on her mouth, and then it stretched around my cock.

I have to get out of here as soon as she wakes. If I don't jack off soon, I'm gonna lose it entirely.

She blinks a few moments later and looks up at me with those warm, brown eyes.

I feel undone. After a night of imagining the worst, when she smiles up at me, I don't think a thing about her beauty. Something inside me just comes a little unlaced.

"Hey, Beauty," I say a little roughly. "Did you sleep well?"

She blushes a soft pink. "The best. Maybe because you were here."

I lean back in my chair, but she keeps her eyes on me. Those laces loosen a little more, and my breath feels uneven. I want to touch her face again, want to carry her to mine and Harley house and watch her pick out the rest of her life. I want to do anything I can to make her smile, even sleeping in stiff jeans and crossing my legs to hide the remnants of my morning wood.

“You’re looking good.” I bite down on a wince. “Healthy, that is. Think you might be up for a tour today?”

She sits up a little and fixes her sweatshirt, hiding the swath of collarbone. Then, she stretches her legs under the blankets, and her arms a little more achingly over her head.

“I think so.” She grins. “I’m not used to all this bedrest. A little bit of exercise will get all my aches out.”

Whatever softness appeared in me when she woke disappears under an image of Bella bent over my desk, saying the exact same thing. I drop my hands abruptly into my lap and fight to keep enough blood in my brain to form words.

“I’ll go get Harley to help you dress.” I stand, hoping my hands will do enough to keep her from seeing exactly how excited I am to have her up and about.

She nods. “Thank you. I guess I’ll have to start getting used to the place if I’m going to be living here.”

That same pull tries to keep me in the room with her. I could help her dress. I could skim my hands along her silky smooth skin and try not to push it any further.

I know that’s a lie. I force myself out the door and sag briefly against the paneled wall.

What is it about Bella that pushes me to the brink like this? It’s as though something in my ravaged soul is calling out for her, pushing me however my ass can be pushed into seeking something far beyond what she’s offered me. I shake my head in disgust. Dressing something like this up in fancy language doesn’t make it any better. The truth of the matter is that Bella’s in rough shape, and no matter what I feel about her, I care more about getting her back on her feet than anything else. I have to.

I set off to find Harley, who should be eating before class at this time of day. As I guessed, I find her in our kitchen, snarfing down a bowl of cereal over the sink.

“You look like a wild animal,” I say by way of greeting.

She dumps her empty bowl in the sink and answers me with a full mouth “You look like you got run over.”

I shake my head.

“What’s up?” she asks.

“Bella—”

Harley steps closer and peers at me. “Is she okay? And what’s wrong with you? I wasn’t kidding when I said you look run over, but there’s something else.”

What the hell am I supposed to tell her? That I spent the night fantasizing about her best friend, and now I’m half-hard from her smiling at me when she woke up in the morning.

“Tired.” I shake my head. “And she’s doing great, actually. She wants your help getting dressed and cleaned up so she can finally take a spin around this dump.”

Harley eyes me. “Okay.”

I can tell she doesn’t believe me, but she leaves, and that’s all I can really ask for. I pound up the stairs to the master bath attached to my bedroom and strip off yesterday’s clothes as quickly as I can manage, then turn the rain shower I splurged on when I built the place to freezing cold.

Maybe I need to jack off, but I need to get Bella out of my head first. It’s the only way to ensure I’m not just going to be repeating this performance for the rest of my days.

I step into the icy spray with a hiss. It feels like stepping into a pool of ice, and I’m shivering before a minute’s passed. I try to force myself to think only about the cold, but my mind strays away to Bella’s pale hand turning the temperature up before she joins me in here. The water sluices down her body, and she still shivers as it calls her nipples to attention before complaining that I did this on purpose.

I put my face up to the spray and try to picture the bloated corpses Sin found in that development, the young boys I put in the line of fire reduced to nothing more than half-identifiable sludge. Guilt churns in my gut, but the images won’t stay worth a damn. I just keep coming back to the expanse of

Bella's collarbone, the way her T-shirt flattened to her skin from the rain, the long skirt I first saw her in and how delicious it would be to flip that up and find nothing underneath. I pound my fist against the wall.

My cock stands just as proud as it did when I got in, and the ice-cold water starts to feel almost calming, like penance for what I'm about to do.

I don't remember deciding to wrap my hand around myself, but I groan and jerk into the pressure. All the images of last night and this morning spin through my mind. Bella is naked and half-dressed and clothed but begging. She's in bed and on my desk and in the shower with me. She's pawing at my skin, pressing her lips to mine, holding me just like I'm holding myself right now. I glaze over the kaleidoscope of images and try to shut my brain off as I rock into my grip. When my orgasm approaches with the force of a steam train, I think I've done it. Managed to get off without crossing too many lines.

I moan her name, and all the fictional images disappear, replaced by the way she smiled up at me this morning when she woke as I come.

Ice-cold water beats down on my shoulders. Fuck, I'm in so much goddamn trouble.

CHAPTER 21



Thor

I knock back a swig of top-shelf rye and meet Storm's eyes over the heads of the cartel members kneeling on the floor between us. Each of the three Rosas have their hands raised and a gun pointed at the backs of their skulls. Sin leans against the racks of liquor that crowd the back room of The Deadman's Hand, a bar on the outskirts of the city Beast set up just as soon as he got the compound up and running. He prefers we don't do business here, but I prefer not to show fucking Rosas our front door.

Storm crosses his arms. "Ain't coyotes, but they're the motherfuckers that meet with 'em. Figured they'd make as good a start as any."

"You need an in before you can get running." I set the bottle of rye down on the metal shelf behind me and step forward. "Need them back on the streets after?"

Storm shrugs. "Don't want them telling stories, but I don't need the Rosas changing up their schedules, neither."

He steps out as I move forward. He didn't come back with the stomach for violence like he used to have. He's happy as a clam to deliver what we ask for, but he doesn't like to see what happens after that.

"Let's split the difference," Sin says. "One dead, one maimed, one to tell the tale?"

I smile. Half the point of an interrogation like this—hell, half the point of bringing them to the Deadman in the first

place—is to scare these guys shitless before you even get to the asking. Beast likes to come out swinging, but that’s why he lets me run information. Dropping the hammer only makes a difference if you get people good and frightened during the wind-up.

“Sounds good to me.” I close the distance to tower over the men on their knees.

I grab the chin of the first man in line and tilt his head back so he has to look up at me. Kneecap, the King with the gun to the back of his head, moves with him. He stares up at me with empty, hardened eyes. I grimace internally. Everybody knows about the turnover rate in small cartels, even the people joining them. The man on the floor in front of me knew it when he joined up. He’d rather die than give anything up with his compatriots next to him.

I throw his face to the side, and with his hands tied behind him, he can’t catch himself before he hits the floor. Starting with a man like that would be trouble.

“Something wrong with that one?” Sin asks, following my lead.

“Looked at me funny,” I spit. “Kill him.”

The Ruthless King behind him quickly readjusts to press the barrel of the gun into the cartel member’s mouth.

“Ah, give him a chance,” Sin chides. “Maybe one of his friends will be more useless.”

We’ve been doing this together long enough that it’s like a choreographed dance. I hum like I don’t know the next step.

“Take the safety off,” I bark at Kneecap. “If your trigger finger gets itchy, that solves one fucking problem.”

Sin chuckles as I turn to the other two.

“We got a few simple questions this evening.” I glance at their friend still on the ground. “Answer ’em, and you can walk out of here. Sound good?”

One of them stares back at me with those same dead eyes as the fist. Fucking cartel. But the one on the end, the youngest

by far, starts to nod before he sees his compatriot isn't.

Bingo. All I need's a crack.

"Y'all got names?" I drift down the line toward the one who almost nodded.

"What's it to you, *pendejo*?" the dead-eyed one hisses.

"Call it Southern hospitality." Sin circles around behind them, throwing me a sharp smile.

The one who almost nodded looks back and forth between the two of us, but the other keeps his gaze solidly on me.

The one who almost nodded mumbles, "Just call me Pedro."

The other one snorts. "Yeah, me too. Call me Pedro, and him Pedrito."

"Fine." I backhand Pedro, and he rocks back on his heels. "Then let's get to it. You get your supplies across the border."

"Not a question, *gringo*." Pedro spits a little blood. "Did you get our *mensaje*?"

I grind my teeth. This little fucker picked the wrong guy in this room to mess with. I remember the months of fighting these guys last time, the blood in the streets. I knew that crap they desecrated Jaguar's body with was one of their stupid *narcomensaje* threats as soon as I saw it, but they forgot since the last time they ran these streets that we don't play by their rules. I make eye contact with Sin. He nods. He spotted the weakness, too. I'll keep Pedro distracted so Sin can work our opening.

Sin punches Pedrito clean across the jaw, sending him spilling into Pedro like a line of cartel dominos. Unlike their friend with the gun in his mouth, the two of them struggle back to kneeling.

"I'll take that as a yes," I say. "Who runs your shit? I want names."

"Why would I tell you shit?" Pedro scoffs.

I sock him in the gut. Air explodes out of his lungs, and he groans.

“Because I can be very persuasive,” I say.

Sin and I complete another circuit. Pedro watches me the whole time. I kick the one on the floor in the head as we circle, just as Sin whispers something I can't make out to Pedrito.

Perfect.

“*Hijo de puta*,” Pedro coughs. “You ain't gonna persuade me shit until I see blood. I've taken worse.”

I stop in front of him. “Do you really want worse? Because I can make this much fucking worse.”

“Do your worst, *come mierda*.” Pedro grins up at me through reddened teeth.

I glance at Sin, shrug, grab my half-empty bottle, and shatter it against the metal shelving. Pedrito flinches at the noise. I grab Pedro by the hair and press the jagged edge of the bottle to his throat. I perfected how to make someone feel every point without drawing a drop of blood ages ago, and while Pedro stares up at me with only the barest hint of pain in his eyes, Pedrito looks white as a sheet.

“I'm gonna give you one more chance before you officially earn the title of stupider than your friend on the fucking ground.” I tower over Pedro and hiss, “I want your coyotes' names.”

At the same moment as Pedro spits in my face, Pedrito gasps, “Tiburón!”

I swipe the spit away unflinchingly and lean back without releasing Pedro. “It's nice to see they don't breed all of you without a lick of sense. Tiburón, huh?”

Pedrito nods. “But he's the only one I know. *Soy un recadero solo*.”

“Errand boy,” Sin translates.

I snort. “Convenient.”

“*Chivato*,” Pedro mutters under his breath.

I punch Pedro before Pedrito can think too much about his buddy's response. His nose crunches under my fist, and the only thing that keeps him upright this time is Ox who stands behind him at the ready.

"Got a route for this—" My phone vibrates on the shelf where I left it behind a case of gin before Storm brought in his catch of the day.

I struggle to keep the grimace off my face. I set it on do not disturb, like always, because an interrogation like this only works if they don't have a shred of information about the outside world, much less a lifeline. But if my phone's ringing, that means someone called three times in a row, pushing past the do not disturb. Someone needs me something fierce, and there are only two people who would ever be this insistent.

I nod at Sin. He gestures to one of our men in the corner of the room, and I step to the side. My phone display reads *Alex*, and that scares me worse than any of the violence behind me.

Unlike Beast, my daughter went out-of-state for college. She got her mama's brains, tested into all sorts of schools with all sorts of scholarships. But I've never quite been able to rest since she told me she wanted to get her undergraduate degree from Vanderbilt.

I accept the phone call and put my back to the room, trusting Sin and the rest of the Ruthless Kings to keep me safe.

"Dad?" Alex asks, panic coloring her voice.

"Hey, baby girl," I murmur.

"Why didn't you pick up?" she demands.

"I'm... a little busy at the moment," I reply.

Behind me, I hear the unmistakable noise of someone's head bouncing off the wood floor of the Deadman, followed by rapid Spanish.

"I can hear that, you know." Her voice takes on that mulish tone of hers. The further I get up in age, the less she thinks I really oughta be running with an MC.

“I’m taking out the trash.” I infuse a note of iron into my voice. We’ve had this argument enough, and I don’t intend to have it again in the middle of an interrogation. “What’d you need me for so bad?”

She sighs. “My faculty mentor for my summer research program just had a family tragedy and pulled out.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, baby.” Alex hasn’t been able to talk about anything but the ten weeks she was going to spend doing some kind of research that flew over my head every time she explained it to me for the last month of phone calls. “What’re you thinking of doing instead?”

Someone groans loudly. Sounds like one of the cartel scum, but I trust Sin not to let things get too out of hand while I’m distracted. We may have the firepower in the room, but all it takes is one lost gun for someone to get hurt.

“I was thinking I might come home for the summer.” She sounds disappointed, and I can only hope it’s more about the professor than the thought of living with me again. “If that works for you.”

“It works great, baby.” Someone yelps. “We don’t get to spend enough time together like we used to. I miss that.”

“Yeah.” I can imagine her straightening up on the other side of the phone, convincing herself the summer isn’t ruined. “Yeah, I’m looking forward to seeing you.”

“Good.” I smile as another torrent of rapid Spanish explodes behind me.

My baby girl’s going to be coming home to the middle of a war zone. She grew up in one after her mama died, something I regret every day, but she’s been safer since she went off to school. It’s almost as good to see as how whip-smart she’s becoming, but it won’t be good for her here.

“Maybe...maybe head for the compound instead of the house,” I say. “See if Beast and Harley have a spare room.”

“What?” I can hear the genuine surprise in her voice. Houston’s been quiet for a while now, and she knows that.

“Just make an old man happy.” I shake my head. “I might be paranoid, but I want you somewhere safe.”

“Okay, Dad.” She sounds hesitant, worried. “I’ll see you at the compound in a couple days.”

“Drive safe,” I murmur. “And I love you.”

“Love you, too.” She hangs up first, and I slip my phone back into its hiding spot.

I roll out my shoulders, try to feel the energy of the interrogation again, and turn back to the room. Both Pedro and Pedrito are bloodier than when I left by far, and their friend on the ground has a barrel-shaped bruise on his forehead.

I crack my knuckles and step forward. “Who’s next?”

CHAPTER 22



Sheriff Grimes

“**Y**ep. Thank you so much for your help. Take care.” I hang up my cell phone and launch it across the confines of my patrol car. A spiderweb crack blooms on the window.

“Goddammit!” I holler.

The window doesn’t fucking matter. I’ll say some gangbanger in training shot it with a BB gun, and nobody will ask twice. No, what boils my fucking blood is getting nothing from the fourth airline I’ve called this morning alone.

It’s been five fucking days, and I haven’t seen hide nor hair of Bella. I’ve checked every hospital, inside the city and out. I’ve watched hours of bus station footage and gave a few informants down there her description in case she popped up. I put an alert on her goddamn card, reported it stolen, so not only will she get denied but the bank will call me with her location as soon as she tries to use it, and nothing.

Now, I’ve called damn near every airline that runs through the Houston Airport System, and none of them have shit either. What’s my next move? Hunting down bush pilots? Putting up missing posters in the town square?

No, there’s something I’m missing. I love Bella, but the truth is, she’s just not smart enough to evade me. I’ve been tracking criminals for half a lifetime, and she’s barely been outside the house except for school and work. She doesn’t have the connections, much less the street smarts. Somebody’s got to be helping her.

I stare out the window at the Houston Central Public Library. I should've never let her have that job. The extra money took the burden off me on lean weeks, I won't deny it, but it put all kinds of thoughts in her head. No matter how much she said she was working, I knew she spent some of her time talking to people and reading books. Books I didn't approve, books I didn't know about.

I throw my car into drive and speed back to the station. It's not the time of year for Christmas or her birthday, so I can't exactly walk in and just ask what she was reading, as much as it would be just like Bella to pull some cockamamie plan out of a book. Whatever I'm going to find, I'm going to find it from the heart of my empire, the sheriff's station.

When I arrive back at the station, Rhoda waves me down before I can even approach her to explain about the window. I plaster a winning smile onto my face and step out of the flow of traffic.

"Hi, Rhoda. How's the morning treating you?" I ask.

She blushes, and that's why Rhoda's always been my favorite secretary—admin, I guess I'm supposed to call them now. She's just on the wrong side of forty, not that pretty, and never married. A few compliments, and she's putty in my hands.

"I'm all right, Sheriff Grimes. These summer months do pretty well for my sciatica, which is a blessing." She pats her hair. "What about you?"

I sigh and put on my bravely shaken face. "Had a bit of a scare on patrol. Some kid fired a gun at my car, hit the window."

"Oh, my goodness!" Rhoda presses a hand to her chest. "Are you okay?"

"It was just a BB, but one of those they make to look realistic." I shake my head. "Cracked the window, but thankfully, nothing worse than that."

"You poor thing." She puts her hands on the counter like she wants to touch me but can't bring herself to cross that line.

“Well, I just had to tell you an informant wandered in a bit ago looking for you. Lanky young man over there.”

My ears perk up. I can't risk the respectable people of Houston finding out what happened to Bella, but I put the word out among the less savory types a man always meets in my line of work. Have I finally caught something?

But I have to play it cool. An informant's usually just a junkie looking for a hit. I don't even look where she gestures.

“I'll be in my office,” I say. “Send him there in five.”

I march through my station with my head held high. Deputies fall over themselves to greet me, and I nod to everyone I can. Well, all except Martinez. He's taking his failure on the cartel case hard, and the lower he gets, the worse his work tends to be.

I was dead right. In here, I know I can find Bella before she humiliates me. How could I not? I made it to the top by dint of sheer, high-quality investigative work. The mayor spoke to that when I got reelected last year, after I talked him out of telling that story about the time we stole apples together as kids. More of a wedding story, I told him, and he agreed.

I settle down in my plush office chair, a gift from my father when I got this job, and smooth my hands across the top of the high-gloss, maple wood desk I had commissioned when I won my fifth election. Of course, I can find my daughter. And I suspect this informant might just be the first step.

After a few minutes, the lanky young man Rhoda described knocks on the door of my office and steps in without an invitation. I recognize him instantly. The inky-black hair, the lip ring he always fiddles with when he talks, the half-finished knuckle tattoos. The man who closes the door behind him goes by Kinkade, a counterfeiter I picked up a few times early on in my career, and again a few months ago.

My vision goes red. When I picked him up this time, I had him dead to rights, and it would've been his third strike. I cut him loose in exchange for plying his services at a bar I

suspected of being a Ruthless Kings hotspot. He's been working his way up the ranks since then.

I stand, holding onto my last threads of composure, and gesture to the wooden chair in front of my desk. "Please, sit."

"I've got something good for you this time, Sheriff, I promise." Kinkade folds himself into the seat.

The last few times he's turned up here or caught me on patrol, he didn't know anything more than the names of a few members and something about boots I instantly tuned out for being so ridiculous it had to be the ravings of a drunk man. He knows he has a lot to make up for.

"What?" I spit.

"I was tending the bar at the Deadman's Hand last night, and a couple guys I think are higher-ranking members, like lieutenants or something, came in and started drinking like the world was gonna end." He spins his lip ring with his tongue, and I grit my teeth. "Once they get to drinking, they get to talking, and after a little bit, the conversation wends around to how fucked the Prez has been acting."

I clutch the edge of my desk to keep from knocking Kinkade's head into it to make the story go faster. He shut the door, so we can't be heard, but I left the shade on the window in the door up, and that means the whole bullpen can see what's going on in here. If I close it now, I'll only draw suspicion.

"Mm-hmm," I mutter.

"So they keep talking, and it turns out he and his daughter showed up in the middle of the night almost a week ago with this half-conscious girl, and she's been living there ever since." Kinkade shrugs.

I dig my nails in, and the wood dents. I knew she had help. I knew that stupid bitch couldn't escape me on her own.

"Did you hear anything else about this girl?" I manage to say. "Anything specific?"

“Um...” He twirls his lip ring again, and I want to tear it out. “Oh, they said the Prez kept hanging around her like some kinda bodyguard. And she was blonde, real long blonde hair, like you mentioned!”

A growl rips out of my throat, and my body moves before I know what’s happening. I grab the marble paperweight I received for three years of meritorious service and hurl it at the wall next to the door. It lodges into the drywall and kicks up a fine dust.

Kinkade doesn’t flinch. My deputies, on the other hand, move like a colony of ants to my door and knock on it timidly.

No. I’m not going down like this. I’m not going to let my bitch of a daughter ruin me without saying a goddamn word.

I scrub my hands over my face, putting additional pressure on my eyes to redden them, and call up the implication of tears. Then, I circle forlornly around my desk and pat Kinkade on the shoulder. The simple touch makes the forger react more dramatically than he has during any of his multiple arrests, but that information slips out of my mind as quickly as it enters. I have a show to perform, and Kinkade is certainly not my audience.

With dragging footsteps, I cross to the door and open it to the worried faces of my subordinates. Deputy Legare, my right hand by all appearances, stands at the front of the pack. Concern wars with genuine fear in his eyes, and I can’t have that.

I take a deep, shuddering breath. “I apologize for my outburst. This informant just gave me a bit of...difficult personal news that is going to result in us opening a new case. You all are like my family here, and I’d appreciate any hours you could spare looking into this.”

Deputy Legare takes a step forward and drops his voice low. “Would you like to speak about this privately first? I can disseminate information to the men as needed.”

Good old Andre. He’s got a heart of gold and one of the most trusting minds I’ve ever met. Perfect to have at my side. I

don't even need to feed him a line half the time. He justifies things to himself and everyone else before I think to ask.

“That’s very kind.” I pat him on the arm and offer a shaky smile. “But I think it’ll do me some good to tell everyone. Make it sting a little less to know who I have on my side.”

Andre nods and steps back into the crowd.

“You all know my daughter, Bella.” I raise my voice so it carries even to Rhoda at the front desk.

Everybody murmurs their agreement.

“This fine gentleman”—I gesture Kinkade forward— “has braved untold danger to come here and tell me the Ruthless Kings, the motorcycle gang who has long evaded us, has kidnapped my beautiful Bella and taken her God only knows where.”

I rub underneath one of my eyes and the deputies around me begin to jostle and shout recriminations. Someone claps Kinkade on the shoulder. Others claim they’re going to bring me Beast’s head for this. Rhoda presses a hand to her mouth in seeming despair.

It takes more effort than usual to keep looking downtrodden instead of grinning. Beast has been a thorn in my ass for my whole career, and now he’s tricked Bella into joining up with him. She’s just too goddamn stupid not to fall for the first man who smiled her way, and using his daughter was the perfect bait. His head on a platter would almost be sufficient payback for all he’s done.

I raise a hand, and my deputies fall instantly silent. “There is one more thing.”

They all lean forward, waiting for any clue I have. That grin teases my lips again.

“They are forcing her”—I swallow like this is difficult for me to repeat— “to say she’s there, that she left me voluntarily.”

The furor grows. Other deputies who had remained at their desks join the crowd.

I lean into Kinkade when I'm certain the station has grown too loud for me to be heard. "Get back to the bar. Buy a disposable cell and make reports on that from now on. I can't have you caught now."

He nods and slips out amidst the chaos. I stand at the eye of the storm and let it flow around me for a long moment.

Let's see Bella escape this.

CHAPTER 23



Sheriff Grimes

Bolstered by my success at the station, I decide to push my advantage. I start showing up to work looking slightly disheveled—nothing that harms my good looks, just a bit of purple smudged under my eyes, my hair ruffled rather than slicked back. One day, I even arrive with my uniform shirt not yet buttoned over the thin tank top I wear underneath. I thought Rhoda’s eyes might fall out of her head. She even made me lunch the next day. I talk the station out of putting up missing posters because she’s not technically missing, and a doting father like me wouldn’t want to risk any additional harm coming to his little girl. Over the course of a few days, word spreads around the who’s who of Houston that my Bella is gone, that you can’t believe a word she says, and that I’m turning myself inside out to get her back. I even make an extra visit to Maryanne in the hospital and insist on privacy to make it look like I’m breaking the news.

Of course, my Maryanne, the Maryanne I married, is long gone. She’s half-conscious in a disintegrating body. God only knows if she recognizes me anymore, though Bella insists up and down she does. I don’t tell her about our bitch of a daughter. It would break her heart, and at this point, I think that’d kill her. I might not know the body in front of me anymore, I might shudder to touch her papery skin and resent the monthly visits I make to keep up appearances, but in honor of the beauty I married, I don’t want to kill her. There ain’t nothing worse in this life than killing blood, and after twenty odd years, Maryanne may as well be blood to me.

When I leave, I tell the doctors she took the news hard, and that they're not to mention it or even talk about it near her room if they can help it. Everyone nods sympathetically, and I know at least I've saved the memory of my wife. It really is difficult to care so much about those around me.

After the hospital, I call the chief of police and ask if he has time for a dinner meeting. My dime, on account of the cash still burning a hole in my wallet from my last meeting with El Serpiente, at Patton's Steakhouse. Chief Tate says he has an opening at seven, and he'll make the reservations.

Which is how I find myself wearing a slim-fit white button-down *I* had to iron in a private room of the faux-speakeasy, watching Leo Tate house a Wagyu New York strip in between bites of crab mac and cheese and sips of the Sangiovese he ordered for the table.

I sip my own glass to cover my grimace. Leo runs the police force in Houston, so we've worked together often, but neither of us really has any sway over the other. What he has, what I need, is a body of men with qualified immunity within Houston city limits. And that means I need to play nice.

"As I was saying"—Leo swallows and gestures with his fork— "Emily insisted on a gold theme for her fiftieth, so I think I'm well within my rights to request a beer keg buffet!"

He laughs loudly, like he's told the world's funniest joke. I laugh with him. Leo Tate is known for a few things. His expensive taste. His love of food and drink. And, most importantly to a sheriff operating alongside him, his ability to be bought. I'd be kidding myself if I thought Leo hadn't installed himself comfortably in a dozen and a half pockets, from petty criminals up to big fish organizations. But he also has a comfortable way of always making himself available for sale again, pending the right price. I'm hoping a few wallet-bruising steaks and an evening's mindless conversation, compounded by my performance over the past few days, will be enough.

"You're thinking too small, my friend." I cut another bite off my bone-in ribeye doused in black garlic butter. "A keg

buffet is all well and good, but it's your sixtieth! You deserve to be celebrated in style." I spear the bite on my fork and smile. "I'm thinking an army of waitresses, in the tiniest lederhosen money can buy, serving beer out of a fountain."

He bellows another laugh and slams his hand on the table, making the cutlery jump as I chew my steak. Leo was a star quarterback in high school, and he's still a big man, though he hasn't let his love of food show too many signs on his body. He wears his navy suit like I'd like to imagine myself doing so at his age.

Perhaps with a bit less jowls.

"Chief," I say when I've swallowed. "I was wondering if you'd heard about my recent tragedy."

"Oh, certainly." Leo waves his hand. "A crying shame, Eric, but I don't like to talk about nastiness like that over dinner. Sours the meal."

I smile tightly and nod. "Well, I'll try to put it out of my mind. I wouldn't want to disturb your peace like mine has been. Please, finish."

I have a great many virtues, but patience has never been one of them, and Leo Tate knows it. Sometimes, I think he does this on purpose. His next bite reaches his mouth a little slower than the last, and the next it seems slower than that. But I grit my teeth, joke about his various pleasantries, and wait.

To have Bella back, to see Beast brought down, I will tolerate an awful lot more than a man in my position should be made to put up with. And it's never far from my mind that the chief's recommendation has made or broken many a sheriff's election. I'm running unopposed for the time being, but with El Serpiente breathing down my neck, I need to keep a weather eye out for any potential complications.

After what feels like another hour—not that I'd be so rude as to check my watch—my plate has been empty for ages, and Leo finally pops his final bite of steak into his mouth. He chews slowly, drains his glass of wine, pours himself another, and folds his hands in front of him.

“Well, Eric, that sure was a fine meal.” Despite his words, the smile he offers me looks hungry. “I’m an old-fashioned sort of guy, the kind who thinks one good turn deserves another. A meal like that, well, it behooves me to ask if there’s anything I can do for you.”

I smile and do not mention that the hostess greeted Leo familiarly and offered him his regular table. Chief Tate eats at steakhouses like this, and finer, often enough that I doubt he even notices anymore.

“Well, you heard about my Bella.” I look down at my plate so he can’t see the fury in my eyes that burns instead of tears. Saying her name makes me feel half insane these days.

He hums comfortingly. “Awful business, Eric. I am sorry. I was gonna send flowers ’round your office, but I figured you’d be all full up by the time I heard.”

I nod. More food’s been showing up than flowers, both at the office and at home, but Leo’s lying, so it doesn’t make a difference anyway. We both know that men like us don’t handle condolences. We either fix the problem or we stay away.

“I appreciate that. It’s been tough, not seeing her around the house every day. She was home alone when it happened, down sick with pneumonia, too.” I shudder. “I can’t imagine what kind of treatment she’s getting with those brutes.”

Leo sips his wine. “I’m sure it’s just tearing you up inside.”

His voice falls flat at the end, a definite sign of disbelief. I grit my teeth. Who the hell is Leo Tate, the easiest buy in town, to judge me? I’ve done right by this city, never taken a bribe until the cartel rolled into town a few months back, and even then only because they promised to clean up some of the other messes I couldn’t quite reach. The cash is more a representation of our continuing partnership than something I’m getting out of the deal. Hell, I’m spending a chunk of it on this, a desperate move to rescue a daughter led astray by the simple fact of not knowing any better.

“My deputies are working themselves to the bone trying to solve this, and while I’ve got more brilliant minds than I can shake a stick at, I need them in the office working the case with me.” I frown and furrow my eyebrows, going for troubled and contemplative. “I guess it would be real handy if you had a few spare men who wouldn’t mind taking some more direct orders from me.”

Even in a private room like this, there’s a game we have to play. I can’t ask for the guns I want to take this fucking biker gang head-on. Leo can’t offer up a list of his officers on the take. But this is us doing ourselves a favor more than actively helping each other. If one of us turned, if the feds somehow managed to get a mic into one of these rooms, and we talked more plainly, we’d be toast. There’s always an undercurrent, now more so than ever as he drags each moment of this dinner out, of hoping the other guy fucks up. Leo’s careful, making us leave our phones at the hostess stand as a commitment to being present with each other, but I still take a little microphone pen to every one of these meetings and leave it running. A bit of blackmail over a man like Leo Tate would go a long way, even if I never released it for how it might reflect on me.

“Well, I understand your troubles, Eric, but you have to know I’m strapped for personnel myself.” He shakes his head. “Crime is on the rise in this city, and my boys in blue are doing all they can to stem the tide.”

Of course, I fucking know that. “This would still be working to that end. I don’t *just* want to rescue my daughter, though I’ll admit that’s driving me and my boys a little faster than usual. I want to take the Ruthless Kings down, clean up their whole operation.”

Leo savors his wine and thinks. I have no clue what’s taking the old man so goddamn long. I’ve done my part. It’s time for him to pony up.

“You make a reasonable point,” he says finally. “Cook, in District Eleven, Drayton, in District Six, and Diaz, in District Twenty-Two. Good men who’ll be happy to take your orders, and each will have a few happy to listen to them.”

I smile, trying to look dismally pleased, like I'm not thrilled to storm Beast's front fucking door. "Thank you, Leo. You're a real saint, helping me out in my time of need." I put my hand out to shake.

He takes it in both of his hands. "You can always come to me, Eric."

I try to pull back, but he holds on.

"There's just one thing." Leo smiles. "These men are very valuable, very dear to me. In exchange for their absence, I'm gonna need to know I can come to you like this someday."

A favor. In addition to the meal and the conversation, he wants a fucking favor.

"Any time, Leo." I shake his hand and grin. "Whatever you're looking for in your time of need, whenever that happens to be, I'm your man."

"Wonderful." He releases my hand and sits back. "Now, do you think that little waitress will be back in soon? I'm anxious to try their banana cheesecake."

I grit my teeth and go to summon the waitress. *Cook, Drayton, Diaz. Cook, Drayton, Diaz.*

Beast should've known not to fuck with me.

CHAPTER 24



Belle

A week has passed in Harley and Beast's house, and all remains quiet. I walk steady enough now, at least as steady as I ever did, and my head seems to be for the most part back to normal. Doc Stitches, a round man with a smiling face who doesn't seem to fit in amongst all the rough-and-tumble motorcycle men that frequent Beast's compound, says I'm healing pretty quick, all things considered. Most of my bruises are even fading. The only things that still trouble me are my ribs, which Doc Stitches thinks might actually just have a bone bruise instead of breaking this time, and my fingers, which I broke in two places each. But none of that has kept me from getting up in the morning, and I can near about dress myself now. I need Harley's help with the buttons on my pants, and I used to need her help with my bra fastening, but she picked me up a sports bra after class one day. I scolded her for putting herself at risk, but she said there wasn't any risk worth worrying about at Target, and she'd noticed how bad I blushed when I had to call her in half-dressed.

It's my very first sports bra, and it took some wiggling the first day, but I like it well enough. Daddy always said a woman's job was to figure out how to be demure without hiding any of her natural assets, and a sports bra does too much of the latter.

I creep down the stairs to the dinner table. Beast and Harley moved me into their spare room upstairs just as soon as I didn't need the hospital bed to sit up, and Beast promised I could redecorate just as soon as he's done with all this trouble

his club is having. He won't tell me anything more than that there's trouble, but he said I needed to know about the red alert. I tried to wave off his offer—the tan walls are a little bland, but the sheets on the bed are softer than any I've ever had, and it even has its own bathroom—but he wouldn't hear of it. He says he's going to have some guys pick up paint chips, whatever those are, for me to look at one of these days, and I should browse furniture online.

A warm smell greets my nose. That's another strange thing about living here with them. They each take nights to cook and order out or eat at the compound the rest of the time. Tonight is Beast's turn, and Harley demanded he make his red-bean chili. I offered to join the rotation, but Harley said I've done enough cooking for a lifetime, and Beast said we could talk about it again if I really wanted to after my fingers healed up.

It's a little dizzying, how fast everything's changed. I spend my days in my room, reading books on a laptop Beast offered me—a real laptop, with Internet access and everything—more often than not, killing time until Harley gets home. Then, she takes me out to the clubhouse and coaxes me into playing games like pool or darts until it's time for dinner. I can't stomach the thought of going out to the clubhouse without her yet. There are so many men, all of them sporting leather jackets and vests crowded with patches they call cuts and, more often than not, a weapon or two. But Harley just cuts through them like butter, and it's easier to move in her wake. The only man here I trust so far is Beast, though I did play a wonderful—if confusing—game of chess with a man called Rook yesterday.

I arrive at the bottom of the stairs and find Beast ladling chili into bowls on their round kitchen table. Cumin and chili tease my nose, and I smile. He looks up at me and returns the grin.

“Harley got caught in traffic, but she's parking now,” he says. “You up to setting the rest of the table?”

I nod and traipse into the kitchen. Harley and Beast keep all their silverware in one drawer, mixed together so I have to sort through to find three spoons, and apparently it never needs

polishing. I also discovered that when they say ‘set the table,’ they don’t mean with napkins and full drinks, either. I only need this fistful of spoons to be finished.

Harley bursts through the door in her leather jacket just as I set the last spoon in place. “Sorry, Pops, Bella. Hell of a drive.”

She drops into her seat at Beast’s right hand. I sit next to her, across from her father. It’s almost as strange as anything else to be someone who gets apologized to.

“How was class?” Beast rumbles.

I pick up my spoon and stir the chili. Beast sprinkled a bit of bright orange cheese on top of each heaping bowl, and chunks of ground meat stick out plentifully from the beans. Daddy hates chili, says it’s like eating slop, but I’ve always suspected a bit of his reticence might lay more in an intolerance for spicy food than anything about the chili itself. I’ve only ever had it in the school lunchroom, but Harley used to sneak in bottles of hot sauce, and it tasted much better that way.

“Miserable,” Harley groans. “I’m starting to think I might not have the brains for college, really.”

Beast tsks. “Now, don’t say that. I may not’ve gone, but I bet I could whup those classes right now if they let me.”

I take a bite. The flavors burst over my tongue, vibrant and savory. I close my eyes and moan softly as the spice burns down the back of my throat and into my stomach, warming me from the inside out.

Harley and Beast fall silent. I open my eyes quickly and find them both watching me.

I dab at my mouth with a paper towel slowly. “Sorry. It’s just...really good.”

Harley laughs.

“No harm in liking things.” Beast smiles. “I was just worried I might’ve over-spiced it for you. I put in green chilis and cayenne like usual, so it’s not exactly for the faint of heart.

But don't get your hopes up too high. This is my one specialty."

"Pops used to call it his five-alarm chili, but I told him that scared people off." Harley wanders away from the table and returns with a plastic container of sour cream. "Throw a little of this on top if it gets overwhelming."

I shake my head. "No, it's great. You were saying about your classes?"

"I was saying"—Harley sighs—"that today was the worst day." She turns to me. "Fridays are my nightmare day."

"Why?" I spoon another bite. Daddy always said the only reason for women to go to college was to get an MRS degree, and he needed me home taking care of the house much more, but I've always thought college sounded amazing.

"Not only do I have this stupid government class that I have to take to graduate, I've also got fucking calculus." Harley rubs her head like it hurts.

"What's so bad about calculus?" I ask. "You always liked math in school."

"Calculus isn't math." Harley shakes her head. "It's like if somebody possessed math and turned it evil. And if I don't get at least a C-minus, I don't get my degree!"

"Do you need the Count to help you out again?" Beast asks.

"Maybe," Harley says mournfully. "I just feel like such a moron. Like, I should be able to manage a basic requirement of my degree. I'm crushing my chem lab, and Intro to Engineering!"

"You're not dumb." Beast looks at me. "Bella, what's your hardest college class? Make Harley feel a little better."

I flush and stare at my bowl. "I'm not...not allowed to go to college."

Beast clutches his spoon so hard it bends in half, and I flinch.

“I’m sorry.” He shakes his head and stands. “An accident. Old spoon. I’m not mad, I’m just gonna go get another one.” He marches into the kitchen without another word.

“Do you want to go?” Harley asks as soon as he’s gone. “Because like, that’s fucked, and if you wanna go and you’re living here, you should just enroll next semester!”

Hope blooms in my chest, warm and bright. I know you need all sorts of special degrees to become a proper librarian, but I’d love to run a place like Houston Central someday, make sure everybody gets the books they need.

But I start to shake my head. I can’t imagine what even one degree costs, much less the several I’d need.

Beast steps back in from the kitchen. “See, you’re no dummy, kiddo. That’s the brightest idea you’ve had all night. Bella, you’ll be enrolled come next semester. What do you want to major in? You know Harley goes to the University of Houston, right?”

My stomach flips. “I couldn’t possibly—”

“Bella.” He sits and holds my gaze across the table. “Do you not wanna go, or is this about the cost?”

His deep brown eyes bore into mine, just as warm as the bowl of chili in front of me.

“I want to go,” I whisper.

“Then don’t worry about the cost,” he says. “You’re part of our home now. Like...like family.”

I can tell he’s smiling by the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, but I can’t break his gaze. That dream I had drifts back to me, the scrape of his lips on mine, his tenderness blending into something deeper, something that heats a place in the core of my being I didn’t know could heat.

“I’d major in English, if I was going to,” I murmur.

“I knew it.” Harley snaps her fingers. “God, you’re gonna love it there.”

“Okay,” Beast says softly. “I’ll figure the rest out. You went to the same high school as Harley, right?”

I nod.

“Getting your transcripts should be a breeze, then.” He finally looks away from me, down at his bowl, and it feels like the world comes rushing back in.

My pulse hammers in my ears, and my stomach churns. Tears press at the backs of my eyes. I drop my gaze to my chili and fumble for anything like words.

The smell drifts up to me despite the chaos in my head. Cayenne and cumin and garlic, all warm flavors.

Homey flavors.

“Thank you,” I whisper. No, I still have manners. I can do better than that. I swallow and look at both of them. “I mean it. Thank you both, so much. I never, ever dreamed I’d get to do any of this, and college”—I shake my head— “it’s all like a dream. Thank you.”

Harley takes my hand and squeezes it. “I would’ve done this as soon as you let me. Whenever you asked.”

I give her a watery smile.

“But alas, fucking calculus waits for no sweet family moment.” She shovels down the rest of her food and stands. “I might come back for seconds, but don’t wait on me.”

Harley turns and heads upstairs, her preferred spot for homework.

Beast and I remain in the silence of her wake. I take another bite of the chili and glance back at him as I chew. He’s not looking at me, but there’s a soft smile on his face, tinged with something I can’t quite put my finger on.

When I swallow, I don’t know if it’s the spices or his smile that warms me all the way through.

CHAPTER 25



I pull up to the garage on the back of my Gixxer and let it idle for a moment. The roar pouring out of my engine feels like a truer representation of what's going on in my mind than any words I could muster. We're getting nowhere with the cartel. Thor's working his connection on the border, and I've made inroads with the Cafarellis, but Storm's hitting a wall, and without his part, none of the rest of this comes together. Every time he picks up a few guys, Thor and I go at them just as hard as we can manage, and every time, we get at best a few drips of information. Nobody's been able to lay eyes on fucking Tiburón, and I'm starting to think even Pedrito was pulling the wool over our eyes.

But the bar in the den calls to me. Beast managed to import a German Rauchbier I've been trying to get my hands on for damn near a decade without crossing the pond, and I mean to knock back as many as it takes to sate the growling in my chest.

I stalk out of the garage just as a cab, the sort you can only get at the airport these days, pulls up to the front gates of the compound. The motion-activated floodlights instantly click on.

"Motherfucker," I hiss as I head over. I doubt anyone with seriously bad intentions would have the balls to show up in a cab, but we don't exactly need lost tourists sniffing around either.

The cab idles for a long moment in front of the massive, electrified gates at the front of the property. One of the windows rolls down, and someone sticks their head out to try to address the intercom Beast installed for the off chance someone without one of our keycards needed to come in. I pick up the pace.

By the time I cover the wide swath of ground between the garage and the gate, whoever arrived in a fucking cab is opening the door. I put a hand on the Beretta 92 holstered on my waist and brace.

Just in time for Alex, Thor's daughter, to step out looking mad as all hell. The floodlights highlight her curly reddish hair, cropped short since I saw her last, and the gray eyes she got from her father—who mentioned we should be on the lookout for her arrival.

I buzz the gate open from my side and slip out through the small gap in the bars.

“Sin!” she says. “I thought I was gonna have to camp out here. Didn't Dad warn anyone? He told me to come to the compound.”

I push my hair out of my face. “He didn't say when. You got bags or anything?”

“A few.” She laughs and opens the trunk of the cab to reveal three suitcases.

I blow out a long breath. “If you take one, I've got the other two.”

“Deal.” She sticks out her hand, and I shake it with a small smile before hefting two of her suitcases and leading her in through the small gap with the other in tow.

She shuts the gate behind her automatically, and the cab peels off.

“Dad texted and said Harley and Beast don't have a spare room right now.” She huffs out a breath. “What's up? He wouldn't tell me anything.”

“They took in a stray.” I shrug. “One of Harley’s friends. Her dad was beating up on her, and she needed a place to hide out.”

“Okay.” Alex drags out the word, almost disbelievingly. “And does that have anything to do with why I’m bunking at the compound instead of my nice warm bed at home?”

I pause. The lights of the clubhouse glow in the distance, just beyond the garage. We’ve got about a dozen spare rooms there, for people in all stages of needing to crash, but as much as they mostly get used for sleeping off a buzz, everyone knows what they’re there for. We keep spare rooms, each equipped with everything to bunk for the night, for when we need to circle the wagons. For when life outside Beast’s gates gets too dangerous and he calls a black alert. I’ve never been here when that happened, but from the look on Alex’s face, she has, and she wasn’t expecting some girl to be the cause.

Harley’s tough as nails, but she’s tough like a lot of the guys are. She’s brash, ballsy, makes the most sense on the back of a bike. Alex is...something else. Always has been. What’s the old phrase? A steel hand in a velvet glove. And that means I have to handle her very, very carefully.

“Did your dad not tell you what’s been going on here?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “He mentioned something about trash, but that’s it.”

“Bella’s not the main source of the trouble, but her dad is the sheriff.” I lug the suitcases further down the road, and Alex follows. “As for the rest of it, we’re on red alert, but you’re gonna have to get your dad to tell you why.”

She rolls her eyes. “Sometimes, I think you guys still think I’m a kid. I’m twenty-one. I don’t need my dad’s permission to get the news.”

“I need your dad’s permission to give it to you.” I grimace as we arrive at the mouth of the clubhouse. “Got a room preference?”

She sighs. “Is ‘close to a bathroom’ on the menu, or am I too late?”

“I can get you anything your heart desires.” The smooth wood of the floor makes the suitcases much easier to maneuver, and I lead her to one of the bigger rooms next to a bathroom, praying things don’t get so bad I regret the choice.

I swing open the door and gesture her in. “Your palace.”

She laughs. “Thanks, Sin.”

I help her get her suitcases inside, and she sits on the queen bed. I turn to leave.

“Can you tell me one thing?” she asks.

I turn and find her face drawn but her back ramrod straight. “I’ll do my best.”

“How scared should I be?”

I look into her steely gray eyes, full of determination to face down whatever answer comes her way.

“I don’t know just yet,” I say honestly. “How’s your self-defense?”

“Decent.” She runs a hand through her hair and seems surprised by how quickly it slides through. “Dad taught me everything he knew, but it’s been a while since I brushed up.”

I nod. “Why don’t you meet me in the main practice room tomorrow morning, say nine? We’ll spar, keep you sharp.”

Alex chuckles. “Sounds good to me. Thanks, Sin. I’m glad there’s someone around here willing to be straight with me.”

I smile and step out, shutting her door behind me. In all the preparations for this war with Las Rosas, we’ve just been focused on keeping our vulnerable targets like Harley and Bella inside, but Harley still goes to class. Bella might do something someday, though I still haven’t truly managed to see her face-to-face, so it’s hard to imagine. I head for Beast’s office. Hardening up our soft targets sounds smarter to me than hoping our enemies never find them.

I knock on his door, and after a brief hesitation, he calls for me to come in. When I open the door, I find Beast sitting at his desk, but the highball of bourbon and the open window behind him suggest he might not have been working before I arrived.

“News on the Cafarellis?” he asks.

I scowl. “Still dragging their feet, but Alex is here. Just got her set up at the end of the hall, near the infirmary.” I jerk my head in her direction. “You wanna tell Thor, or should I? He went home already.”

Beast sighs. “I got it. Anything else?”

“Yeah.” I take my seat in front of his desk. The starched black fabric keeps my posture stiff, reminds me the life of an MC man means never slacking until I’m ready to hang up my boots. “I was thinking we might want to give Bella and Harley a little bit of self-defense training, with everything going on.”

Beast breathes out, long and slow, and sits back in his chair. “Now that’s an idea. Harley’s dangerous when she wants to be, but she doesn’t like training. Her form slips. I don’t need her getting hurt because she punched someone with her thumb inside her fist. Bella...” He shakes his head. “That girl’s had damn near the opposite of self-defense training.”

“That’s what I was thinking.” I run my thumb over the ridged fabric of the chair’s arm. “Alex and I have a sparring session planned for tomorrow morning at nine. You think the girls could swing it? Might be smarter to pair them up with each other than any of us.”

“See, I don’t know about that.” Beast swirls his glass of bourbon. “I think fighting us might be better training, given who they’re likely to end up fighting.”

I raise an eyebrow. “None of the Rosa lackeys we’ve picked up yet have been serious bruisers. Cartels tend to specialize in fear and speed anyway, right?”

“Las Rosas ain’t our only enemies, and you know it.” He sips his drink. “No, the girls’ll be better off training for the worst of the worst. I’ll spar with Bella, since she’s the furthest behind, and I’ll see if I can’t rustle up Thor to take Harley on.”

I peer at the Prez for a long moment. Everyone knows his rules about hurting women and kids. I wasn't a whit surprised when he moved Bella into his house within the gated compound instead of leaving her to sleep in one of the crash rooms like Alex. He gets protective when he finds trouble like that. It's the same instinct that drives him to take on some of the worst prospects I've ever seen, and the same heart that shapes those kids into someone worth wearing our colors more often than not. But this is starting to feel like something more than normal.

He meets my gaze steadily, his eyes becoming deep and fathomless the longer I look. I know it's the expression he pulls out to scare people, to drive into their souls that the Ruthless Kings are not the sort of MC you fuck with, but it raises a few goosebumps on my arms anyway. Around the clubhouse, it's easy enough to forget that Beast is one of the most feared men in Houston.

"You got something to say, Sergeant?" he asks.

"No, sir, boss," I answer automatically.

Beast laughs. "Thought we broke you of all that 'sir' crap."

I chuckle with him, and some of the tension oozes out of the room.

"You're probably right." I stand up. "It'll be good for Bella especially to be able to watch the other two without having to worry about dodging their punches. We'll all spar together tomorrow."

"Bright and early." Beast raises his glass to me as I slip out the door.

We haven't had any real trouble in a while, and since Beast forbade picking up new prospects until we wreck the Rosas, the main practice room is going to be a mess. I meant to only stay long enough for a beer or two before heading home, but if someone doesn't clean that up before tomorrow, we're all shit out of luck.

I sigh and head for the cluster of padded rooms at the back of the clubhouse Beast added a few years back, turning his treatment of Bella over and over in my mind. I came up in a rougher MC than the Ruthless Kings by far, broke most of my bad habits ages ago, but Beast has never snapped at me like that day in Bella's sick room. Sure, the Prez yells. His temper's legendary. But that was different.

I switch the light on in a practice room covered in loose gear, abandoned towels, and what looks like somebody's shorts. Whatever's going on with the Prez and Bella, I got bigger problems of my own.

CHAPTER 26



Beast

I stare at the final sip of bourbon in my glass in the quiet after Sin leaves. Self-defense. I've spent half my life in Houston improving the security on this compound, so I don't know if anyone short of the feds could breach it, but he's not wrong that Harley leaves often enough for me to worry. And Bella...

I shake my head, knock back the rest of my drink, and stand. If I want those girls in fighting shape tomorrow morning, I have to warn them. Last I saw them both, Harley was talking Bella through the basics of pool on the table out back.

My mind offers me the image of myself, bending Bella over the table to show her how to make the perfect shot, my hands over hers on the cue and my warm breath in her ear. There's a reason I didn't offer to help.

When I reach the back patio, though, I find Harley laughing with one of our younger recruits, Patches.

"Come on, man, they gotta teach you something worth knowing in those fucking Scouts." She pocketed a striped ball easily and leaned back.

"You'd think!" Patches leans over the table, and I can see from here the way his hands shake around the cue. He ain't used to holding it yet, and with his stick raised like that, he's gonna send his shot wide.

But the kid shoots anyway and scuffs the felt while sending his ball spinning toward the eight ball.

“Motherfucker.” He shakes his head as it sinks into a pocket and ends the game.

I step out of the shadows. “Your grip’s the problem. You gotta learn how to stabilize it before you try to play against my Harley.”

“I told him!” Harley grins at me.

Patches sighs. “She did. And I thought I did.”

“You mind if I take a moment to celebrate her victory?” I smile try to keep the mood light, but Bella’s absence is making my heart race a little more than I would like. I doubt Harley would be here shooting the shit if something had happened, but having her out of both our sights scares me more than I would’ve thought.

Patches nods and heads inside.

“What’s up, Pops?” Harley leans her cue against the wall and begins pushing the balls remaining on the table into pockets.

“Thinking about having a little self-defense training tomorrow.” I cross my arms and lean against the wall of the clubhouse. “You, Bella, and Alex, ’cause she just got in.”

“Alex is here?” Harley perks up. She’s always been close with Thor’s daughter, looked up to her for being a few years older.

I nod. “But that means I need to find Bella and let her know. Any idea where she’s at?”

“Oh, sure.” Harley glances into the darkness beyond the well-lit porch. “She headed back to the house, I think, but she was supposed to text when she got there.” She checks her phone. “Nada.”

My heart jackhammers. “How long ago was that?”

“Not more than ten or fifteen minutes.” Harley shrugs. “Patches ain’t much of a player yet, so he takes a dog’s age to set up his shots.”

I run a hand over my hair. “Maybe send her something. I’ll go see if I can’t find out where she got off to.”

I set off into the darkness before Harley can answer. A couple of years back, I thought about lighting the paths between our main buildings, at least the ones we wouldn’t mind too bad if a couple of pigs found their way in, but I figured it would make us look like what we were rather than some random rich guy in the middle of a huge spit of land. Now, I’m cursing that decision. There’s a path between the clubhouse and our place, but it splits off in a couple of directions, toward the back shed and the brewhouse and the garage, so it’d be damned easy for someone still finding their way to get all kinds of lost.

If Bella made it to the back shed, she may well be trying to find her way out right now. We’ve cleaned up since our last *talk*, but I don’t think it ever really looks like anything other than what it is.

I take a deep breath and peer down each path. There are a few lights on in the house, and the garage is blazing, but the brewhouse and the back shed sit dark. If she didn’t text on arriving at the house, seems I’m best off checking the garage before my mind runs away with me.

I circle around the squat cement building attached to the front of the clubhouse. For once, I can’t hear metal squealing as I walk up. Might be too late, or it might be no one’s wrecked in a while. The roll-up door at the front sits wide open, pouring golden light out over the drive, and inside, Bella stands alone amidst an army of bikes, wearing a simple pair of long denim shorts and a plain white T-shirt. She runs her hand over the leather seat of the ’36 Knucklehead I dug up and refurbished a few years back, and the motion goes right to my gut. Her smile reflects in the shiny black finish, and I can’t help myself.

“That’s the first real, iconic Harley Davidson. The one that put them on the map, all the way back in 1936.” I step into the light.

She starts as I approach. “Sorry! I was trying to find my way back to the house, and I think I took a wrong turn—”

“Nothing wrong with that.” I pick my way through the legion of Ruthless King bikes to the corner where she stands, deep in my collection. “If the door ain’t locked, you’re allowed to be wherever you like.”

She swallows. I follow the motion with my eyes.

“I noticed it because it’s so much slimmer than all the other bikes over here.” She rubs her thumb across the seat again.

I laugh. “I’m a hog man, through and through. I like my bikes to look like they could hit a wall and keep going. But I can’t resist a classic like the Knucklehead.”

She smiles up at me, and her doe eyes sparkle. “What made it so classic?”

“That’s easy.” I bend to tap the overheard valve. “Back in the day, lubrication was the name of the game. This here put the whole motorcycle world on its head, once they fixed all the leaks.”

“Lubrication?” She tilts her head to the side.

Shouldn’t have used that word. My mind spirals away with all kinds of thoughts I can’t be thinking.

“Getting oil where the engine needs it to keep all the gears working smooth.” I hope I don’t sound as strangled as I feel.

She nods and points to my matte green Fat Bob 114. “Does this one have that? I can’t see it.”

“It does.” I smile. “Bikes have just gotten a lot more complicated since the thirties.”

She circles around my Fat Bob and cups the handlebars of the Electra Glide Highway King I picked up recently. “How do you know which ones to get?”

I chuckle. “That’s a tough question. It depends on an awful lot of things, like what you’re using the bike for and how much mileage you want out of it.”

Bella shakes her head. “I mean, how do *you* know? Why did you get this one”—she pats the Electra Glide—“over that one?” She points to a sparkling red crotch rocket in the line-up of bikes against the wall.

“That’s awfully personal.” I smile.

She flushes. “I’m sorry. You don’t have to tell me.”

“I’d like to,” I say quietly. “But a biker’s ride of choice is real dear to him, like a bit of his soul on the outside. I might not go asking just anyone around here.”

She nods.

I sigh and think back to my first bike, my years as a road warrior before I even settled down in Vegas. “For me, it’s all about reliability. Like I said, I like to think I could take a wall, even if I couldn’t.”

“Why?” She looks so genuinely curious. I can’t help but laugh a little.

“I spent a long time moving around before I settled here, before I settled anywhere.” I lean against one of the spokes of the lifts in the middle of the garage. “I didn’t exactly have the sort of home life worth sticking around for. Nothing like you, of course. It was just me and my pops for a long time, and he’d rather drink himself silly with his boys in town than hang around with some kid. Got me outta there quick on the first bike I could trust to carry me far enough to be worth it, a 1980 FXWG.”

Bella sits side-saddle on my Electra Glide, and I can just picture the wind in her blonde hair on the back of one of my hogs.

“I crashed the old girl over a decade ago, but she lasted well until then.” I smile. “I got the shitty little front wheel on my wall in my room. I pulled it off her as soon as I had the spare cash to replace it. After that, reliability’s a hard habit to break.”

She nods slowly. “And that’s why you got that Knucklehead.”

“What?”

Bella bites her lip and stares at the ground. “Well, it makes sense, doesn’t it? If you want a bike to last as long as possible, one that still runs from before World War II would be the gold standard for you.”

I stare at her for a long moment. When I bought the Knucklehead, I knew it didn’t fit my usual style. I just wanted to see if I could get it running. But when I sat on its seat and felt it kick to life under me for the first time, I felt like a kid peeling out of my little town all over again, with all the certainty in the world that the bike would carry me wherever I needed to go. I’d never put the two together before, and here’s this slip of a girl, barely older than I was when I left, drawing a line through my history as easy as sand.

“I guess you’re right about that,” I say eventually.

She looks so small on the back of my bike, and I can’t tell if I want to cram myself in front of her to take up the space, or put her on something smaller to see just how powerful she could become.

The thought shakes me from my reverie. “You know, I actually came looking for you for a reason.”

“Oh!” She hops off the seat. “Of course, I’m sorry.”

“You gotta stop apologizing to me,” I murmur.

She pales, but nods.

“I was thinking you could use a bit of self-defense training.” I rub the back of my neck. “I set something up for tomorrow morning, if that works.”

Bella freezes. “You want me to go home.”

“No, no.” I take a few steps toward her, raising my voice a little to emphasize the point, and she flinches back.

“Sorry,” I say lowering my voice. “I only want you to be able to defend yourself if something...happens.” I’ve been trying to keep her out of the danger, keep her from knowing just how violent MC life can be. “Like for when you go to school.”

A bit of the tension goes out of her shoulders. “That makes sense. I can make whatever time you want work okay.”

“Nine,” I say. “Harley can show you where we’re meeting up.”

She nods and takes a step toward me, just barely within arms’ reach. “Thank you for looking out for me.”

Something in my gut heats. “It’s nothing. It’s gonna be you, Harley, and my VP’s daughter anyway.”

Bella looks up at me, warmth in those big brown eyes. “It’s not nothing, John.”

I want to grab her, crush my mouth onto hers, make her cry and gasp and scream that name. But I swallow and step back instead.

“I’ll see you then.” I turn and head for the house. The tightness in my pants as I move tells me another fucking cold shower awaits me when I get there.

CHAPTER 27



I stand in the clean practice room the following morning, facing down three girls in sparring gear with Thor and Beast behind me. Harley opted for a plain black tank top, cut low on the side to reveal an equally plain black sports bra, and black shorts in addition to the shin guards and knuckle wraps I handed each of them. Alex wears a fitted, bright green tank top that catches the light in such a way that I know it's made of that high-tech, sweat-wicking material over graphic, vine-pattered leggings. Bella looks like she cobbled together an outfit from the other two girls' closets, and given the modest clothes I've seen her around the clubhouse in, I bet she did. She's got a soft pink tank top in that same fancy material as Alex's and a pair of black basketball shorts folded over several times at the waist to stay up on her much narrower frame than Harley's. Of all of them, she looks pale and scared. Beast was right not to pair the girls up for a few reasons. Alex is taller than the other two by several inches, and while Harley and Bella stand almost eye-to-eye, Harley's got breadth on Bella and years of muscle. Matching them up would only make them think they had an even fight when they don't.

"The rules of the practice room are simple." I cross my arms. "Everybody wears their shin guards and knuckles wraps."

Harley knocks her knuckles together sarcastically.

"No shoes," I continue. "In real life, you're not gonna get perfect conditions like this, but this ain't real life, and if you ruin Beast's fucking mats, he'll kick your ass for real."

Harley rolls her eyes.

“No impacts other than fists and feet.” I gesture. “No crotch shots. Don’t strike from behind if you’re not practicing something specific, and don’t go full power.”

Despite how pale Bella looks, I can’t help noticing she hasn’t taken her eyes off Beast who stands behind me. Every now and again she nods, but not at the end of my sentences. If I had to guess, I’d say she’s nodding in response to something he’s doing.

Motherfucker. The last thing I need is this fucking mess gumming up the actual training.

“With that”—I clap my hands—“we’re gonna pair up.”

Thor and Beast step up beside me.

“I don’t want fathers and daughters together for today.” I meet Harley’s eyes, and she grins viciously at me.

I’ve got one chance to keep this from turning into the Beast-and-Bella Show, and it’s ignoring my Prez’s orders. But I gotta take it. Having these girls safe is more important.

“Thor—”

“—will work with Harley,” Beast finishes.

I grit my teeth as the VP steps over. Beast meets my gaze evenly, and an understanding passes between us. He knew what I was going to do, and he doesn’t intend to let me get away with anything like that.

“Which puts Alex with me, and Bella with Beast,” I say, trying to keep the frustration out of my voice.

“Since you’re starting from the beginning,” Beast tells Bella, “why don’t you and I step over here, and I’ll teach you some basics before we get to sparring?”

She nods and walks with him to the far corner of the gym as Thor and Harley square up in one of the circles on the floor.

I take a deep breath. I trust my Prez. I really, really do. And I know he wants these girls safe as badly as I do. So I just have to take a step back and focus on what I can control,

which is knocking Alex on her ass as many times as it takes to sharpen her up.

She saunters over to another circle and gestures me forward. “Don’t take it easy on me just because you know I’m out of shape.”

I try to smile. “Wasn’t planning on it. All that fancy—whatchacallit?”

“Athleisure,” she says.

“All that athleisure of yours tells me you’re not out of shape, just out of practice.” I step into the circle and tighten my knuckle wraps.

“I think I have to knock you out for that.” She holds her knuckles out with a smile to tap mine and begin the match.

I knock my fists against hers and put my guard up. She does the same and backs to the edge of the painted circle. Her guard is decent, but I can already see the weakness in her left arm. Worse, she’s looking at my hands, and she’s got her heels on the floor. Sloppy.

But I know just how to show her what she’s missing.

We dance around each other for a moment, and I let her strike first. As I expected, she leads with a high jab, rotating her hips and shoulders to get the leverage she’s not getting from her stance, and she drops her left guard.

I twist out of the way and knock a soft uppercut into the unprotected side of her head. She stumbles off balance, and I sweep her legs before she can right herself. Alex crashes to the ground with a groan.

“Maybe you can go a little easier.” She pushes herself up on one arm.

I laugh and offer her a hand up. “You left yourself wide open. Show me your stance again.”

She takes my hand, stands, and drops back into position. I grab her left wrist and pull it higher.

“This guard drooped before you even moved. I knew you were gonna drop it because you weren’t paying attention.”

Alex nods.

“And your stance is a mess. I’d never know you’ve had training before.” I shake my head.

“What?” She looks down. “They’re out of the straight line. I thought I’d fixed that. That always used to be my worst problem.”

“Sure. And what’s this?” I kick her flat heel softly.

She groans and rises onto her tiptoes. “Lazy footwork.”

“Better.” I nod. “And don’t forget to pay attention to all of me. Too much focus on the hands, and you’ll lose the rest.”

As Alex gets used to her stance, I glance around the practice room. Harley and Thor are locked in an intense battle, exchanging flurries of blows before breaking apart to catch their breaths. Maybe Harley hasn’t let her training slip as much as I thought. Beast and Bella, on the other hand, stand face to face as Bella aims soft punches at Beast’s palms. He says something I can’t make out, and she giggles. What a fucking mess.

I shake my head and stick my fists out. “Ready for the next round?”

Alex seems to shake herself out of her own thoughts before she nods and knocks my hands.

She’s always been a quick learner. Her stance improves instantly, and her gaze lands on the center of my chest like it should. She’s going to be a tougher opponent this time.

I close the distance and strike first, a low right aiming to sneak below her guard. She blocks and counters with a punch aimed for the side of my head, but she bounces off my guard and retracts her fist circularly.

Rookie mistake. I spring to my feet and launch a straight left into her unprotected shoulder. She grunts, but doesn’t stumble this time, and I back up to wait for my next opening.

Alex doesn't let me catch my breath. She pursues me with a hard right hook, but in her rush, she forgets to pull her guard in to protect her ribs. I take her hit and follow it up with a body shot. She wheezes out a breath, and I make the retreat I tried for a moment earlier.

"Had enough yet?" I ask.

"Here, I thought you of all people would know brains and brawn aren't exclusive," she pants.

In a real fight, I'd take her out while I had her weak, but it's better she knows how long it takes to recover at this point.

"I'm honored." I smile. "Most people spend so long looking at my rippling muscles they don't even notice I've got a brain in this head."

Alex laughs and lifts her guard, already better than it was at the beginning of the fight. "Yeah, I look at a reedy motherfucker like you, and I think rippling muscles."

I smirk. I'm not a wall of muscle like Beast, or even Thor in the right light, but my slightly slimmer build has done me more good than harm in this life. It's always better to be underestimated.

"Glad to see all the book-learning isn't going to your head." I feint with my left, and she braces. "I thought you might be about to call me svelte."

She snorts, and I strike with a right-hand jab to break up and distract her guard. As she fumbles to counter, I land a right cross on her shoulder. She splutters. I launch a left hook into her cheek, and she spins away from me.

"Low down—" she mutters.

Before she can finish the thought, I sweep her legs again, and she goes down hard.

"What the hell was that supposed to teach me?" She glares at me from the floor.

I squat down next to her. "Not to get distracted. Cartel-types thrive on fear, which means they're gonna be trying to

get under your skin.” I smile. “I figure you outta know just how easy your skin is to get under.”

Alex sighs and drops her head back against the mat. “I’m in worse shape than I thought.”

“I don’t know about that.” I shake my head. “Your stance is already miles better.”

She laughs, and her gaze drifts away from our circle. I follow it to see Beast and Bella now back-to-front, his hand wrapped around her wrist as he guides her slowly through the rotation of a proper jab. Bella watches her fist move in awe, like she’s never seen her own hands before.

I frown.

Alex looks back up at me and takes in the expression on my face.

“You think there’s trouble brewing there?” she murmurs.

I sigh. “There’s something brewing, and I don’t know how any kind of brew with those two ends up anything but trouble.”

Alex shoves a few red curls out of her eyes and sits up on her elbows. “Because she’s the sheriff’s kid?”

“Because...” I shake my head. “Because of all of it. I’ve never even seen Beast with anyone like *that*.”

She puffs out a long breath. “Me either.”

“Mind keeping an eye on the situation?” I ask. “Every time I talk to Beast about it, he damn near bites my head off.”

“And you think he’ll listen to me?” Alex raises an eyebrow.

“I think Bella might.” I watch her throw another slow punch, looking for all the world like she’s never seen a scrap in her life.

Alex sighs and sticks out her hand. “Consider it done. I think it’ll be best for everyone if nothing comes of it.”

I take her hand and pull her up as I stand. “Especially Harley.”

She nods, and neither of us need to say it. Beast is old enough to be Bella’s father.

“All right.” I shake my head. “Let’s see if we can’t fix that circular retraction of yours.”

CHAPTER 28



Belle

“I think that’s enough punching,” John murmurs.

His voice shivers down my spine and curls in a quickly warming place in my gut that I’ve never felt so much before. He releases my wrist and steps back. A protest rises to my lips, but I swallow it down. I’m here to learn. That’s all that matters.

“What do you say we work on breaking some holds?” His dark eyes burn into mine, and I nod silently.

“Can I grab you?” he asks.

That place inside me burns. “Yes.”

John wraps an arm softly around my neck so my head rests in the crook of his elbow, then places his free hand over the one that reached my shoulder. The move pulls me taut against him. I can feel every line of his body, down to the way his T-shirt wrinkles against my back through the thin tank-top Alex loaned me this morning when she and Harley realized I didn’t have anything like exercise clothes. He’s so strong, so solid against my back. His chest rises and falls in time with mine, and my heart nearly races out of chest.

“This is an arm bar,” he says. “It’s a tricky one to break, but I know you can do it.”

His praise calls color to my cheeks. I don’t know why he’s so confident. I struggled with the simple punches I can see Alex and Harley managing easily across the room. I haven’t done a good one at speed yet.

“How?” I whisper.

His hand tightens on my shoulder. “Tuck your chin under the crook of my elbow.”

I obey, and my nose nearly touches his arm. I am overwhelmed by the smell of him, musky and rich and unlike anything I’ve smelled before, so much that I almost don’t realize my mouth is pressed against the thin skin at the inside of his elbow. His pulse beats a furious rhythm against my lips.

“Now.” His breath washes over my neck, warm and intimate. “Grab my arm and pull down.”

I curl my hands around his forearm and realize that, even if my face weren’t in the way, I don’t know if I could contain his muscles in both of my hands. Just how much bigger he is than me suddenly crashes home like it never has before.

When John suggested self-defense training, I worried it would feel like being back home with Daddy administering his lessons. I thought I would be scared.

Between the new feeling burning inside me and John’s, Beast’s, warm presence against my back, scared is the last thing in the world I feel.

Sin claps, and I jump.

“All right,” the younger man rasps. “I think it’s just about time to switch partners. You girls are never going to get good enough against just one enemy.”

My heart sinks. I try to step away from John—Sin is the main instructor, after all—but he only pulls me closer. Something hard presses into my backside.

“I don’t think Bella’s ready for that,” John says. “We’re still working on basics, and another teacher would just confuse her.”

Sin crosses his arms, throwing the muscles on his sinewy forearms into sharp relief. “When I learned to fight—”

“She’s not you,” John snaps. “You and Thor can switch if you want. Alex and Harley can handle it. Bella needs more one-on-one.”

My cheeks burn with shame. He's fighting with his friends because it's taking me so long to learn a few simple maneuvers. Or are they friends? I know the two dangerous men John introduced me to today hold positions in his organization, but I don't know if they're anything but colleagues.

"In fact"—John glances at the far side of the practice room—"I think watching the other girls spar is making her nervous. We're going to step aside for a moment."

"Prez—" Sin says.

"What?" John whips his head toward the man.

Sin clenches his jaw. "Nothing. I just didn't get to clean that one up last night."

"I'm sure we can handle it." John releases me and turns to march toward a door I hadn't noticed in the wall.

My heart sinks. All the bubbling warmth deep inside me fizzles out, and panic builds in its place. I've done something wrong. I've humiliated Beast like I used to humiliate Daddy, and he's taking me aside to tell me just what I did. I should've known someone like me could never live the same life as Harley or Alex. I just don't deserve it.

I slump into what turns out to be a smaller practice room crowded with equipment behind Beast and try to marshal my expression well enough not to make him angrier. He closes the door silently behind us, and I brace for the yelling that I know comes next.

But nothing comes. I drag my gaze from the floor to his face and find him staring down at me with something complicated happening in the darkness of his eyes.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

"What did I tell you about apologizing?" he murmurs.

I flinch. "I didn't mean that. I take it back."

"Beauty." His voice sounds soft, worried. It doesn't make any sense. "What happened?"

“Did I do something wrong?” I blurt.

He exhales long and slow. “No, Beauty, of course you didn’t.” His eyes on mine grow impossibly darker. “But I’m about to.”

And then, like in my dreams, he surges forward. He takes my face in both hands and crashes his lips into mine.

All the books were wrong, I realize in an instant. I don’t feel like I’m flying, or opening the book of my life to a new chapter, or becoming a new woman. I feel like a handsome man, a man who hasn’t left my side since I asked him to protect me, is kissing me like his life depends on it.

I gasp, and that warmth inside me flares back to vibrant life. His lips are chapped, his stubble scratches my face, and he tastes like leather and smoke, and it’s the best feeling in the world. When my mouth opens, he presses his tongue between my lips. I almost flinch back, but he twines his tongue with mine, deepening his taste and spurring that warmth to higher and higher heights. I can only melt into him.

After what feels like an eon, he pulls back, breathing heavily, and I realize my lungs were crying out for air. I gulp down mouthfuls, and none of it tastes as sweet as his mouth.

I expect him to pull away now, to shake his head and say this never happened like a hero in one of my books, but John is always, always better than them.

He drops tiny kisses over the line of my jaw, almost down to my neck, and whispers, “Please, Beauty, touch me if you don’t want me to stop.”

My mind whirls. The warmth burns out of control. I’ve never felt like this before, and I’ve never felt anything so *much* I can hardly tell if it’s good or bad. But the one thing my addled brain knows for certain is that I don’t want John going anywhere.

I grab fistfuls of his T-shirt and pull his mouth back to mine. I need to taste him again. He makes a low sound in his throat that turns the warmth into a raging inferno and meets every movement of my lips with one of his own. My world

becomes nothing but John, his smell, his taste, the bulk of him blocking me out from the world, and I don't know how I could ever want anything else.

My back hits a wall, and he pushes himself against me, pinning me in place. One of his legs slips between mine, lifting me onto my tiptoes with our height difference, and every ember, every lick of flame, coalesces there. I am burning up, and the only thing I can think to do is push the flame higher.

I release his shirt and run my hands up his muscled chest, over his throat, and into his hair to drag his face even closer to mine. I don't want him pulling away for anything, not even a breath. My lungs burn in my chest, but it feels like a small problem compared to all the burning.

John slips one of his hands off my face and down onto my hip, so close to where the fire burns the hottest. A small whimper escapes my throat, a plea for anything he can do to make it better, and he obliges. He grabs my hip, his hand so large against my tiny frame, and pulls me along his leg. Rocking forward and back, forward and back, until I have the rhythm and I can move myself. I make a wild, wanton sound into his mouth. No one ever told me how good I could feel.

I grab John's shoulder for leverage, to rock myself against him faster and faster. He keeps an iron grip on my hip, pulling me ever higher. His other hand slides from my face down to my chest. Through my shirt, and my bra, he cups my breast and runs his thumb over my covered nipple. It shoots through me like lightning, and I arch into him. My hips crash into his, and I feel that same hardness I felt in the practice room against my backside.

His erection.

I slip back down his thigh, but I can't get the thought out of my head. John's erection. Even with his mouth on mine, his hands roaming my body, it shocks me to think he might be burning up like I am. That he might want this closeness in the same way I do.

I have to know for certain. I pull my hand out of his hair and fumble for the waistband of his sweatpants. His T-shirt is rumpled, pulled up to his chest, and I can't resist running my hand over the exposed skin there. He makes that same low sound as my fingers dance over the muscles of his stomach, the dark hair I've seen hints of, and jerks his hips into mine.

That startles me, and I bite his lip. John hisses into my mouth, but only kisses me harder, pulls me tighter against him. He is not a man I have to be careful with.

I run my hand over the front of his pants, between our bodies, and feel that hardness again. It coils in his pants, taut and waiting to be released. I run my thumb over its highest point, and he pulls his mouth away from mine to bury his head in my neck and groan.

"Beauty." He releases my hip to clamp his hand over mine on his pants.

My mind clouds. "John?"

He hisses out a breath between his teeth. "You shouldn't... shouldn't keep going."

"Why?" I sound plaintive, desperate.

He squeezes his hand over mine, and I feel his erection jump underneath both of us. "I don't want you to do anything you're not ready for, and if you keep touching me like that..."

His sentence trails off like I should be able to fill in the rest, but I can't. Why would touching him like he's touching me change anything?

He pulls my hand off him, raises it to his lips, and kisses every knuckle slowly. Then, he picks his head up and drops a kiss on my lips. It's not the same sort he gave me a moment ago, like I had all the oxygen left in the world in my mouth. It's a quiet sort of kiss.

A goodbye kiss, I think.

I grab his shirt. "John—"

He makes that low sound again. "You didn't do a thing wrong, Beauty. This one's all on me."

He steps back, and I ache at the loss of him. In the yellow light of the practice room, I can see the shape of his erection through his pants. He offers me a small smile I'd almost call shy and leaves the room.

I drop my head back against the wall as the burning between my legs slowly starts to ebb. What just happened?

CHAPTER 29



Beast

I run one of the clubhouse towels over my hair and sigh. When I left Bella, I had to head directly for the locker room. The sweatpants I grabbed for self-defense training did not stand up against her, the soft sounds she made, the titillating way her body moved. She didn't seem to have any experience, but God, when she sank her sharp little teeth into my lower lip, I damn near took her right there in the practice room.

But those are the sort of thoughts that find me soaked from another freezing shower and wearing a pair of pants from the lost and found. I have a locker, just like the rest of my men, but more often than not I don't use it. My house is close enough.

Just not with Bella Grimes in my life.

I can't stop thinking about the hazy surprise on her face when I backed off. She looked up with those doe eyes, her pupils blown wide, and all of my resistance nearly melted. I just want to give her whatever she asks for, and that goes double when she's asking for my cock. But I know good and well she didn't know what she was asking for. I'd be shocked to learn she ever kissed a man before. As much as thoughts of her bent over every surface in my house keep me up at night, I don't just want to have her. I want her to feel safe around me. I want to take my time with her, make sure she gets treated right for the first time in too goddamn long.

Not that I can fucking figure why I think I'm the man for that. I shake my head and step out of the locker room, back

into the main practice room to find it mostly empty, except for Sin putting all the gear away in one corner. For a half-second, I worry they cleared out because they heard us and I'm going to have a fuming Harley on my hands in exchange for a few minutes of kissing. A few minutes of some of the best kissing of my life, that I'm already thinking about how to do again. But Sin doesn't even look up as the locker room door slams behind me, and I can trust my sergeant-at-arms not to beat around the bush. Hell, if all of them had heard, they'd have smashed down the door more likely than not.

"Session over?" I call to Sin.

"Yeah." He slots the last pair of shin guards into place and turns slowly to look at me.

"How'd it go?" I drape the towel around my neck.

"Harley's is good but not a good as she thinks she is." Sin sighs. "Alex is a fast learner, but she hasn't practiced in years."

I nod. That makes sense for both of them. Harley got her ego from me, too, and Alex has always been whip-smart with one foot out of the life.

"What about Bella?" he asks quietly. I almost don't hear him from the other side of the practice room.

Bella whines like a desperate thing when you touch her nipples, even through layers and layers of clothes. She writhes at the barest touch of pleasure and kisses like there's a well of untapped passion under all her prim, frightened outer layers.

"She's coming along," I say.

Sin takes a step forward. "I think the session should be over for you, too, Prez."

I cross my arms. "Excuse me?"

He takes a deep breath, and I know this is the moment. He keeps circling around the issue of Bella and me, lingering, watching. I don't know what he's figured out. Or what he thinks he knows. Every time I've been able to spook him down, pull rank, whatever I needed to do to get him to fuck

off. But this time is different. The way the air changes between us, I know this is the moment. He's either going to say it now, or he's going to let me do whatever I damn well please.

Course, I'm going to do whatever I damn well want to anyway. Sin's a good lieutenant, but he doesn't have any kind of say over me.

"Permission to speak freely?" He meets my gaze, iron in his stare, and I know which way the dominoes fell.

I shake my head. "Granted."

"I think you already know what I'm gonna say." Sin straightens another rack of equipment and steps a little closer to me.

"I think if you got somethin' to say, you should have the balls to say it." I itch for my cut, back in my bedroom at the house. I want to remind him I'm his Prez, even if he won't back down.

"Fine." He squares his shoulders and marches up to me, almost close enough to be get in my face. If any other man treated me this way, I'd knock him out. Depending on what Sin says next, I still fucking might.

"You can't get involved with Bella," he says evenly.

I shove him away. He stumbles back a step but moves no further. Anger starts to boil in my veins.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" I spit.

Sin shakes his head. "I don't care if you deny it. I've seen what I've seen, and if I've seen it, other people might've."

I scrub a hand over my face. Until half an hour ago, there was nothing to see, unless you count my increasingly frequent trips to my shower. "Piss off."

"No." Sin crosses his arms over the thin white tank-top he always wears to the practice room. "No, I think you need to hear this. You know nothing good can come of this, right?"

I turn and storm towards the door of the practice room. He can say whatever he damn well pleases, but I don't have to

stick around and listen.

“You’re old enough to be her father,” he continues. “And I mean that literally, Beast. She’s the same goddamn age as your daughter.”

I grit my teeth and try to block him out. I don’t hear footsteps behind me, and while Sin can be light-footed when the moment calls for it, I don’t think he’d bother just now. That means once I make it to the door, I won’t have to listen to his shit anymore. He’s too scared to take this into the hallway.

“More than that, she’s your daughter’s best fucking friend,” he calls after me. “I could tell you Harley’s never gonna approve, but I think you and I both know that’s barely the fucking half of it. She’d lose it.”

I think about whirling on him, snarling that I don’t pick my dates based on my daughter’s approval, but I keep my eyes on the door. I don’t want to have this fight. I don’t want to blacken his eye and have to answer for it tomorrow.

“You might just be the stubbornest motherfucker alive.” He sounds tired now, resigned. “You’re gonna blow this whole club up over some girl.”

I put my hand on the door. “Permission fucking revoked. Mind your own goddamn business, Sergeant.”

Sin sighs as I shove out the door. I can’t go home yet. Harley will be there, even if Bella isn’t, and I can’t face either of them yet. Instead, I storm toward my office. Men scramble out of my path as I pass, and the den falls completely silent when I walk by. I march into the war room, slam the door behind me, and repeat the process with my office door. Once inside, I pour myself a shot of bourbon and knock it back instantly.

I need men with good eyes around me to survive this fucking life, but that doesn’t mean I want them turning their eyes on me. Sin’s too good. I don’t believe for a goddamn second that anyone else has spotted shit. I’ve spent some time around Bella, sure, but not more than I would anyone else we picked up hurt like she was.

Not until this morning, when all my carefully constructed defenses crumbled to dust.

All the rage goes out of me in one long breath, and I pour myself another glass of bourbon to nurse.

I've been kicking my own ass over Bella for the past week. I know she's Harley's age. God, do I know it. Every time I lose control of my imagination, I think about the softness of her cheek under my hand and if she might be that soft everywhere. After today, I can't deny that inexperience made up with enthusiasm got me rock fucking hard. God, when she put her hand on my cock, so gentle, so curious. I halfway came in my pants. She touched me like she touched my bikes last night, like I was the danger she didn't understand but wanted to. I've never gone for younger women before, always preferred a lady who could tell me exactly what she wanted, but I want to learn Bella like she's trying to learn me. I want to teach her all the ways a body can feel good and walk her through all the ways that suit her best.

And that's completely inappropriate. Harley would kill me if she ever found out. She might well regret it afterward, but there's no goddamn way I could explain how much I want to protect Bella well enough to seem like anything other than a slimy old man taking advantage of the young girl in his care.

No matter how much it really seemed like Bella wanted it at least as much as I did.

I groan and take a sip of my bourbon. Even if I didn't have to worry about hurting my daughter, or the way the world would look at us, the fact of the matter stands that I am an MC Prez protecting Bella from her abusive father, the fucking sheriff. I've been hearing rumors from around town that local golden shithead Grimes has finally started talking about the fact that Bella's gone. Did a whole pity tour around town, and I heard that our name's in the mix. Details are hazy—upper-crust bullshit gossip always is—but everybody agrees it's an MC, and most of them say us. So her daddy is on the warpath, minutes from following up his pity tour with a revenge tour, and the last thing I need is a pissed-off lawman breathing

down my neck while I'm trying to rout the fucking Rosas again.

I turn to look out the window and sip my bourbon, trying to keep all my attention on the way it burns down my throat. Instead, I find Harley, Alex, and Bella in the middle of our scrubby lawn, still wearing the same exercise clothes I last saw them in. Alex turns an effortless cartwheel, and the other two clap. Then, Harley stands. Her cartwheel wobbles a little, but she lands it well enough. After a few moments' discussion, Bella stands up. In the bright sunlight, I can't help dragging my gaze over the clingy pink material of her tank-top, cupping breasts I now know just about fill my palm. She puts her hands up like the other two girls and goes to complete the trick. Halfway through, Harley's loose basketball shorts slide up her thighs with the force of gravity. At first, I can only see the miles of creamy skin, looking just as smooth as I hoped it might. Then, the sun catches a few jagged, silvery scars, stretched in a way I recognize from my own face. She got those when she was much smaller.

Bella crashes to the ground and fixes her shorts with frantic hands. Harley scoots across the ground to sit at her side and says something that makes her laugh.

I knock back the rest of my bourbon and turn away.

CHAPTER 30



Belle

In the days after our self-defense training, I spend a lot of time with Alex. She's around when Harley goes to class, which makes it a little easier for me to wander around the compound I've started calling home.

Home. It's a funny word these days. I think about it when I'm up at night, tossing and turning in a softer bed than I ever imagined sleeping in. There's a routine to the compound, a haphazard one that shares almost nothing with my daddy's, but enough that I am starting to settle in. Even just the settling in feels like a betrayal. This Thursday passed, a Thursday I know I would've gone to see Mama on any given week, and I didn't realize until late afternoon because I spent all day with Harley and Alex, laughing and having a whale of a time while we shopped online to bulk out my extremely limited wardrobe. I think about her and Daddy most nights, but my days are all about my new home, my new life here.

Today, Alex declared she didn't come home from college to spend as much time inside here as she did there. Harley is at a picnic table a few hundred feet away with a man called The Count, a muscular man with a shock of blonde hair, getting help with her homework. Alex produced a few lawn chairs she calls "chaises" for the two of us to set out and catch some sun.

"So," I say slowly as I lean back against the black mesh of the seat, "what exactly do we do now?"

She laughs. "Whatever we want. Read, talk, nap. The point is the sun." She pulls the lacy sleeves of her tank top down off

her shoulders to expose the bare skin underneath.

There's a lot of time like this at the compound. Empty time, in which I'm not supposed to be doing anything but whatever I please. I fidget and pick at the bungee cords attaching the mesh to the rest of the seat.

"You're not much for relaxing, are you?" Alex smiles.

I blush. "I'm just not used to it, is all."

She chuckles. "Me either. Back at school, if I don't have my head jammed in a book, my friends check to make sure I haven't been body-swapped."

I smile to myself. I can't imagine the life Alex describes, a group of friends what feels like halfway across the country, still close enough to worry. I can't even imagine that much studying.

"What are you doing here for the summer then?" I ask.

"My research project got canceled." She sighs heavily. "It sucks, but I'll just do it next summer."

A research project. The words have an almost magical quality. I look at Alex, her eyes closed against the blistering Houston sun, for a long moment. She's so beautiful, so tall, so confident. She feels like one of the women I would imagine myself as outside of the kitchen window at night, an impossibility, but here I am sitting next to her.

"What about you?" she asks. "I mean, I've heard it second- and third-hand, but it doesn't seem like anyone's asking you."

"What about me?" I furrow my eyebrows.

"What are you doing here for the summer?" She smiles. "Or as long as you're gonna stay."

"Oh." The breath leaves my lungs in a sudden gust. No one has asked me since I got here, not even Sin or Thor.

"You don't have to say." She stretches out her long, long legs, miles of skin beneath tiny denim shorts. "I just thought you might want to talk about it. I love Harley like a sister, but

she's kind of a blunt instrument. Didn't know if you had anyone with a little more tact."

Normally, I'd take offense to any critique of Harley, but it's been so easy to spend time with Alex because of how much Harley clearly loves her. At first, it stung a little, like my best friend had a secret other best friend, but Alex is so kind it's hard not to like her.

"I don't," I say slowly. "But it's...tough to talk about."

She nods.

"I guess..." I look at Harley over at the picnic table. "All the men around here look terrifying. They're strong and armed and dressed like they're ready to hurt somebody. But nobody's been anything but nice to me yet."

Alex hums in agreement. "The club is all bark and no bite within these walls."

"That's just it." I straighten my shorts, a new pair of soft pink ones in a light fabric that lay a shocking two inches above my knees. "I'm just getting to understand all this club stuff, the way they look out for each other and fight each other's battles. I expected it to be like the sheriff's office, where everyone's kinda on the same team, but only as far as the job requires." I shake my head. "It's nothing like that here, right? Everyone actually cares about each other."

She laughs. "That's one way to put it. I'd say they're pigheaded morons who should give up all their bruising and just ride bikes like 99 percent of the country but won't because they love the life too much."

"And the silly nicknames." I laugh.

I don't like thinking about John going out and bruising, or anything else that might get him hurt. It makes my chest hurt.

"Don't tell them that." She shakes her head with a smile. "They're very protective of their silly nicknames."

"Even The Count?" I raise an eyebrow.

"Especially him." She laughs. "But what does any of that have to do with you being here?"

I blow out a long breath. “Because I’ve never...seen anything like this before. Felt it, I guess. My daddy looks like a hero in a book, and he goes to all his deputies’ funerals when they happen, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen him sad about one. J—Beast is still upset about those few men he lost recently, I think.” I smile a little at the thought of him. “I’m here because all these men with weapons don’t scare me half as bad as my daddy did *that* night.”

Alex nods slowly. “You’re spending a lot of time with Beast these days, huh?”

“I guess.” Since the self-defense training, I feel like I’ve been seeing him everywhere and nowhere. We haven’t been alone in each other’s company long since, but he’s always around for a few words at least.

“How do you...feel about him?”

“He saved my life,” I answer immediately. “Without him, I don’t know where I’d be right now.”

Alex sighs and flips over in her chair to face me. “Bell, I’ve seen the way you look at him. I think you like him more than that.”

I flush. That warmth inside me rekindles a little as I remember the kiss, the hard press of his broad thigh between my legs, how small I felt surrounded by him.

“We kissed,” I whisper. “Just the other day, when we went off during the self-defense training. He kissed me, but I kissed back a whole lot more. I think it was just because we were so close during the training session.”

She looks at me. “Have you ever...?”

I shake my head and look away. Alex feels suddenly impossibly older, even when she’s only two years older than me.

“You really are innocent.” She shakes her head, and my blush burns hotter.

Alex puts a hand on my arm. “I don’t mean that like a bad thing. There’s nothing wrong with doing all sorts of stuff, and

with doing nothing at all. But I don't think you should be doing anything like that with Beast."

"What?" I look back up at her and find what looks like genuine compassion in her gray eyes. "I mean, I don't think he wants anything more from someone like me, but why not?"

"A lot of reasons, to be honest." Alex shakes her head, her red curls bouncing around her cheekbones. "For one, I think Harley would be pissed. I don't know if it'd be at you or at her pops, but I know she wouldn't like it."

The thought lands heavy on my heart. Harley saved my life even more than John did, a million times over in school and now. She wouldn't let me pull away. There's nothing in this life I would do to hurt her.

"For two..." She sighs. "Do you know anything about a man's needs?"

"Like a hot meal?" I ask "Or a woman to run the house?"

Sadness breaks over Alex's face, there and gone in a flash. "I mean like physical ones."

"Oh." I bite my lip and run through what I learned in health class. I know how babies are made, and how all the boys laughed when the teacher brought it up. They wouldn't stop talking about it for weeks. And I know if I don't cover up properly, I can attract the wrong sort of man, a man who doesn't want a good wife but a woman for a few minutes. But that's only the wrong sort of man, and I know John is just the best sort. "Maybe?"

She squeezes my arm. "Men—even Beast—have certain... sexual urges. What might just be a kiss to us is the beginning of something more to them."

The hardness of his erection under my hand, the way he suddenly pulled away. "You mean, if I were to kiss J—Beast, he'd think I wanted to go all the way? Every time?"

"No, Beast is a good guy." Alex sighs. "I just mean *he'd* want to. And he wouldn't be able to not want to, and it hurts him when you don't, if you get too far."

I press a hand to my mouth. That warmth, that electric feeling between us, hurts him? How do I just keep hurting the people I most want to only do right by?

My face burns, and I look away from Alex. It doesn't seem like she thinks I'm a slut for kissing John, but if there's one thing I know, it's that any woman who goes all the way with anyone but her husband is.

"Are you hearing me, Bell?" she asks. "It's just about Beast. If you found someone else you liked, I'd have your back the whole way."

I nod. "Can we talk about something else? I need some time to think about this."

She turns onto her back once more, soaking up the sun once more.

"Tell me about your research project," I blurt out.

She grins. "So I'm an Anthropology major—"

I listen to Alex with half an ear and keep spinning her earlier warning in my head. Has Alex ever gone all the way? She wears the sorts of clothes Daddy told me only sluts ever did, but she looks so nice in them, so dignified, that it's hard to connect her with the women Daddy talked about. I think Harley has—she had a few boys she kept on rotation in high school, and we used to giggle over which one she liked best, but she stopped telling me the physical details when she admitted to making out with Sawyer Atkinson at the eighth-grade dance and I got so nervous knowing it that I threw up. Maybe the rules for being a slut are different here on the compound, like so many of the other rules I learned growing up. I don't want to hurt John.

But I don't want to hurt Harley so much more. Across the yard, she drops her head onto her calculus homework in frustration. I owe Harley more than I could ever imagine paying back, in this lifetime or the next. If chasing that warm feeling with John is going to hurt her, then I just have to ignore it. In books, the heroine always thinks about the hero at night when she can't have him, and with my own bedroom, I can

think about whatever I like. And like Alex said, John is a good man. He wouldn't force me to go along with his needs, and I doubt he'd hold it against me either. He's been so serious about my staying that I don't know what it would take to make him angry enough to kick me out.

The knowledge settles in my chest, and I know my decision is made. I'm not going to kiss John anymore. I'm just going to stay and think about him at night until I can find a way to let him go for Harley's sake.

CHAPTER 31



Thor

I prowl the streets of Houston at night, my chopper growling in harmony with the other bikes around me. Storm pulls up on my left. This was supposed to be his run, cornering enough Rosas to clamp down on their coyotes, but since Alex came to town, I can't just leave it in another man's hands. I want to catch these scumbags myself to be certain we're doing it as quick as we fucking can.

I don't want them in a city with my daughter, if I can help it.

Haven't seen hide nor hair of the motherfuckers yet tonight, but Storm swears he got word there'd be something going down in this area.

I motion to brake at the next corner, under a shattered, flickering streetlight, and everyone pulls to a quick stop.

"You sure about the location?" I bellow over the roar of the bikes.

Storm nods. "Heard the goddamn street name."

I stare up at the street sign over my head. We've been circling the block for almost an hour. If Storm heard a street name, we should've seen something by now.

The hair on the back of my neck prickles just as the streetlight flickers on to reveal the first black-and-white car nosing out of the dark.

Fucking pigs. One of the younger guys, Piston, immediately grabs for his pistol. I shake my head at him.

The streetlight turns off and on again. Two squad cars. Three. Four. Five. And I can hear a sixth idling a bit away.

We're all armed, but we can't start this kind of shootout, because I doubt we can finish it.

Piston glares at me.

The front door of the nearest squad car swings open, and a wall of a cop unfolds himself out. Beast believes in riding under the radar as far as we can. A dollar in a pig's pocket is a bullet they can shoot at us later and all. That means I need to convince ten MC men not to make any kind of move.

Should've brought Sin.

"Evening, officer." I shut off my bike and dismount.

He just stands by his car while the other four cars pull into a tight circle around us. My gut sinks. We're fish in a fucking barrel, and I have to keep everyone from shooting.

I walk up to the one big officer while others climb out of their idling cars.

"Did we break a law, officer?" He's got a few inches on me. I haven't met anyone like that since Beast, all those years ago.

The big man crosses his arms, and I realize he's covered up the shoulder patch that should display his badge number. This ain't no traffic stop.

I take another step closer. "What the fuck is going on, officer? I got rights, you—"

The big man moves faster than I would've thought possible. He whips out a baton and slams it into my gut, knocking the air right out of me.

Has to be one of those new polycarbonate ones. It lands heavier, and with how thick the one in this motherfucker's fist is, I don't doubt it could kill at the right angle.

I reel back and barely see my men grabbing their guns in the dim light. When it flickers back to full brightness, I see

that sixth fucking squad car, covered in pigs with their service weapons out, half a dozen or more, all sighted on my men.

I'm not making my daughter bury my sorry ass after everything else I put her through.

“Fucking”—I wheeze—“weapons down! No toasts tonight!”

Storm drops his hand, and so do most of the rest of them, but fucking Piston keeps his semi-automatic pointed at the officer in front of me.

“You think that’s gonna save you?” The big man sneers. “Word’s out. It’s biker season.”

I hear the sound of fists on flesh behind me. I jam my fist into the pocket of my cut, slide on the set of brass knuckles I keep in there just in case war ever broke out in Houston again, and charge the big man in front of me.

He laughs and charges me just the same.

I haven’t been in a proper scrap in a while. I’ve hit people, and I’ve sparred, but nobody worth a damn has stepped to us since before Sin. When I collide with the massive cop in front of me, it’s not like sparring, and it’s certainly not like interrogating. He fists his hand in the collar of my cut, keeping me from getting away as he slams his baton into my free side repeatedly. I can feel the bruises building up, but if there’s one thing you never forget from years in the ring, it’s how to ignore the pain.

I smash my brass-knuckled fist into his head and force my knee up into his balls to get a little space. He groans and loses his grip on my cut and his massive baton. I shuffle back and spare a glance behind me.

Mistake. My men are covered in pigs. I turn back to my officer to demand what they want from us just in time to catch a baton blow to the face. One of those thinner, extendable metal pieces of shit. Something crunches. The pain explodes like a rocket, and my vision instantly doubles. Nausea wrings my guts, the taste of blood fills my mouth, and I stumble back a step.

Broken eye socket. Gotta be. My eyelid droops, and I let it fall. My vision clears a little, but the nausea remains.

I launch myself at him, crash my knuckles into his teeth, and bring my knee up into his liver before he can recover. He stumbles back, catching himself on the top of his car, and spits blood. I try to grab his head and smash it against the roof. A knockout like that would give me a chance to help my men behind me, but he rolls out of the way at the last second and I stumble.

“Motherfuck—” I turn to chase him, but his baton catches me in the ribs. Just a bruise with that tiny thing, but it gives him a moment to close up on me again.

He pins me against the roof of his squad car and whomps his baton against the side of my head and my shoulder. The metal stings, and I feel it cut into my skin in a few places, but it doesn't have half the heft the big polycarbonate one did.

He sneers at me like he thinks the fight is finished, and I know these fucking pigs don't know shit about us. I've broken worse holds than this and won the fucking day.

I pull his service weapon from his belt and slam it up into his chin with as much force as I can muster before tossing it over the car. His head snaps back with a grunt, and I try to force my leg between us in the tiny gap he creates.

But I forgot about how many pigs I needed to fight. The big one backs off as another officer lands a heavy blow on my shoulder, and my collarbone shatters. I lose my grip and my balance.

The big officer grabs the wrist I was using to brace against his pig mobile in one and my shoulder in the other as I stumble, then spins me to crush me facedown against the roof of his car.

“Get the others,” he barks at the one who intervened.

“Not many left,” the other replies as he returns to my men.

My broken eye socket screams as he pushes me harder against the metal, but I aim a kick at his knee anyway. I only manage to connect with his thigh, and he grunts but yanks the

arm connected to my broken collarbone higher against my back. Bone and tendon grind, and I swallow down something uncomfortably close to a scream as lights burst in my vision.

“Scum like you don’t know when to stop,” he growls.

He slams his knee into mine, crushing it against the car, and something else splinters. When I try to regain my footing, my leg won’t hold me up anymore.

A voice crackles though the radio in the car. “Drayton, 10-20?”

“Closing up an 11-66 at—” He gives a location several blocks from where we stand.

“Need you at a 909,” the radio says. “Report when finished.”

“Copy.” The big officer, Drayton, hangs his radio up.

“What I want is simple, you piece of shit,” he hollers so everyone can hear. “Return Bella Grimes in the next twenty-four hours, or you’ll get a piece of what open season really looks like.”

He releases me, and my knee crumples under my weight. I hit the asphalt and glare up at him.

“Good fucking luck, pig,” I spit. “Open season goes both ways for us.”

Drayton stares at me for a long moment, then walks back over to his thick, polycarbonate baton and grabs it. “Good luck telling anyone.”

He swings it down over on my throat. I feel the bones flatten under the force of his blow, and wheeze out a pained breath.

“909,” he barks to the rest of his men.

Footsteps shuffle behind me, and one, two, three, four, five, six squad cars pull away. I shove up on my uninjured arm and stare at my men through my one good eye.

Piston lies still on the pavement, but his chest rises and falls. One of Storm’s arms hangs limp at his sides, but he

stands steady enough. The rest of them sit up with various levels of success, all covered in bruises and bleeding in multiple places.

And every single bike got knocked over in the scuffle.

Storm wanders over to me with a panic I've grown used to in his eyes. I point at my knee, then my throat. He nods and wraps an arm around my shoulders to lift me off the ground. Together, we hobble over to pick up the pieces.

Bear, one of the men who seemed to end up better off, aside from the wobble in his step, lifts my bike. I prefer so much aftermarket you can't even see the original model anymore, and tonight, I went out on my Hammer, the bike I've been working on for the last decade. She's seen more wrecks than I can count anymore, but tonight's a bad one. Her muffler is missing, and her brand new brown-and-gray paint job is now more on the asphalt they dropped her on than her chassis.

I pull my phone out of my pocket to have someone call Beast and find the screen shattered.

Bear seems to read my mind and pulls out his own phone as Storm settles me on the seat of my baby. I stare out over the carnage as my injuries start calling out to be noticed.

I've fought a lot of battles and a lot of wars. If there's one thing I know for damn certain, it's that I might lose battles, but I ain't gonna lose a war that starts like this.

Sheriff Grimes and every motherfucker who answers to him is going to taste dirt before I'm satisfied.

CHAPTER 32



Beast

I pace the packed hall outside the infirmary in the clubhouse waiting for Stitches to come out and give us any kind of update. The whole clubhouse has been silent since the call from Bear came in, right in the middle of an impromptu poker tournament, so I couldn't have kept the news from anyone if I wanted to. Several men crowd into the hallway with me, and even more wait in the den. Hell, I'm pretty sure the motherfuckers who were here started calling around to get the rest of the club to show up.

War's been on the horizon since Mac disappeared, or maybe since Buzz, but everybody's been gearing up to take on the cartel. We know cartel. They're small, they're fast, they hit hard but they hit small. They take out runners in the dark by themselves. Nobody's been gearing up to take on the law.

I look around at the faces of my men. Some look angry, their hands never straying from guns or blades or bats like the sheriff's men are gonna pop up around the next corner looking for a bruising. Those expressions make sense to me. It's hard to keep from running down my own ammo stores, from sending a message to our contacts for a big order. But that's not what makes me mad.

No, what turns my rage into something beyond what I've felt in a long time, maybe beyond what I ever felt before, are the men who look scared when I meet their eyes. Most of them look away quickly, or try to cover up the fear with the sort of rage the others call on so easily, but I can read them better than

that. They're my men, handpicked from these streets to fall under my protection.

And Sheriff Grimes has them scared in the heart of our operation. For that, I'm going to rip out his beating heart and make him eat it.

The door swings open, and Stitches steps out. I catch a glimpse of the team of physicians he swore we could trust behind him, rushing back and forth between the eleven cots we dragged in with syringes and pills and bandages.

Stitches looks up at me with haggard eyes. I've never seen the usually grinning man so tired or upset.

"No one's dead," he says simply. "And most of them will come out of this all right after some time."

Murmurs flood the hall. I don't look at my men, I can't see the reaction without losing the threadbare grip I need to keep on my temper to talk to the round-faced doctor doing so much for us.

"Most?" I repeat.

"Piston had enough trauma to a few fingers that we had to amputate." Stitches sighs. "The final three on his right hand."

A slim thread of relief winds its way through the room. A man can ride with two fingers, if carefully.

"Anyone else?" I ask.

"Thor's larynx was crushed. We got a scope in, and pulled his airway out of trouble, but a team of the best experts in the world couldn't restore full vocal cord function. He may speak again, but it'll never be the same." Stitches crosses his arms.

I inhale slowly. My rage burns in my veins. Thor's been my right hand for a decade. I wouldn't be the man I am today without his advice. But I know Stitches well enough to know he's not done just yet.

"And his knee was destroyed." He rubs his eyes. "I can't even attempt reconstruction without a few colleagues who weren't available tonight, but I'd guess he'll limp for the rest of his life at best."

Thor doesn't talk much about his life before the MC, but I know he used to fight, and I've never seen a man keep himself in better shape. An MC needs certain abilities to ride, but he went above and beyond to make sure his body would never fail him.

The murmurs kick up again, a sour mood takes the hall, and someone gasps. That instant of shock and fear push me instantly over the edge.

"Motherfucker!" I whirl and slam my fist into a wall, Ruthless Kings scattering in every direction to get out of my way. The drywall crumbles like I wish Sheriff Grimes's skull would, and I do it again, and again. The full hallway starts to empty, except for Stitches, who doesn't flinch.

I land a final punch, feel my knuckles split, and somebody yelps.

I know that yelp. I turn and find Bella behind me, flattened against the wall of the emptying hallway with her face white as a sheet. Motherfucker, I thought she'd be in her room at this time of night. The poker game got too raucous for her, but Harley and Alex stayed to try their luck. As far as I know, they're both in the den right now.

My feet move before my brain, and I'm at her side. "I'm so sorry, I thought you were back at the house. We're having a bit of a rough night around here."

"Harley said the game ended." Bella swallows but doesn't move, and fear still shines bright in her eyes. "I know men need their outlets."

Stitches calls, "Everybody's all patched up, if you want to come in now."

"I don't—" I shake my head. "I got a bit of a temper that I'm working on, but I'm never gonna hurt you or Harley. Hell, I'm never gonna hurt anyone you see around here."

I can't help myself from getting closer to her, as though that'll make her any less scared, but somehow, it seems to. She stares up at me, her blue eyes shining, and a little color starts to return to her face.

“Is hitting the walls your outlet instead?” she whispers.

I smile. “You could say that. On good days, I go to the practice room and knock stuff in there around instead.”

At the mention of the practice room, her gaze darts to my lips and resolutely back up.

“Why is Doc Stitches here?” she asks. “Does that have anything to do with your rough night?”

I glance down the hall to see the round doctor has returned to his office, but he left the door open. Low grunts of pain drift out, punctuated by antiseptic smells and metal rattling. We had to pick Thor’s team up in my truck because too few of them could ride, but I haven’t seen them since Stitches shut the door in all our faces. I drift slowly back down the hall.

Bella trails after me. I mean to stop her, but one of my men makes a guttural, animal noise, and I turn my back on her entirely to step inside.

Eleven cots, crammed in with barely enough room to spit, hold eleven men covered in blood. Most of them can’t sit up, and I count eight or nine different casts before I even get to splints. Thor sits in the proper hospital bed in the middle, so covered in bandages, needles, and bruises I can barely see my best friend. Half my mind notes absently that we’re going to need another infirmary to wage this war.

The rest burns with a desire to hunt down the motherfuckers who laid hands on my men and make them feel the same hurt.

Amidst the doctors and patients, Sin ghosts from bed to bed. Stitches allowed him in early because he swore not to touch anything and that he had an iron stomach. We needed someone to ask the better-off men what exactly happened. We need to be able to hit back fast.

Bella makes a soft, pained sound as she steps into the doorway. My gut pulls me toward her, but Sin steps away from Storm’s bed and meets my gaze. It’s time for an update, and I’m the Prez. Bella has to wait.

Sin glances over my shoulder at her and leans in to whisper in my ear. “It was cops, not the sheriff’s deputies, and they all covered their badge numbers. Somebody heard the name Drayton.”

I hiss. The proper police have no reason to come at us more so than usual right now. It’s still gotta be the sheriff’s hand in this.

“And just before they left, the biggest pig at the roast yelled out that we had twenty-four hours to return Bella, or it would be open season on us.”

I grimace as Sin pulls away.

“Call church for tomorrow,” I say. “Whole club, in the den ’stead of the war room. We need the space.”

He nods and walks out. After a few moments, I can hear him speaking to a crowd of Ruthless Kings God only knows where in the clubhouse. No one wants to go far at this point.

Finally, finally, I turn back to Bella. She stands frozen in the doorway, her face pale.

“Did my daddy do this?” Her lips quiver as she speaks.

She stares at the men behind me rather than at me, and I know just what she’s thinking. That she’s more trouble than she’s worth, and I’m about to tell her to get gone for all the harm she’s caused? I don’t want that any more than I want a bullet in my head. For a long moment, I think about telling her it was the Rosas, that it don’t have shit to do with her, but Sin’s guess comes back to me. He thinks the Rosas are working with law enforcement, and somebody who would do this to my men would fit right in with the cartel.

And, a little selfishly, I want her to see what her father really is. Maybe then she can stop hearing his voice in her ear.

“Not directly,” I say. “But yes.”

She presses a trembling hand to her mouth and shakes her head. “I have to go home. I have twenty-four hours, right? I have to go home so he won’t hurt anyone but me anymore.”

She starts to turn, and despite the army of doctors and near dozen of my men, I grab her and wrap her in my arms. She struggles against my grip.

“You are never going back to that hellhole again,” I whisper. “This is just the cost of doing business. I’m gonna make sure your daddy doesn’t hurt anyone soon enough.”

After a long moment, she wraps her arms around my waist, and I press her head to my chest to stroke her hair. She’s been a little more distant since our encounter in the practice room, and I’ve been following her lead, but it’s impossible not to think about with her body pressed up against mine, warm and pliable.

I let her go. It’s already been too long. “Go on home, Beauty. You don’t need to see any of this.”

“I can clean—” she protests.

I shake my head. “We got cleaners. Go rest and try to forget about this.”

Bella stares at me, her blue eyes burning into mine, but eventually she sighs and heads back the way she came.

My arms ache with the loss of her, and I wonder if she’ll take my mention of working out in the practice room sometime as an invitation.

I grit my teeth and turn. I’m a Prez in the middle of a two-front war, and I have men to take care of. I need to forget about my daughter’s best friend.

CHAPTER 33



Belle

That night, I clutch a stuffed, tan-colored pillowcase in my hand as I creep down the stairs of Harley and Beast's house. My heart pounds in my chest, and my breath races.

This time, I'm not leaving because I'm scared. Whatever that fire Mama's boats lit in my chest was, it lives in me now. Harley's going to be so hurt when she finds out, and John...

I don't know what John will be. I've been keeping my distance from him as best I can since I talked to Alex, but tonight, in his arms, my heart fluttered and that warmth inside me blazed up all over again. Everything with him is too complicated to sort through.

But I know what I have to do. Eleven men got hurt tonight, awfully hurt. I didn't go back to the house when John told me to, but to the den where all the men sat with Harley and Alex. I heard more awful things. Rubber bullets and broken bones Thor never being able to walk right again. Harley had her arms around Alex like she was worried Alex would drift apart if she let go, and I understand why. I haven't known her for long, but I've never seen her look so distant and distracted.

So it's my job to go home and take whatever my daddy's going to give me. I'm not going to hurt these nice people because I'm too scared to die.

I reach the bottom of the stairs and open the unlock front door. The compound lawn yawns in front of me, scrubby and dark in yet another Houston summer storm. I've dressed a little better this time, in jeans and one of Harley's sweatshirts

she hasn't taken back yet. Once I make it out, I only need to call Daddy, and he'll come get me.

I take a deep, shaky breath. I don't want to go. But I don't ever want to be the reason someone else gets hurt again.

Tears streak down my face as I sprint out into the night. The scrub makes it hard to run, bumping and clumping under my feet, and the mud doesn't help. I can't see in the darkness, except for the few lights still on in the clubhouse and the garage, but I know I can't go there. I just run.

Into something hard. My heart jars into my throat, and my ears ring with the force of the impact. I stumble back, and big, warm arms catch me around my waist.

Lightning cracks through the sky overhead, casting John's face in dramatic a shadow. He holds me pinned to his body, the warmer summer rain drenching us. My breath comes in short puffs.

I'm caught.

"Going somewhere?" he asks.

I swallow. "I don't want to be like my daddy. I don't want to hurt people just by being around."

He leans closer. My heart thuds, and despite how my heart aches, I don't want him to let me go.

"It would hurt me if you left," he murmurs.

The air between us crackles with something brighter than the lightning, just like in the practice room, but I have to ask. "Why?"

His eyes flutter shut, and he starts to close the distance between our faces. John is going to kiss me. He's going to kiss me in the pouring rain, all of our clothes stuck to us like we went swimming in them, and if Alex is right, he's going to want more.

My mind wanders to that first moment in the library, when he smiled and I realized just how handsome a face like his could be. Maybe I want him to want more. Maybe this was inevitable.

He brushes his lips against mine. I instinctively wind my arms around his neck, and his lips fuse onto mine.

There are a million and one reasons to run. From the compound, from John, from everything that's happened to me since I took that card from his fingers, but I can't remember any of them anymore. I only know the one reason I can't run.

He tells it to me over and over again in the soft slide of his hands over my waist, the way he cups his hands around my body and lifts me up so I have to wrap my legs around his waist. In the way he pries the pillowcase from my fingers and strokes my hair back from my face. In the way his hands become urgent, then slow back down like he has to remind himself not to rush this.

John is asking me to stay because he cares for me. No one's ever done that before.

I don't remember getting back to the house, but when I slide back to my feet, dripping wet in the front hallway of his house, my lips and cheeks burn a little from the scrape of his stubble and the heat in my center boils.

"I..." John shakes his head. "This is the last stop if you want to get off the train, Beauty. I can't resist you like this."

"Resist?" I look at John. He's wearing his leather vest covered in patches, but the white T-shirt underneath it has turned almost translucent in the rain, and his jeans cling to every contour of his body in a way that makes that heat in my veins an inferno. I press myself against him to feel that hardness between us. "Why?"

He groans low in his throat and takes my mouth in a burning kiss. I push up on my tiptoes to get closer to his mouth.

John pulls back and grits his teeth. "I need you to hear me. If you come upstairs with me, into my room, I am going to want to have sex with you."

I know about sex from school and church. I know it has to do with this warmth in me, and his hardness, and the electricity between us. The smart girl, the good girl my daddy

raised would nod and go to her own room. Sex isn't meant to happen outside of the marriage bed.

But Daddy taught me an awful lot of wrong things. I stare up into John's eyes for a long, long moment. He wants me to stay. He pulled me out of the rain to keep me here, even knowing his men might get hurt because of it. I've never felt safe like I have with John.

I don't know if I ever felt safe before John. All I know is he wouldn't ask a thing in this world of me that would put me in danger. I trust him down to my bones.

I take his hand. "I know." I walk up one stair and look down at him. "Are you coming?"

His dark eyes burn, and we race up the stairs. He flings open the door to his bedroom at the end of the hall and drops my soaked pillowcase of things inside before closing it behind us. I get a vague impression of dark walls and the wheel he mentioned before his lips are on mine again, and he's burning up just like I am. I kiss my burning into him, and the fire that lit in my chest when I realized I didn't want to die, and all the desperate sadness of leaving this place where I've been so much happier than I thought a girl like me could be. He kisses me back with that same intensity, over and over again.

Stay. Stay. Please, stay.

The backs of my knees bump into something soft, and I pull back from him to see the bed behind me. It's massive, bigger than I could've imagined a bed being, with a soft red comforter on it.

John pushes me forward again, clearly urging me to lie down. I frown.

"I'll get it all wet." My clothes are still soaked, and his bed looks so nice.

His gaze darkens. "I hope so, Beauty, but we can take these clothes off no problem."

I don't understand the first part of his sentence, but the second comes through loud and clear. I blush. No man has seen me altogether, and I know I'm not much to look at.

“Oh, don’t get scared now.” John kisses the corner of my mouth, my jaw, and down onto my neck. My nerves flutter under his touch, and that warmth blazes again.

“I’m sorry if I’m not...not what you were hoping,” I whisper.

He looks up at me from his place on my neck and slides his hands under my sweatshirt. “I promise you’ll be better than I dreamed.”

He pulls it over my head, and only a plain white bra stands between him and my skin. My breath catches, but he doesn’t even up look. He just bends his mouth back to my skin and kisses from my neck down my chest to the swell of my breasts. Like in the practice room, even the near proximity turns the warmth into a blaze. I slide my fingers into his hair so I don’t tumble onto the bed. He runs his hands over the waistband of my pants, up my ribcage, to the clasp of my bra.

The blaze dampens all my worries. “Please,” I whisper.

I want to know what his mouth feels like on every part of me. I want to know what his skin feels like against my own.

He groans and unfastens it, then slides it down off my arms. I gasp. He spirals his kisses slowly closer to one nipple, which feels tight in his proximity, and palms my other breast gently.

I arch into him when he closes his mouth over me. Everything else vanishes from my mind in a sparkle of fireworks. I’ve never felt this—this good before in my life. A high, whiny moan escapes from my mouth.

John releases my nipple and grins up at me. “Good thing my room is soundproof. I need to hear more of that.”

“More?” I gape at him. Can this really get better?

He smirks, kisses down my chest, and kneels in front of me to unfasten my pants.

I blush. He kisses my hipbone.

“Am I correct in thinking you’ve never done this before?” he asks.

I look away and nod. He pulls my chin until I have to meet his gaze.

“That’s not a bad thing.” He grins. “Just means I’m gonna take real good care of you. Ready?”

I nod. He’s right in front of the fire, and I don’t know what I want him to do about it, but if he doesn’t do something soon, it’s going to burn me up.

He pulls my pants and underwear to my ankles in a single move, then slips off my shoes and discards the whole pile. I don’t even have time to be embarrassed, though, because he positions both of my hands on his head and dives his face between my legs.

I spread automatically, and only my grip on him keeps me upright. His tongue dances over the folds between my legs, and I realize they’re soaked from something other than the rain. His every movement stokes the blaze in my core brighter and brighter.

“John,” I gasp.

He smiles against me, and the feeling makes me desperate. I rock into his face like I did on his leg, and that makes everything more intense. His tongue finds a point above my entrance, and I nearly scream his name.

Suddenly, he pulls back and looks up at me, the bottom half of his face shining. I blush again.

“I’d like to fuck you,” he murmurs, his voice low and rough. It shimmers up my spine, and I want to know that feeling.

I lick my lips and nod.

He grins. “Lay back.”

I scoot up the bed to put my head on his pillow. Somehow, that feels even more intimate than having him between my legs. He undresses quickly, but leaves his boxers on. I frown.

He chuckles and steps to the side of the bed to grab my hand and place it on his hardness. It’s bigger than it was last time, or it feels like it through the thin material.

He smiles. “I didn’t want to overwhelm you.”

The apex of my legs burns emptily, and I want him there. I want all of him, and I want to prove that I’m not fragile.

I grab the waistband of his boxers and yank them down, baring him to my gaze like he did me. His...erection bounces free, the tip shining with something like the wetness between my legs, and the last of my fears melt away. John wants this as much as I do. I know what Alex said about John wanting more is true but I want more too. Is it wrong if we both want this?

I run a curious finger along his length, and it twitches. He grabs my wrist.

“If you want me to fuck you”—his voice growls out of his throat, animalistic and desperate—“hands off my cock for now.”

I pout wanting to explore more. “I want to—”

He kisses my fingers. “Later, I promise.”

Later sounds good. He pulls on a condom with quick fingers. I let him settle on top of me, his hardness—his cock pressed against my leg, and he runs a hand down my body to the place where all my warmth is gathering. He strokes along it, gathering some of the wetness, and I moan. Then, he slips one long, thick finger inside. It aches for a split second, and then white-hot pleasure consumes the feeling. I rock into him, driving it deeper, seeking more of that sensation.

“God, you’re so fucking wet,” he groans. “So good, so ready.”

He slips in another finger, and I whimper. I want to be good for John. I want to burn up with him in this blaze.

He meets my gaze, his eyes dark and heavy. “Ready?”

I take a deep breath and nod. He slides his fingers out and lines up his cock. As he presses forward slowly, I crush my mouth against his. His cock burns more than his fingers, but he goes slow until his hips meet mine. Every inch of me feels full, burning with pleasure and want.

With him on top of me, inside me, I feel perfectly safe. Like nothing can hurt me.

He draws back and presses in again slowly. It aches a little, but he brushes against a spot inside me that causes my vision to go white with pleasure. I thrust up into him, chasing the feeling despite the pain, and he moans into my mouth. One of his hands finds my breast again, as his next thrust comes faster, and I become an inferno. Anything I felt in the practice room was just embers compared to this. The next one comes even faster, and I choke down a scream.

He pulls his lips off mine to focus on my neck once more, murmuring between kisses, “You’re so good. Louder, Beauty, louder. I want to hear you fall apart.”

I have always been quiet. I’ve trained myself for that. But here, under his ministrations, with his cock wringing feelings I’ve never felt before out of me, I can’t help but obey.

Gasps pour from my lips, then groans, then moans. When he hits that spot again at full force, pleasure overwhelms me entirely, and I lose control of my body. I scream his name into the air, tensing and shaking as waves of pleasure wrack my body.

After a long moment, I collapse back onto the bed. John collapses with me, rolling off to the side and leaving me cold. I never want him further away than on top of me again.

Like he can sense it, he winds an arm around my waist and drags me flush against him, his softening cock presses against my back.

“I’ll stay,” I murmur.

He laughs into my shoulder.

CHAPTER 34



Beast

The next day, I wake without morning wood for the first time since Bella moved in. Light shines through the blinds we forgot to close, casting her in golden tones against my red sheets.

She stayed the night. I close my eyes and open them again, in case I'm dreaming, but she remains. A soft smile curves my lips, and I run a finger over her bare arm. Yep, real. Just like every other second of one of the best nights of my life.

Her sounds, the way she shook when she came, fuck, the moment when I took her virginity. It was better than a dream, just like I promised her. I know I should feel bad, like I'm taking advantage of a good girl, but she wasn't shy about telling me what she wanted. Even in the bright light of day, it feels less like I took something and more like she gave me a precious gift.

She stirs and turns on her side away from me. The covers slide off her back, exposing the only swath of skin I haven't already seen up close. In addition to the still-fading bruises, her skin here is littered with scars, just like everywhere else. The ropey lines on her thighs, the burn on her side, breaks and bruises and lacerations, a story of abuse told in a map of silvery white lines. I stroke a hand over her soft blonde hair. I knew I would kill Eric Grimes the moment she called me in the rain, but seeing all this, I know it's going to be soon.

Bella rolls onto her back and blinks awake. She stares around in a panic for a brief moment, but then her eyes fix on

the motorcycle wheel on the wall above her head, and she smiles even before she turns to meet my eyes.

That soft, trusting smile socks me in the chest. “Morning, Beauty.”

She wrinkles her nose and frowns. “Why do you keep calling me that?”

“Because you are.” I cup her cheek. “Beautiful.”

She shakes her head. “John—”

“I’m not hearing it. I’ve seen the whole package, and I’m sold.” I chuckle. “And you’re the only one who can call me that and get away with it.”

“The whole package.” Her brow knits, and I just know she’s thinking about her scars. “Why just me?”

I lean up over her, cup her side over the ancient burn, and kiss her. “Because you’re special.”

She opens under my lips, but she’s laughing at me.

I pull back. “What?”

“I’m nothing special at all, and I can’t figure how you think so.” She smiles up at me, completely confident in her assessment.

My heart breaks for her. Her daddy got even deeper into her head than I feared.

I run my hand down under the blanket until I can feel the scars on her thighs. “How long has he been hitting you?”

She bites her lip and looks away. “Do we have to talk about him?”

“Not one bit.” I cup her inner thigh and spread her open under the covers. “We can do all sorts of things.”

“John!” she squeals.

I keep my grip on her leg and grin. “I can let go if you like.”

She turns on her side so the leg in my hand is suddenly bracketed over my hips, and her warm body presses close to

mine. Not an inch of cloth separates us, and my cock starts to respond.

Bella pulls the comforter up over her shoulders and peers up at me. “I might just like to talk for a while.”

I swallow and release her leg, but she lets it settle over my hips. How can she be so shy and so forward at once?

“What do you want to talk about?” I ask.

She sighs. “You know all about me. My daddy, my mama, my job. I barely know anything about you outside of this clubhouse.”

I exhale slowly. “What do you want to know?”

“Whatever you did before this.” She shrugs, staring up at me with earnest interest in her bright blue eyes. I run my thumb over her mouth and find I can’t deny her anything.

“I told you a little about my home life.” Usually, I hate talking about anything before Reaper and the Vegas Ruthless Kings, but the words come easily with her here. “I didn’t tell you I grew up in this tiny little town so close to the Oklahoma border, I used to cross state lines for groceries.”

She giggles. “I’ve only ever lived in a city. I can’t imagine what a small town would be like.”

“Nosy, mostly.” I shake my head. “Everybody knew I was the boy whose mama left and didn’t take him with her. Everybody knew my pops was the town drunk. I grew up wild with an army of people wagging their fingers at me.”

“Is that how you’re so fearless?” Her blue eyes grow wide. “I’ve only ever done my best to do what I was told, and I can’t imagine being brave like you.”

I drop a kiss on her lips. “I don’t know. But you left home to protect yourself, and I don’t know if there’s anything braver than that.”

She shakes her head. “That doesn’t count. I mean real brave, every day brave like you are. Brave once doesn’t count. How do you do it?”

Her eyes shine up into mine, desperately certain. Maybe one day she'll hear me when I tell her how much I admire her.

"I guess..." She runs her fingers through my chest hair, and I groan. "I guess you do just keep trying things. The more things you've done without the world exploding or whatever your daddy said it would do, the more you'll be able to believe the next one won't tear the world either."

She stares past me for a long moment.

"Eight," she finally says.

I furrow my eyebrows. "What?"

"That's...that's when he started hitting me." She bites her lip. "Just after Mama went in for her first big hospital stay."

Eight years old. That man laid hands on an eight-year-old child. It takes every ounce of willpower in my body to keep my temper in check.

"I think that's when—" She grabs my hand and runs it over the scars on her thighs once again. "But I don't know. I don't remember much about that time."

I pull her hand up to the center of my sternum, to a small, circular burn. "I ran in a tough crowd before I fell in with the Ruthless Kings, and the leader put his cigarette out on me once."

Her mouth falls slightly open. "I'm so sorry."

I can't help it. I laugh. Bella's sitting here covered in a network of scars that would put half of my top guys to shame, and she's worried about the one time some douche used me as an ashtray. I knocked his teeth down his throat and got the hell out of Dodge the next day, joined up with Reaper the next month. She doesn't need to worry about something that happened to me long ago.

She looks up at me with wide, hurt eyes. "What?"

"I'm sorry." I bring her hand to my mouth and kiss it softly. "I am just awed by how much you still care."

She cocks her head to the side.

“Most people in your situation”—*and in much less shitty ones, like me*—“would let themselves get nasty. Stop...stop loving as much as you do you.” I kiss her hand again. “It’s some kind of magic that you still do.”

She blushes. “Daddy always said my bleeding heart was going to get me taken advantage of.”

“I’m not gonna lie to you, Beauty.” I kiss her palm. “It’s a tough world out there, and some people might want to do that. Doesn’t make you any less strong for holding onto it though, and I’ll break the knuckles of anyone who tries.”

She inhales a little shakily, and I think she might’ve heard me for the first time.

The morning sunshine warms us, and a thought comes to me unbidden. I could do this for the rest of my life.

I sit up abruptly, and her leg slides off my hip. “We gotta take a shower one of these days.”

“Oh!” She clutches the blanket to her chest. “Okay. Do you want to go first, or should I?”

I grin. “I got a nice, big shower, baby. Why don’t we share?”

She flushes and rakes her gaze down my bare chest to where the comforter tents at my lap. “Is it later?”

“It damn well could be.” I slide out of bed and hold out my hand for her.

She wraps the comforter around herself and holds it with one hand, then takes mine with her other and stands.

“Toga party?” I ask.

She giggles self-consciously. “It’s just...very naked, is all.”

“Oh, I intend to have you very naked very often.” I grab her around the waist and sling her over my shoulder easily.

She yelps and loses her grip on the comforter, which makes it real easy to tug away before we even reach the bathroom. She squirms, her skin on mine, and my cock aches

already. I close the door between us and the sheet, and lean against the towels as I turn on the shower.

Bella inhales slowly, drops both of her arms to her sides, and marches into the shower.

“It’s huge in here!” she calls out to me.

“Enough space for a little fun.” I slip in behind her, and the rain shower pounds down on my shoulders, warm for once. “Let’s get cleaned up before we get dirty.”

I grab my washcloth and bar of soap and work it into a lather while she watches me with her bottom lip caught between her teeth. Her chest rises and falls rapidly, bouncing her small, pert breasts. I grin and push her slightly outside the stream.

“Wh—”

“Let me wash you.” I run the cloth over her shoulders, her spine, the curve of her tight little ass. She shivers, and a breath hisses out through her teeth. I drop to one knee and wash down her legs, then grab her hips and spin her. She wobbles through the turn, but her blue eyes are heated when she catches herself.

I grin and wash slowly back up. Over her knees, her thighs. I slide my fingertips into her pretty pink pussy, and she moans. I keep one hand there, teasing her clit in light circles while I wash the rest of her body, taking extra time on those sensitive little breasts of hers. Then, I release her and step back. She stares at me.

“All done.” I grin. “Rinse off, and then you can do me.”

Her gaze darts down to my cock, and she nods with wide eyes. It takes everything in me not to laugh at her excitement.

She doesn’t bother taking her time going back to front. In fact, I barely feel the washcloth on my chest before she has her hand wrapped around my cock. All my grand plans go out the window, and I jerk into her warm grip.

“Does that feel good?” she asks with wide eyes.

“Very,” I groan. “Do you want to use your hands or your mouth?”

“Mouth,” she says resolutely and drops to her knees in front of me.

I wind my fingers into her hair and try to control myself. If I want those plush lips around my cock I need to go slow.

“No teeth,” I hiss. “Only take what you can, use your hands for the rest. And I’ll tell you when I’m about to come.”

She nods and licks my tip with a strawberry-pink tongue. I clutch her hair. She smiles a little, then takes me in her mouth.

The warm, wet heat of her is overwhelming. Like everything else we’ve done so far, she’s clearly inexperienced, but she more than makes up for it with excitement. She only takes an inch, but she moves her tongue against me like I did against her last night, and I can already feel my orgasm starting to build. After wanting her for so long, having her is intoxicating.

“Like this.” I use my hand in her hair to show her how to bob up and down. “God, Beauty.”

She moves with me, still using her tongue on my underside, slowly getting faster and faster. I stop moving her and stroke my hand through her hair, and she moans around my cock. The vibrations drive me wild.

“So good,” I grunt. “Just like that.”

I thrust forward, and she gags a little, but she doesn’t back off, taking a little more each time and wrapping her hands around the rest. I’ve spent so long in this goddamn shower thinking about her, and now she’s mine, all mine.

She meets my gaze, her blue eyes watering just a little, and it’s too much.

“I’m gonna—”

Bella pulls back, but there’s not enough time for her to move. I shoot my load all over her face and chest.

She blinks up at me, and after a long moment, licks her lips.

Fuck, I really could do this forever.

CHAPTER 35



I yawn and drop into my chair at the breakfast table with a bowl of cereal. “Morning.”

“Good morning, Harley!” Bella chirps.

I rub my eyes. I love her but she’s always been a morning person, and I’ve always resented it. I spoon a bite of whatever sugary crap Pops bought at the store this week into my mouth.

“Got any plans for the day?” my father asks.

“No classes,” I say through a full mouth. “So suffering my imprisonment, I guess.”

I expect him to snap at me, but he just laughs. I swallow. Is Bella’s morning personality somehow contagious? Am I the only sane one left in this house?

“Alex mentioned taking care of the guys from last night.” I shrug. “Figured I might go see if that’s lame. Wanna tag along, Bell?”

She bites her lip and glances at the plate of toast in front of her. “Probably. Do you know when?”

“When the sun stops hurting my eyes.” I stand and trudge into the kitchen for a mug of coffee, but when I reach it, the coffeemaker’s still brewing.

That’s weird. Pops hates mornings almost as bad as I do, but emphasis on the almost. He’s always up well enough ahead of me to make coffee at least.

I lean out the kitchen door. “Something up with the machine?”

“Hm?” Pops turns to look at me.

“Coffee’s running late.” I jerk my thumb at the bubbling machine. “Wanted to know why.”

“Oh.” He stares past me for a moment, then smiles an almost ridiculously wide smile. “Well, I guess I woke up a little closer to your time than usual.”

I shrug and turn back. I didn’t see him go to bed last night, but I barely saw me go to bed. Half the MC stayed over, just waiting for any kind of update on the condition of the hit. Stitches seemed pretty confident none of them were going to die, but a night’s vigil seemed appropriate. I spent the whole time with Alex, just reminding her Thor would be okay, but nobody’s energy got much higher than that.

There’s a brief burst of conversation from the table behind me, but I can’t make out a word. Bella giggles, high and feminine.

The coffee machine finishes its dark work, and I pour myself a steaming hot mug with nothing to cut it. I’m glad Bella’s starting to settle in. Since Alex has been gone, it’s a little lonely around the compound, and having both of them means I might actually survive a summer of confinement.

I walk back into the dining room in time to see Bella tuck her hand back into her lap and collapse into my seat as I take a big swig. The coffee burns down my throat, but I need the caffeine. A little of my haze clears as I take another sip.

Pops raises an eyebrow at me, that same goofy smile on his face. “Didn’t get me a cup?”

“Did your legs fall off?” I put the mug down and sink back into my cereal.

“Can I try some?” Bella asks quietly. “I’ve never had coffee before.”

“Oh, anytime, but you don’t want Harley’s and my brew.” Pops chuckles. “We drink tar. I’ll finish off the pot and make

you something a little lighter.”

He heads into the kitchen, and I glance up at Bella. She’s smiling to herself as she nibbles on her toast, glancing into the kitchen every now and again like she’s curious just what Pops is up to.

It’s a little weird. I know Pops has taken charge of making sure the compound and the guys all seem welcoming, but he hasn’t done anything extra around the house. And anyway, I started drinking his tar because he said I could drink it or make my own when I first got hooked in high school.

But it’s hard to be mad. It’s not like Bella had a lot of folks being kind to her growing up. I get why he’d go above and beyond.

After a few minutes, he steps back in with two steaming mugs, the heavy-duty black one he favors and a purple one that must’ve been stuffed up on one of the top shelves because I don’t remember it. I don’t know why he wouldn’t have given Bella one of our regular mugs, but maybe he thought she liked it.

“Let me know what you think.” He sets the purple mug in front of her. “We have sugar somewhere, and I’m pretty sure the milk’s good.”

“Thank you.” She smiles up at him as she grabs the mug.

I don’t know if I’ve ever seen her this smiley. Maybe all she needed was to get out from under her dad’s crapass thumb.

I take another bite of cereal as Bella takes one dainty sip of her mug and screws up her face. I can’t help it. I burst into laughter, spewing cereal all over the place. Pops laughs, too, but when I look at him to share the slapstick combo of Bella’s face and the mess I made, he’s only looking at her.

Weird.

Pops goes to get Bella some milk and sugar as I wipe up the cereal.

“Why do people drink this stuff?” she whispers. “It’s so... bitter.”

“I need it to survive.” I shake my head, drop the paper towels in the trash, and slug a little more of my tar. I’m finally starting to feel something like awake.

“Maybe it’s not worth trying, then.” She shakes her head.

“It’s always worth trying.” Pops reappears with the milk and sugar, and a bottle of chocolate syrup I forgot we still had from our sundae dinner last month. “Here, this might make it a little less bitter.”

Bella pats his arms as he sets down his offering. “Thank you, John.”

He smiles at her instead of tearing her head off, and all the pieces fall into horrible, horrible place.

Pops fucked Bella.

They’re both happier than I’ve seen them in a long, long time on the day after a massive hit by Bella’s dad, of all people. They’re circling each other like they’re the only two at the breakfast table. She called him fucking John, a name he doesn’t even tell most people, much less let them use.

He had to have seduced her. Bella barely survived having me help her get changed, and the only man’s hand she’s so much as held is her dad’s. She wouldn’t pursue my pops. She wouldn’t have a damn clue how to even if she wanted to. My stomach flips, cereal and coffee blending into an awful sludge, and I shove my chair back from the table.

They both look at me.

“I’m all done.” I stand. “Pops, can I talk to you?”

“Uh, sure, Harley.” He glances at Bella, and that does not help my nausea. “Now?”

I scowl at him. “Now.”

He stands up and leads me into his smaller office in the house. “What’s up?”

I slam the door behind me. “What’s up? I told you my best friend was in fucking trouble, that she needed to escape a

dangerous situation, and you seem to have heard that I was inviting you on a goddamn sex retreat!”

He pales and sits in the chair behind his desk. “I know what this looks like, but—”

“But?” I screech. The nausea threatens to overwhelm me, but my anger tamps it out. “There is no fucking ‘but’ here. She couldn’t be more vulnerable if she tried, and you are taking fucking advantage of her, Pops!”

He sighs. “Bella and I discussed—”

“Discussed.” I spit the word to get it out of my mouth faster. “Have you even thought about the fucking power dynamics here? You saved her life. You’re giving her a place to live. She’s spent her whole life being scared of the man who did that for her before.”

He throws his hands up. “Harley, if you would just *listen*—”

“This isn’t a listening situation, Pops.” I shake my head. “God, I spent all these fucking years scared to introduce to the two of you. I never thought I had to be scared of you going behind my back to fuck my best friend.”

I fling the door open to storm out, and Bella’s right there. She looks at me with those puppy-dog eyes of hers, begging me to listen to my pops, to her, to imagine there’s a way whatever happened between them happened without being totally fucked, and that scares me worse than anything else. I’ll get her wherever she needs to go later, but right now, I just need distance between myself and my pops before I use all that fucking self-defense training to blacken his goddamn eye.

I stalk past her and up the stairs. Just another reason not to be a fucking morning person.

CHAPTER 36



Belle

Harley's words shake the house and ring in my ears. Behind her back, she said. Couldn't be more vulnerable, she said.

After she storms past me, I lean against the wall outside his office for a long time. This hall, like so many of the halls in his house, is painted a soft gray, a masculine neutral unlike the colors my mama picked out for the house she and Daddy were supposed to share for the rest of their lives. I run my fingers over it and wait.

Alex warned me. She said men have certain expectations. But when the time came, when I stood in front of him, soaked to the bone once again and shaking, John kept saying we could stop. I kept saying no. I know only sluts have sex before marriage, but I thought Harley didn't believe in all that.

Tears well in my eyes. She saved my life. I told her to leave, and she saved my life anyway, and now she thinks I'm a slut. I could see it in the way she glared at me before she stormed upstairs.

Finally, John opens the door to his office. For the first time since I woke up in his arms, he looks drawn. Dark bags droop under his eyes, and a frown pulls on his lips. My heart sinks. Harley was right.

I did something very, very bad.

John stops short when he sees me and forces a tired smile onto his face. "Beauty. I take it you heard all that?"

I bite my lip. “Harley’s got a way of making herself heard.”

That sinking feeling in my stomach doesn’t abate when he only chuckles and opens the door a bit wider. I should’ve left. I should’ve said no. It doesn’t matter that I didn’t know a body could feel as good as mine did before last night, before this morning.

John sees me hesitate and grabs my hand. “Please, come sit.”

He tugs on me only once, his hold loose, but I can’t resist him. I trot obediently into his office, and he closes the door behind us. I expect him to take the big chair behind his desk, but instead, he sits on a low leather couch against one warm brown wall.

I don’t sit with him.

“We’re doing something wrong, aren’t we?” I ask. I can’t keep the wobble out of my voice or the tears still threatening to fall.

No one’s ever made me feel like John has, but for Harley, I’ll do anything.

He scrubs a hand over his face. “A lotta people might see it like that.”

My stomach sinks worse than ever, through my feet into the floor of this house I’ve been calling home. I am sick. Just when I started thinking I might be the sort of girl who didn’t need all the punishments Daddy always insisted on, I go and make the biggest mistake of my life.

Memories force their way to the front of my mind. The warmth inside me. The explosion of light and love. The look on John’s face when he asked me to stay. None of that felt like a mistake when it was happening.

“Why?” I sink into the small chair in front of his desk, across from the couch.

When I dressed this morning, in giggly quiet in my room at the end of the hall, I’d chosen a long skirt in case John

wanted to touch me again. My legs rub against each other now, no tights to keep them apart, and I feel like a slut.

“Some people don’t like it when folks too far apart in age start spending time with each other,” he says.

I shake my head. “How far is too far?”

You’re nineteen, just like Harley, right?”

I nod.

He smiles that tired smile again. “I turned forty-three last month.”

Twenty-four years. Four times the gap between Mama and Daddy. But in all the things I was ever told not to do, nobody ever mentioned this one to me.

“What difference does that make?” I smooth my hands over my thighs and realize, like a knife twisting in my gut, that I’m trying to prove Harley wrong. Harley, who I trust in everything. I want her to be wrong this time because I’ve never been so happy as I was last night. I’ve been proud sometimes, even satisfied when I was living with Daddy, but I don’t think I was ever, ever happy.

John makes me happy.

When he frowns and turns his face toward the floor, it breaks my heart a little.

“That’s where Harley takes a lot of her issue, it seems.” He rubs a hand over the back of his neck. “Some people think, with that big of an age gap, the older one’s gotta be taking advantage of the younger.”

Taking advantage. I know that term. Daddy used it often enough.

“But I said yes!” Tears drop silently down my cheeks. Last night was beautiful. I don’t want anybody ever calling it taking advantage.

John reaches out and takes my other hand, then presses kisses against my knuckles. His stubble scrapes my skin, and the warmth rekindles.

“It’s more complicated than that, Beauty.” He sighs. “There’s lots of ways to make people say yes, even make them think it’s their idea. Harley’s worried that because you’re living here, because I’ve been helping you out so much, there’s no way for you to say no.”

I start to protest again, but John shakes his head.

“You know how you told me you ought to go back home?” he asks quietly.

“Of course.” I frown. “I want everyone safe.”

“I don’t mean last night.” He smiles, and it’s softer this time. “When you first arrived here. You told me you’d been selfish for leaving, and you ought to go right back.”

With a start, I realize I don’t want to go home and face my punishment anymore. I will go, for John and Harley and their men, but it scares me bone-deep.

Why did I ever think I ought to go?

John seems to be able to read my thoughts. “Exactly like that. Your daddy convinced you that you deserved it. Harley thinks I did the same.”

I slump against the back of my chair, and my hands slip out of his. I didn’t even notice when Daddy convinced me of something. What else did he make me believe?

Could Harley be right?

“And then there’s the fact of Harley just being plain old hurt.” John sits back against the couch across from me. “It’s tricky when you’re friends with someone and they start liking your family in ways you don’t expect.”

The word *hurt* echoes in my ears. Just like Alex said. I forgot that I wasn’t just protecting me. I forgot I was protecting Harley, that I owed her for years of taking care of me.

Those tears well back up, and I have to blink hard to keep them from spilling. John is right. Harley’s right. I can find other ways to be happy somehow. Someday. I owe it to both of them not to hurt them.

I stand. “Thank you for explaining all this to me. It seems”—I suck in a deep breath—” seems I’ve made a few mistakes, and I hope you’ll forgive me for them. I’m still learning all the rules here.”

I don’t look at John. I can’t. I don’t want to see the expression on his face, the face I’ve watched blossom with the same happiness I felt inside of me, the face that’s seen me in more ways than I ever thought anyone but my husband would. Instead, I just smooth down my skirt and turn to go tell Harley I was wrong.

I don’t make it two steps before John’s warm arm wraps around my waist. He pulls me to his chest. I can feel him against my back, hard muscle I know the feeling of without clothes between us now, and despite all my resolution, all my certainty, I can’t bring myself to pull away.

He bends to whispers in my ear, “I’ve never felt with anyone like I have with you.”

I swallow and nod. The tears in my eyes fight to spill.

“I don’t want to lose you, Beauty.” His grip on my waist tightens, keeping me close.

It doesn’t feel like a restraint, though, holding me back from something I want to do. It feels more like a seatbelt, keeping me right where I ought to be.

Keeping me safe.

“But what about everything you just said?” I ask. My voice sounds pitiful to my own ears. Even with all the evidence, I still want Harley to be wrong. I really am selfish, just like my daddy said.

He spins me to face him. For the first time since I heard Harley yell, I look up into his face. He still has a bit of that tiredness, but his soft smile looks earnest, serious, and determination burns in the pits of his eyes.

He looks like a man I want to believe. A man I want to trust with everything I am because I can be certain he won’t ever do a thing wrong with it. I put myself in my daddy’s

hands because that's what I thought I ought to do. I shouldn't give anything more to John, but I want to anyway.

"I don't care about that." He laughs a little. "I don't think I could let you go if I wanted to."

I fit perfectly against his body. My curves mold into his muscles, and when I reach up on tiptoes to wrap my arms around his neck, it feels like I've been doing this my whole life already. Like he was made for me.

"What about Harley?" I can't help asking. "I don't want to hurt her."

"Harley..." John shakes his head. "She's startled. She ain't seen us together. She doesn't know how we are. Once she sees it, she'll come around."

I've never seen Harley hurt like that before. She's never glared at me with that kind of fire in her eyes. But against his body, I want so badly to believe him.

"I don't know how to let you go, either, John," I murmur.

He makes a low sound in his throat, and I reach up to press my lips to his. The warmth burns, but for the first time, this doesn't feel like the sort of kiss meant to feed it. There's something soft in the crush of our lips. He moves slow against me, and I want to move slow against him. The warmth is there, but it's only warming me. I kiss John like we have all the time in the world for the warmth and everything that lies outside.

I kiss him like it's the beginning of something. Maybe the beginning of everything.

CHAPTER 37



Beast

Bella leaves my office not too long after, saying she's going to go talk to Alex and see if she has any advice on Harley. I think about warning her not to, but I've known Alex since she was knee-high. She's not a gossip, and she's certainly not going to go telling my right hand when things are this tense. Instead, I just nod and gear up for church. There's a lightness in my step as I head across the compound. I wish Harley hadn't figured it out when she did—I was already working on plans to break the news a bit more gently—but once she comes around, there's nothing stopping me from telling the rest of the Kings. Everybody'll fall in line once they know Harley's on board.

I need the lightness, the memory of Bella moaning underneath me as I introduce her to pleasure and admitting she cares for me as much I do her, to get through this meeting. Stitches sent a message over this morning that all the men Thor had with him are well enough to make it to the den, but only barely. That means our failure, our humiliation, in all our fucking faces. We've had too much bad news for too long, and I need a taste of something sweet to keep me from riding off guns blazing as soon as I take a headcount.

The noise of a full mass meets my ears as soon as I push open the doors to the clubhouse. Men in colors spill out of the doorway of the den, and they all fall silent in a wave as I enter, whispers echoing forward as I pick my way from our newer men toward the center of the room.

On the big couch in the middle sits Thor, with all the other men off to his left. Sin's on his right, but between the two of them, there's a seat big enough for me. I take the appointed seat, the glass of bourbon on the coffee table in front of it, and allow myself a moment to look over my right hand before calling everyone to session.

A patch of bulky gauze covers his eye, taped in place enough that I can see it gumming up his hair. A thick, black brace covers his knee, and another slings his arm in place. A single crutch sits on the couch next to him. He looks at me with one gray eye, the white of which has turned as red as Beauty's when she first showed up at the compound, and his neck is damn near black with bruising.

Stitches says every single one of those will require some type of surgery over the next few weeks. He only managed to get the knee guy in last night, and as long as he rests more often than not, Thor will be able to get around for the most part. Even through the lightness, a fury starts to build in my veins.

I grab my drink and hoist it high. "To those who came home hurt. Not the battle, but the war!"

My men, with drinks and without, with fear and anger in their eyes in equal measure, chorus loud enough to shake the rafters, "Not the battle, but the war!"

"Tell me what happened." I sip my drink, letting my anger simmer for now.

Sin glances down the line of injured men, then stands. "Sheriff Grimes—"

Everyone boos and hisses.

"He ain't worth a title," someone hollers. "Call him the pig he is!"

"Bella's pig daddy," Sin corrects, "has teamed up with Houston police to get her back. We've got a clock on us to turn her over, or it's open season on the streets."

"Fuck him!" someone yells.

“She’s under our protection,” someone else replies.

“Send him a message,” I holler. “Kings don’t give up their own.”

The whole room cheers and stomps their feet, at least, the ones who can.

Storm stands a little unevenly. “We got lured out by Bella’s pig daddy with a lead on Las Rosas.”

“So we’re damn near certain that’s two heads of one beast,” Sin finishes.

My rage builds. It makes fucking sense trash like Eric Grimes would be the one to get trash like Las Rosas situated. They’ve got the same sense of loyalty. We still have to fight a war on two fronts, but at least they’re fighting for the same goddamn aim.

“It’s black alert now,” Sin calls over chaos. “All hands on deck here, except the hunters we can’t spare, and we’ll warn ‘em.”

I make eye contact with Storm, and he nods. Stitches diagnosed him with a concussion and a few broken ribs, as well as some real bad shake-up, but he’s set to ride, so he’ll be organizing the hunt. If I know him, he’ll keep it off the city streets as best he can.

“I’m real damn sorry, Prez,” one of the enforcers who got rocked, Bear, leans off the couch to say. “We should’ve had them.”

My anger bursts into living flame, and I not only stand but climb onto the table in front of me.

“Next man who apologizes to me gets a backhand for his trouble!” I roar. “We are up against an enemy the likes of which we ain’t been up against for a long goddamn time. They’ve got money. They’ve got weapons. They’ve got institutional support. But do you want to know what we’ve got?”

“What?” my men holler back at me.

“We’ve got the men in this goddamn room!” I hoist my glass into the air. “We’ve got the trust that every one of us would go to the dirt for every other one, and the balls to fight until the fight is fucking done. We don’t turn. We don’t run. And we don’t leave anyone behind!”

Everyone raises their glasses and hollers. Some call out about revenge, others about how they would’ve done the same if the pigs found them, and still others about the Ruthless Kings themselves. I let the energy flow into me, angry and passionate and filled with the certainty that we are going to trounce this enemy like we’ve trounced the rest.

I sit back down and turn to Thor. He’s fought at my side for a decade. At the very first meeting like this, when we knew we had to put our lives in the others’ hands and we didn’t have nearly as many men to fall back on, we made a promise. If I die, he takes care of Harley like he would Alex. If he dies, I do the same for Alex.

Every time we’ve had a church like this since then, a war church where we know men will die at the end, one of us has looked at the other and we’ve exchanged our daughters’ names.

“Harley,” I say automatically.

Thor grimaces and nods. It rushes back to me that he can’t speak, that some trumped up jock saw fit to crush his goddamn windpipe and all that motivated rage, the passionate anger I was going to use to lead my men to victory like I always have before, turns dark and bitter.

This isn’t just a war. This isn’t just a battle. Las Rosas are a thorn in our side, a nuisance we had to get rid of. They took out our runners, and I don’t take that lightly, but the sheriff has overstepped. He’s made it fucking personal. He took Thor’s voice. Thor might not use it often, but he uses it when it matters, and it matters right fucking now.

I put a hand on his undamaged shoulder and lean in so he can hear every word above the clamor.

“Harley. Alex.” I grit my teeth. “I am going to ruin Eric Grimes. I am going to take him apart piece by piece until his nearest and dearest can’t recognize him anymore. I am going to wipe him from the face of the earth until there is no record of what he’s done.”

Thor merely nods, and a shadow of his former determination flickers in the one of his steely gray eyes I can see. My anger turns into an thunderous thing. I clamp down on his shoulder, and as I look at him, as I stare at the black and blue on his neck that becomes Bella’s neck, too.

Whoever said it was right. Eric Grimes doesn’t deserve a title. He doesn’t deserve a name. He is the lowest sort of man. He fights any opponent who stands half a chance against him by proxy, through pig lawmen without an ounce of respect for anything they stand for, and he fights girls, his own daughter, with his goddamn fists. He chokes the life out of her so bad she actually gets scared after years of conditioning.

I cannot share this city with a man like Eric Grimes. I don’t know if I can share this goddamn planet.

Beauty in the rain, leaving to keep us safe.

Thor, not able to say his daughter’s name back to me.

I push off of Thor and set down my drink. There’s one way to settle a problem like this. My men will fight the war in the streets against the pigs and the cartel and whoever else they fucking send against us, but I need to take the head off the snake right fucking now. Consequences be damned.

There’s a shotgun bolted to the side of my Low Rider ST. There are shells in a pouch in my office behind the war room. I don’t even have to go back to my house to make a paste out of Grimes’s head. Thor will thank me. Bella will thank me. The whole goddamn MC will thank me.

“What next, Prez?” Patches looks at me as I stand looking at that round-ass face. A kid’s face.

The face of a kid just like Harley, who fleeced him at pool a few nights back. Just like Bella, who smiled as I let her go.

If I ride off now, in broad goddamn daylight, best case is I make it to the sheriff's station before I get gunned down. Worst case...there's more of them than I can count.

I take a deep breath. "Now, we figure out how to get our revenge."

Next to me, Thor grabs a pad of paper and scribbles out a message before holding it up.

At least I can ride shotgun it reads.

The tension breaks a little as the men laugh. I sit back down, but I can feel that hungry rage rise inside of me.

Once church is dismissed, I head into my office. I pull the sack of shotgun shells out of a desk drawer with a false bottom and set them in front of me. I could go now. No one would stop me.

I grit my teeth and force myself to place a call. It's been a long goddamn time since I needed advice, but there's still only one man I go to.

Reaper picks up on the second ring. "Beast."

His voice rasps over the phone line with his smoker's edge, and some of the tension goes out of my shoulders. He'll shoot straight with me. I can rely on him.

"I've got a situation." I breathe out a long sigh. "I'm in need of an ear."

"Shoot." I can picture him on the other end, leaning back from Road King's block with grease on his hands.

"We've got a hell of an enemy, but we know where the head of the snake is." I clench my fists. "I know. And he made it personal. Messed up my VP, my...old lady."

The term rolls awkwardly off my tongue, but it feels right. I can't imagine wanting anything for Bella other than for her to stay by my side.

Reaper whistles.

“I want to take him out,” I spit. “Clean up the mess, let them know who they’re fucking with.”

“You wouldn’t have called me if that were a bright idea,” Reaper says.

I growl as that thunderous rage starts to overtake again. “It fucking could be. I could be in and out of the station before his fucking brains dried on the wall.”

“Station,” Reaper repeats. “You want to take out a cop by yourself in the station.”

“The sheriff,” I spit, feeling like a new recruit all over again.

“Jackass,” Reaper replies.

“You’re not—” I holler into the phone.

“You know I’m listening.” Reaper snorts. “You want to die in a blaze of glory because it’s easier than keeping a fucking handle on yourself. Feels fucking righteous. That makes you a jackass.”

I clench my fists so hard my nails draw blood from my palms. “I don’t want to die.”

Reaper sighs. “You’re Prez now, Beast. You go, you die. If you’re lucky, no one else dies with you. If you’re unlucky, a bunch of punk kids who might’ve grown up to lead their own MCs die with you, or after you, because they think blaze-of-glory crap is acceptable.”

I blow out a long breath and think of Patches again. Of Harley and Bella and Mac and Buzz and Rubble. I unclench my fists.

“How’s Doll?”

CHAPTER 38



I wing dart after dart at the board on the back of my door, gathering them up and going again and again just to hear something hit something else. Pops fucked Bella. He didn't even have the decency to deny it, to let me hope for a fucking second that I might've been wrong. No, cool as a cucumber, he asked me to *listen*. Fucking listen, like there might be a way in this world he had sex with my best friend without it being the worst, most disgusting thing I could imagine.

I fling another dart, and it bounces off the knob to lodge in the carpet.

“Fuck!” I scream and throw myself back onto my bed.

Had sex with Bella. He had sex with her. Bella, who didn't want to hear when I kissed a guy too much. Bella, who never took a date anywhere unless her dad picked him out, and those good boys wouldn't dare touch her above the wrist. My best friend Bella.

I fucking knew introducing them would end in death. I just thought it wouldn't come from me killing my fucking pops.

That's it. I stand and pace the room. The last dart I threw crunches underfoot, and I hiss out another swear as the tip draws fresh blood out of my skin. Fucking dart. Fucking Pops.

He gave up the protection detail once Bella and Alex were both here, once he realized I had enough keeping me here that I didn't feel any kind of need to sneak out. My two best friends in the world were right where he wanted me.

Fuck, when I say it like that, it sounds like a fucking scheme. Setting me and Bella both up to take advantage of us. Bella's naiveté. My worry for her. Both trapped on this stupid fucking compound, pinned in on every side by Pops's fucking men and Pops's fucking war. If it hadn't been for Thor and the others coming back last night, I might think he'd set up the whole goddamn thing just to get what he wanted.

Fear and hurt and anger and hate course through my veins in an intoxicating brew.

I need space. I need fresh air. I need to tear something up just to feel it rip.

Didn't take long to get a new magnet, but I hid it better this time. I swing off my bed and land on the floor, then reach under and feel around the leg until my fingers touch the cool metal of the screw-plate holding the leg in place. *Bingo*. I pull out a magnet the size and shape of the top of a cap screw, but it says my university's name on the top in blue ink.

They were just giving these out on campus a few days back. Under my bed, it just looks like they threw another screw on the plate. As long as I remember to put it back, no one's finding this as long as I live.

I dress quickly. Jeans. T-shirt. A bit of leather to keep me safe. Pops has his meeting at the clubhouse, and I'd be shocked to my bones if Bella came seeking me out. She runs from conflicts worse than anything I've ever seen.

I'm coming back for her, of course. I'm not going to let anyone take advantage of her, even my pops. But I need to get my head on right first.

With the magnet in place, the window slides up smoothly. Pops confiscated my gate card, too, after the last stunt, but that's just the easiest way to get off the compound. There's a bit of the fence that pulls up from the dirt it's buried in if you know exactly where to look, and if you pull out the stake Alex and I spent a whole afternoon painting the exact color of Texas scrub grass one afternoon.

I pop the window back in place and shimmy down the trellis. With the rain last night, dust doesn't even kick up around my feet when I land. I peek around the edge of the house, toward the clubhouse and the garage.

Bikes spill out of the open garage door, and a cheer goes up from inside. Right. This was his all-hands on deck church to deal with the attack on Thor last night.

I haven't checked on Alex yet. She was like a ghost last night, even after Stitches said her pops would be okay. The only words I got out of her the whole night were "I told him." I know she's even more worried about her pops than I am, but I've never seen her so shaken.

She flinched when they told the men in the den that the cops had declared open season on MC members.

I stare at the clubhouse for a long moment, and everything my pops did fades to the back of my mind. Alex is my sister. I should be with her right now. And if it was dangerous with a fucking cartel looking to roll MC heads, it's probably even worse now.

In my mind, I hear Bella giggle as my pops stares at her, see her waiting outside his office like she was next in line to talk to him. That nausea burbles back up, and I turn away. The hole is in the other direction anyway.

Church lets out as I creep around the edge of the back shed, and men flood the yard. I freeze, but they take up patrol positions without any sign of having seen me.

"Shit," I whisper. Patrols inside the gates means black alert, everyone they can spare at the compound full time. Inside the clubhouse, there'll be a bunch of leather-clad men trying to figure out fitted sheets for the cots.

I cover a smile. I like to watch that, when I can. It's the only thing that makes black alerts any fun. But if I head back to the clubhouse now, Pops will be there.

Anger roils through me. I don't want to see him.

I time out the patrols slowly and grab the slingshot I tucked into a hole in the wall here. A clump of grass and mud,

and I'm ready. Pops knows there's a bit of pulled-up fence, so he keeps a camera on it at all times. He'll know what I've done as soon as he discovers the picture is shifted, but this part of the fence butts up against someone's property so it will be a while before they realize the angle's off.

I take aim and fire. With a soft *thud*, the camera spins a bit off its angle, giving me a sliver to slip through where I won't be seen. In the next gap, I slip from the back shed to the hole in the fence. A quick brush over the grass reveals the location of the stake, and I pull it up.

I can't help glancing over my shoulder one last time. The next patrol will round the corner soon, I know it, but knowing that only makes what I'm doing feel more dangerous.

My heart thuds in my chest. I swallow. Pops deserves to be scared like this.

I wriggle under the fence, replace the stake, and I'm gone.

Out this way, there's only a crapass bike, a little café racer I picked up on a whim in high school, but it'll put some wind in my hair. I walk down the brightly lit, quiet streets. It's always so quiet out here, no matter what's going on at the clubhouse, like stepping into a different world.

Pops slept with Bella. Pops slept with Bella. Pops slept with Bella.

I slam my fist into the trunk of a nearby tree just to break the silence. My knuckles sting as they scrape against the bark, and I shake my hands out. I got a half mile walk to the bike. The stinging better keep my mind occupied until then, or I'm going to throw up on these people's nice lawns.

Finally, I unlock the sky-blue piece of shit and climb on board. Just feeling it between my thighs calms me a hair, but I still kick it up as fast as I can. The rumble of an engine, even a shitty little one like this, blocks out my thoughts.

I tear away from the curb, away from Houston, away from everything. Every time I see another human being, I make the nearest turn away from them. I race down unmarked roads, dirt and gravel and tarmac blending together under my wheels.

I speed faster, faster, faster, until there's no choice but to wreck or become one with the bike. Wind tears at my hair, yanking it away from my scalp. I scream, a long, wordless sound that chases some of the fury away. I can hardly hear it over the engine, and that makes it taste even better. When I stop screaming, I laugh until my cheeks hurt.

Minutes or hours pass, but eventually I pull to the side of a road. I don't quite know where I am, and Pops will be looking for me before too long.

The nausea makes something of a reappearance, but I'm not as furious as I was before. Pops is a lot of things, most of them things cagers wouldn't like very much, but he's never been a cradle robber. I barely saw him with women, but the ones I did were all just about his age. And he seemed truly upset when he first found out about Bella, it shook him down to his core. I know my pops well enough to know when an emotion's real. He wasn't planning anything.

I owe him the benefit of the doubt. He's not the kind of man who would take advantage of any woman. It just hurts that it had to be Bella.

A car sails past me on the road, and I duck my head nervously. When it passes, I glance after it. Just a minivan. Could be any soccer mom, or an off-duty pig.

Coming out here was stupid. I've been keeping up my self-defense training, with Alex or by myself, since that first sparring session, but even at my best, I'm no match for someone who could do that to Thor. Maybe I also owe Pops fessing up for this stunt.

I pull out my phone. One percent battery.

"Motherfucker." Not enough for a call. I fumble open the GPS, and the map only loads enough for me to see a star not too far away. The Deadman's Hand.

I groan. Pops will kick my ass if he finds out I'm gone, but it's either call from the Deadman or ride back and hope no one noticed. At least this way, I might get out in front of it.

The engine rumbles back to life underneath me, and I head in the direction I remember the star being. Luckily, it doesn't take that long until I see the winding drive of the Deadman, set a bit back from the road.

After the compound, the bar was Pops's first purchase. He said there's no point in running an MC if they don't have somewhere other than the house to make a mess. I'm grateful to see a sparsely packed lot, because most nights, the Deadman is wall-to-wall with Ruthless Kings that'd love to get an in with my pops. There's no point in turning yourself in if someone beats you to it.

I park, leave my helmet on my handlebars, and head inside. The wood creaks under my feet, bent with age and beer-stained. It's just as empty inside as I expected. One man sits at the bar. A woman sits in a man's lap at a table off to the side. A lanky, black-haired guy covered in ink and piercings wipes down the bar while shooting looks at the couple. I walk up to the bar.

"I ain't seen you around here before." I lean against the polished wood. "My name's Harley, and I need to call my pops."

CHAPTER 39



Sometimes in life, you can just tell the angels are looking out for you. Sheriff Grimes has been breathing down my neck for something more since I gave him the news about Bella, and just today, my grandma found a dead dog on our front porch. I'm not an idiot. I know that means if I don't come up soon, Gram's going to be the first to go.

Which is why, when Beast's daughter marches in and fucking introduces herself, I know it's a gift from the goddamn angels.

The way I hear the men talk in here, I just know Harley's uppity. She plays games with the rest of the guys around the clubhouse, sasses her dad in meetings. I just never knew she looked like this. Dark eyes, plush mouth, curly brown hair down to her ass—and what an ass it is. In her leather jacket and jeans, she's got curves some of the women in magazines must be wishing they had. Just the sort of girl who'd get it in her head that she was better than everybody else, just because of who her father is.

She needs to be taught a lesson, and the angels are giving me a chance to do that while saving my grandma in the bargain.

I grin. “*The* Harley? Never thought I'd get to meet you.”

She rolls her eyes, and it takes everything in me not to grin even wider.

“What do you need Beast for?” I lean forward on the bar.

Harley blows out a long breath, kicking up a few strands of her loose, dark hair. “I gotta let him know where I’m at.”

“Dang.” I shake my head. “Bar phone went out an hour ago, and I trashed my cell so I’m using this busted old one.” I pull out my phone, the same one I’ve been using since high school. The screen is cracked all to shit, and only half of it lights up anymore, but it means I don’t have to encrypt anything. Nobody can use the bastard but me. “It don’t work right for anyone else.”

She snorts. “I can see that.” She puts her back to me—uppity, I knew it—and glances around the mostly empty bar. “What about a charger?”

“I can just call for you,” I offer.

“I’d really—” She looks at me, still holding up my phone, and sighs. “Yeah, sure, whatever. Tell him I’ll be home in fifteen.”

I fight down another grin, put my back to her, and dial the sheriff.

“I told you never to—” he blusters as soon as he picks up.

I ignore him. “Hello, sir. I’m calling on behalf of Harley.”

“Harley?” Sheriff Grimes replies. “Beast’s daughter?” His voice shivers down my spine. I’ve never heard a man sound quite as hungry as this before in my life.

“Yes, sir.” I nod. “Right here at the bar. Says she’ll be home in fifteen.”

“Scratch that.” I can hear him grinning on the other end. “Keep her there. Packed house?”

“No, sir.” With my back to her, I let myself smile.

“Good work, Kinkade.”

“Let me talk to him!” Harley grabs for the phone.

I end the call before she even brushes the case and smile apologetically when she stares at the dead screen. “Sorry, he’s pretty pissed.”

She groans and hands the phone back. “Yeah, I bet. What’d he say?”

“That he’ll come pick you up.” I shrug. “I said the bit about going home, but he didn’t seem to care.”

Harley drops onto a stool and pillows her head on her arms. After a long moment, she looks up at me through her curtain of hair.

“Doesn’t seem like I’m driving home.” She rolls her eyes. “Get me a beer?”

“Just this once.” I smile as I turn. “We could lose our license, you know.”

Twenty minutes later, Harley is still nursing her first beer and whining about the bullshit problems that make up her life when the door to the bar bursts open. Despite knowing it was coming, I jump. She jumps with me.

The few bikers inside scramble to their feet.

Outlined in the noonday sun stands Sheriff Grimes, uniformed and wide-legged. For a long moment, I think he’s just going to walk in, grab Harley by the hair, and drag her out again. I’d pay money to see that.

Instead, he steps in with a wide smile, and a handful of Mexican men step in behind him with their AKs already raised.

“Oh, shit,” I say. Sheriff didn’t say nothing about guns on the phone.

The bikers grab their guns, and the air fills with pops of light and the muffled, frantic *takka-takka* of silenced automatic gunshots. Harley yelps. Gram’s face flashes before my eyes.

I grab the uppity bitch by the armpits and drag her behind the bar. If she gets hit, all my luck goes up in a puff of smoke. I’ve been working with the sheriff long enough to know he’s not exactly the sort to give second chances.

She lands on the floor with a thud and stares at me with wide eyes. “What the hell is he doing here? Pops is gonna arrive any minute. We have to bounce.”

I suck on my lip ring to keep my eyes from rolling into the back of my head. I didn’t even know they made girls this stupid, and here I am, sheltering for my fucking life with one.

“Hello?” She waves her hand in my face. “Is there a back way out?”

I snatch her wrist out of the air just as a bullet wings over our heads and shatters a bottle of something. The clear liquid dribbles down the shelves, and I suck on my lip ring a little harder.

She yanks her wrist out of my grasp. “Fine, I get it. Quiet ‘til the firefight’s over. Christ.”

The air reeks of gunpowder. I haven’t been this close to a firing gun in a while, and I promised Gram I wouldn’t ever be again. She’s going to whoop me when I get home if I smell like it.

Finally, the gunshots quiet. Harley starts to stand, and I clap a hand on her shoulder to keep her down.

“You gotta work on your bedside manner,” she hisses.

In a few moments, we’ll know exactly who’ll be working on what kind of manners. There’s no way for them to know who summoned the sheriff here. Hell, I can sneak out the back and still call Beast, get him here fast enough Harley doesn’t even notice. No one’ll be the wiser. My grandma and I are good either way, and that’s all that really matters.

Maybe I’d be better off if the sheriff lost. and I could just sign up for this godforsaken MC proper.

Before I’m even finished having the thought, Sheriff Grimes leans over the bar. A spray of bright-red blood coats one of his cheeks, matting down a bit of his blond hair. Despite that, his blue eyes glow, and a wide smile stretches his face.

“So you’d be the Harley I’ve been hearing so much about.” He extends a hand over the bar. “Sheriff Grimes. Nice to finally meet you.”

Harley looks at his hand, then at me. My fate is sealed, and so is hers.

I grin.

Realization dawns on her face. She moves faster than I would’ve anticipated. Like a snake, she knocks the sheriff’s hand away, then crashes her fist into my jaw. Something pops, and pain bursts in my vision. I topple back, and for a moment, she is scrambling over me. My half-stunned body becomes intimately acquainted with all the ways a body like Harley’s can wiggle when its owner isn’t thinking too much about how she looks. I try to muster my arms to grab her.

Instead, the moment ends when Sheriff Grimes grabs Harley by the hair and lifts her off me. She stops struggling and lets him stand her up. I miss her warmth for a brief moment, but I should’ve known a bitch like Harley wouldn’t go that easy.

As soon as she’s standing all the way up, she turns and spits right in the sheriff’s face. He backhands her without hesitation, and I watch the bruise bloom on her face, a little darker where the sheriff wears his wedding ring.

There’s a high, feminine scream from a mouth other than Harley’s

I scramble to my feet. The place is a bloodbath. One cartel guy—there’s five now, somehow—nurses a wing shot by himself. The biker who was at the bar lies crumpled on the floor with a stool on top of him, unbroken, like he just knocked it over when he fell. The one in the corner is sprawled on top of the club slut who was with him, still in the booth. Both the MC men are riddled with holes. The scream came from the club slut, still alive under the corpse of the King, as one of the cartel thugs approaches her with a knife. She squirms to get away, but the biker is too heavy. The thug approaching her, grabs her hair, pulls her head back, and drags

the knife across her throat with another spray of bright red and a gurgle.

Harley flinches, but it's hard to tell what she's flinching about. I position myself behind her, trapping her in case she makes another run for it.

“Should've known a bike rat like you would have manners I wouldn't teach to a dog.” Sheriff Grimes wipes the spit off his face and flicks it back at Harley with a sneer. “I think it's time you and I got to know each other.”

“I think I'll dance on your grave before you know shit about me,” she hisses.

The sheriff sighs. “In the name of my sainted mother, I hope you haven't been teaching my Bella that kind of language.”

“Your Bella?” Harley laughs. “She—”

A look crosses the sheriff's face, a look I recognize all too well. Harley's officially become more trouble to play with than she is to eat.

He yanks her over the bar itself by her hair, and despite all her bravado, she screams as she clatters over a stool and lands on the floor with a thud.

I grin. Her composure had to crack some fucking time. I open the bar hatch and step through to watch her squirm. She tears at his hand in her hair, drawing bright red lines on his skin.

“We'll work on your attitude”—he drags her across the floor— “once we get somewhere a little quieter.”

I glance at the cartel men. Working with the sheriff is one thing, but the cartel is another entirely. I haven't told Gram about them yet. I know she'll say we should leave Houston, and I think we still might have to unless I can convince that knife-wielding fuck to cut me up a little, but she'll be all kinds of torn up if we have to move. She's lived here her whole life, and I'm not going to move her if I can help it.

While I watch, despite the bullet holes spilling gallons of each man's blood onto the floor, the knife-wielding one slits each Ruthless King throat and dips his fingers in the blood. On one of the wooden walls, he writes in big, red letters, "*Tenemos su hija.*"

"Quit your fucking graffiti," the sheriff snaps. "I want her loaded up."

The cartel member glares at him for a long moment, and suddenly, I'm not quite sure which one of them is in charge.

"Warehouse," Sheriff Grimes spits. "Before her father does us all the disservice of ruining our nice display."

The man nods and says something to his buddies. Even the one with the arm wound stands, and they troop outside. The sheriff drags Harley across the gravel lot to a black SUV, and I trail out after them because I don't want to be left alone in there with the bodies unless I have to.

The SUV looks like cartel transport to me, but when he opens the door, inside I can see one of those lights police officers can slap on the top of any old car to chase you down with.

I breathe a sigh of relief. Above all else, the sheriff is still working with the law. I've got some kind of protection.

"The warehouse." Sheriff Grimes looks at the one who wrote the message on the wall. "Send word ahead."

Then, he looks at me, and my stomach sinks. It's not Beast I should be afraid of.

CHAPTER 40



I rattle the metal cuffs keeping me attached to the chair bolted to the concrete floor again and feel them bite into all the bruises I've already built up trying to get out of these fucking things. My jaw aches, one of my eyes is so swollen I can barely see out of it, and that's not even accounting for the scrapes from the gravel or the way my scalp is still screaming from being dragged. But Pops trained me well. I glare up at Bella's fucking dad with all the hate I can muster.

It's not hard. Even after the morning I had, there might be no man in the world I hate more than Eric fucking Grimes. I'd drag him across a gravel parking lot, shoot at him in a place he thinks he's safe. Abuse him for years upon years until all the people around him think he's nothing more than a victim they can take advantage of.

"All I want is to have a civilized conversation." Sheriff Grimes—Eric, Bella told me he hates being called—wipes my blood off his knuckle on a towel and sets it back down. "Why won't you let me do that?"

"Why would I, *Eric*?" I spit.

When he sneers, I glare past him. It's getting harder to think through the pain, but I know Pops is coming for me, and he's going to need everything I can get about their operation. That I'm in a warehouse wouldn't be hard to guess, even if Bella's dad hadn't said it nearly half a dozen times before we even left the Deadman. The walls and floors are all unpainted concrete, and the ceiling's some kind of corrugated metal.

Shelves stretching almost up to the ceiling are crowded with wooden crates, each bearing different stamps that I can't read from my position in the one empty corner, strapped to this fucking chair. The place reeks of chemicals and rot I don't want to think about, but under that, I can smell a little salt. I tried to pay attention in the car, too, but the motherfucker made me sit in the back, so with his blacked-out windows, all I know is it took us fifteen or twenty minutes to get here and there weren't too many sharp turns. Altogether, my best guess is that we're somewhere by the port, and I'd have guessed that by the word "warehouse" alone. My only hope is getting him to fuck up and admit something, and that's doubtful with all the Rosas standing around the rest of the warehouse.

He grabs my chin and tilts my head up to face him. I fight his gentle upward pressure, and when he presses harder, I tuck my chin and sink my teeth into the soft flesh between his thumb and forefinger.

Blood fills my mouth, and he leaps back.

"Mother—" He shakes his hand and stares at the tooth mark I left behind. "Do they breed you fucking feral?"

I spit his own blood at his feet, on his fucking shoes, and grin at him through what I hope are red-stained teeth. "Keep trying me. and you'll find out."

"I'm asking you a simple goddamn question, you beast." He shakes his head like I've disappointed him. Like I give half a shit what he thinks of me. "Where is Beast holding my daughter?"

His blood is rancid on my tongue. "Fuck you."

"If you insist on trying me, I will comply." He lands another flurry of punches on my face.

A tooth cracks, and I grimace. I hate dental surgery. But if Bella could bear this for years, I can handle it for the next few hours, until Pops breaks down the door with the whole MC in tow.

Bella is stronger than me. I've always known it, and now, as her dad cracks the third of my teeth, I feel it deep down in my bones. Pain sizzles as my head snaps toward the clock on the wall once more. Half an hour. The numbers are so huge it seems like they're just there to taunt me, remind me just how weak I am. Half an hour.

"Please stop." Tears flow freely down my cheeks. I am in nothing but pain. "Please."

A few more of the Rosas have gathered around to watch the show, more and more since fucking Eric cut the middle out of my shirt to make a bandage for his fucking knuckles and exposed my bra to their leering eyes.

He grabs me by the hair, my abused roots screaming, and yanks my head back. "Where is she, then?"

"The compound!" I gasp before I can stop myself. "The compound, just fucking stop, please."

Eric grins and releases my hair with a sickly smile.

"See? I knew you could be good for me." He pets my hair back into place like his touch could cause anything but pain. "There's a good girl under every beast like you if you know how to look."

"Now, how do we get in?" He strokes his thumb over my cheek.

My stomach churns. I may be scared, and I may be hurt, but I'm not handing over the keys to the kingdom. I owe Bella that. I owe Pops and everyone else there I love.

"Front fucking gates, I guess." I shrug.

Sheriff Grimes puts his hand out, and one of the cartel members slaps a knife into it. I can't contain my wince. But he just uses the tip to push the remains of my shirt off my shoulders. The blade scrapes against my skin, sharp enough to feel and light enough not to cut.

"We were just getting along so well." He frowns. "I thought you were finally learning your lesson."

Every expression of his makes me sick. The exaggerated concern, the false pleasure, it all comes together until I can't fathom how Houston would've trusted him.

"I'm getting out," I say. "I'm getting out, and I know good and well that the election's coming up. What do you think the mayor would have to say about this? What about the voting public?"

His gaze goes flat and cold, like I've finally stepped over some line he keeps in his evil little head. "That's not the sort of thing a girl who wants to be let go should be saying."

I don't know if I can read anymore. The clock numbers, big as they are, blur in my vision. I thought I was pain before. I didn't know just how much pain I could hold. All I know is, Pops isn't here. He was supposed to be here by now.

My head lolls as Eric steps back from another round.

"This is your last chance, Miss Harley." He peers at me over the fucking towel. "I want to have a civil conversation. You insisted on being uncivil." He sighs. "And I'm sorry to admit my friends here are more uncivil, yet. I'd like not to ask their help. Don't make me."

The Rosas laugh, and I feel suddenly like I've found myself in a river full of gators, all closing in on me.

"How do we get in?" he asks softly, a counterpoint to the tension surrounding him.

"I took out a camera," I whisper. "At the back. Fence is loose if you pull the stake. You gotta go one at a time, but they can't see you."

I don't mention the patrols. I need to leave my family what I can.

"That wasn't so hard." He smiles. "Maybe we can even get you dressed up like a real lady at the end of this."

I don't have the energy left to tell him to fuck himself.

“Last thing, babydoll, and then we’re done.” He steps closer and crouches to get into my eyeline. “Compound isn’t that specific. Where is she *exactly*?”

My house. The words bubble to my lips, and I clamp down on them. A fighting chance. They need a fighting chance.

He tilts my chin up, and I can’t resist. A bit of tooth rolls over my tongue. I muster everything I have left and spit it at his forehead.

The Rosas, a bigger crowd than I remember, laugh.

Eric stares at me with that same flatness and cocks a fist back without any indication of rage. There’s nothing warm in him like Pops. His anger is a cold, intractable thing.

That scares me more than anything else that’s happened in this warehouse. My brain whites out, and whatever animal instincts I have take over.

Pops isn’t here yet. A sick, dark voice within me says it’s because he’s too busy with Bella, because they’re in bed right now, laughing because they don’t even know I’m gone.

“Wherever Pops is,” I mumble. “Check the bedrooms first.”

Eric freezes. His grip on my chin becomes iron, becomes aching.

“Do you mean to tell me my daughter is fucking Beast?” His voice has that same cruel, chilled edge.

I bite my split, bruised lip between my teeth to keep from saying anything else. The pain clears my mind a little. I’ve signed everyone’s death warrants.

If he kills me for this refusal, I don’t know if I could mind.

Eric straightens. He trembles with barely controlled rage. I wait for the next hit, for the knife to reappear, for the gunshot to my brain. Instead, he looks at the Rosas behind him.

“I’ve done all I can with her,” he says flatly. “Just make sure there’s enough left to return to Beast.”

The ever-growing crowd of cartel members prowl forward. Through blurry eyes, I try to count them. Five...ten...I lose it. Too many to count, or too blurry. More than I could take in my best shape, on my feet. More than I thought there were in this whole goddamn warehouse.

Pops isn't here. He said he'd be here, that he'd always be here, always find me, and I am alone. That dark voice urges me to fall into the feeling. He failed me. He deserves it.

But Bella doesn't.

Once, some time in early high school, I asked her why she didn't tell her mom. I'd heard all the explanations about other kids and authority figures, but I never asked about her mom. She swallowed, set down her sandwich, and looked me dead in the eye.

"I don't know what she'd think if she found out," she said. "And I can take the punishments better than Mama."

I try to stare at Eric with the same certainty Bella looked at me with that day, the same strength. "My pops is gonna kill you."

Sheriff Grimes chuckles grimly. "Not if I kill him first."

CHAPTER 41



Beast

I stalk the floor behind my chair in the war room, running my hands through my hair again and again. Harley left. Harley left. Harley fucking left, just as those stupid bastards on the sheriff's payroll figured out we weren't going to do shit about their stupid fucking threat.

"Well?" I bark.

The whole room jumps. Seasoned MC men, veterans, everyone but Thor and Sin flinch at the rage in my voice. Barely an hour since I dismissed everyone from the last fucking church, and here we all are again.

I've never felt a rage like this, and I thought I had felt rage before. It's not the living anger that's powered me through so many fights. It's not even the anger that coiled in my veins last time Harley took off, when we had no one on our back but the fucking cartel. It's something new, sharp-edged and desperate. It claws at my insides, burning me up just as bad as everyone else.

"Who the hell was on cameras?" I holler.

Rook raises his hand and nods to a newer kid next to him. "Preacher and I, but we didn't see nothing. Might be worth taking a second look."

"Fucking do it then." I scrub my hands over my hair again. Harley's gone. Harley's gone. "Do we have any goddamn clue what happened? The patrols didn't see shit?"

More than a dozen men throughout the room shake their heads. Fucking Harley. She had to be her father's daughter. I may not know what she got from her mama, but I can see my wiliness in her every time she sneaks the fuck out under my nose.

"Haven't heard anything from our street team." Sin shrugs. "We can always send more out."

I slam my foot into the wall behind me, cracking through the top layer of drywall despite the metal reinforcement behind it. Only my steel-toed boots keep my toes from crunching with it.

"We can loosen up the black alert." I hear the grimace in Sin's voice as he says it.

If we send more men out, if we loosen up security here, it might help me drag Harley's ass back home. And I know in my gut it'll get people killed.

I put my back to the room and lean against the wall for a long moment. I have to be the Prez right now. I have to keep my men together, on their toes, as we head into what seems like the first battle of a long-ass war.

The last words Harley said to me might be a screaming fit about fucking her best friend. That rage, that panic-edged thing, tears up my insides. I've been Prez and Pops for as long as I've been Prez in the first place, but they've never torn me in different directions like they are right now.

I turn back to the room. "Let's—"

Spider, one of the lucky few who'd been on patrol when I called this second church, bursts through the door at the other side of the war room, panting with a wild-eyed look on his face. The crowd clears instantly out of the way, making a path from him to me like he's Moses parting the sea. He stumbles forward, and I see his hand clutching his stomach.

I see the bright red painting his thin fingers.

"He—" Spider wheezes as he tumbles to his knees.

My heart pounds in my ears. The anger in my chest twists tighter, becomes something I can use as a bludgeon.

Spider collapses, face-first on the wooden floor. Sin is by his side in a moment, hands unsteady at the other man's neck, checking for a pulse. The whole room holds its breath.

Sin looks up at me, face drawn, and shakes his head.

The whole war room bursts into motion. Someone hits the button that slides case after open-topped glass case of guns out of the wall, each loaded and ready to go. Sin, from his place on the floor, snags a beer out of the mini-fridge next to him and sets it by Spider's head, the best we can do in this chaos. Thor snags a gun, then looks at me and taps his throat.

“Motherfucker.” Normally, Thor's my right hand, one of the best commanders on the fucking field. “Sin, you've got Thor's team. Tell yours they answer to Rook. Thor, post up at the clubhouse door. You're in charge of keeping this place intact.”

Thor nods. Rook glances at me. I can see the thought in his eyes. He's a sniper, not a leader.

“Learn,” I spit as I grab my favorite from the case, a Ruger Super Blackhawk, and a sack of bullets.

He nods and wheels out of the room. Sin pulls his Beretta out of his belt holster and his phone out of his pocket, then races out of the room. Without him leaning over Spider, I can clearly see the gunshot wound in his gut. The jagged, round hole looks just about the size I'd expect from a forty-caliber bullet. Pig-standard round.

Which means we're dealing with the fucking sheriff directly if we're lucky.

I swing into my office to grab my sawed-off twelve-gauge and a bag of shells. It might not be practical, depending on what kind of mess I'm walking into, but I've spent too much time thinking about just how good Eric Grimes's head would look splattered by one of these not to take it. I sling it over my shoulder, tie both bags to my belt, and join the flow of my men streaming out the door.

I need to find Blue and Malo. When shit hits the fan, they run directly under me, get the orders to the rest of my men. I scan the crowd for Blue's lanky ass, his curly, dark hair, but instead I find something that strikes fear into my heart.

Bella, her soft brown eyes wide with fear as she steps out of one of the many bedrooms next to Alex. One of our younger members presses a .22 into Alex's hands, and she joins the flow of traffic.

Thor's going to lose it when he finds out, but instead of telling him, I beeline for Bella.

"What's going on?" She stares up at me, just as scared as she was that day in the library.

Somehow, that comforts me a little. A roomful of men with guns, intent on violence, is no scarier to her than a bit of yelling. As much as I wish she hadn't, she's lived the sort of life that'll make her tough enough to withstand my world.

I shake the thought out of my head and put a hand on her shoulders. If it's the sheriff's men here, I need her scared.

"Go to the house," I say. "Bolt the door. Hide in my room and lock that door, too." I grimace. We didn't get nearly far enough in our self-defense training for me to give her a gun. "There's a tire iron taped behind the tire over the bed. A hunting knife, too, but I think the tire iron's gonna suit you better for now. Pull it out and hide."

She nods slowly. "It's my daddy, isn't it?"

I cup her face. "I think so, Beauty. So you better take good care of yourself you hear." I pat the shotgun. "And I'm gonna take good care of him."

She swallows, the yellowing bruises on her throat bobs, and nods once.

"One last thing." I open up a hidden closet full of spare clothes and pull out the smallest jacket I can find. It won't do shit against a bullet, but I wouldn't put a knife past these bastards. I drop it over her shoulders.

She shrugs it on and bolts. My last image is of Ruthless Kings colors on her back, swallowing her tiny frame. I take a deep breath and head outside.

Amidst the gun smoke of my men facing off against a small army of Rosas further back in the compound, the front gates swing open wide. One Rosa stands at our smoking door panel. Unmarked cars race in as soon as they're open, and pigs in uniform pour out of the doors.

Sheriff Grimes pulled out all the fucking stops, and I'm going to make sure that blows up in his goddamn face.

Finally, I spot Blue in the crowd and grab him. He's got a bandolier of explosives, the sort I'm pretty sure I banned him from using, but I don't give a shit now.

"Find Malo," I bark. "Have him take his squad and close up on mine and Harley's and house. Bella's there, and they'll be looking for her. I want you and yours on the cars and the gate. They might get in, but they're not getting out."

Blue nods sharply and pats his bandolier with a grin. "I think I can manage that."

He bolts toward the cruisers. The compound guards, who clearly tried to hold off the cartel as best they could, look like they're flagging.

I cock the hammer on my Ruger. What's a Prez for, if not inspiring his men? I leap away from the clubhouse and into the fray.

One of the Rosas has a knife out and is creeping up on one of our newer recruits. I land on the grass behind him and club the Rosa over the head with the butt of my Ruger. He goes down like a sack of potatoes.

"Look sharp," I call to the recruit.

He glances at the cartel member at my feet and nods. I sink a round into the man's head, not even watching the explosion of gore, and prowl forward. The *taka-taka* of automatic gunfire rings out around me, and I duck behind a thick, brick pillar of the outdoor patio.

“La Bestia!” one of the Rosas hollers.

Motherfucker. I speak enough Spanish to know that one, at least.

I lean out from the pillar to find a few cartel members peeling off from the fighting to advance on me. Bastards. I take a fighting stance, level my revolver, and sink lead into the one’s shoulder. He spins back with a spray of blood as the other two raise their guns. I duck back into cover as bullets spray the ground around me, kicking up chips of stone and mud.

When I hear the telltale rasp of an empty magazine sliding out of place, I whip out of cover and shoot again. His guts explode in a spray of blood, and the third one charges me as I grin. I cock the hammer, shove my Ruger in my pants, and snag a chunk of loose rock off the ground. I don’t have Thor’s experience or Sin’s training, but I came up fighting dirty.

I whirl around the other side of the pillar to find the Rosa within arm’s reach, having dropped his AK for a wicked-looking knife. He turns with a look of surprise. I wrap my fists around the stone and swing a two-handed punch up into his chin. His head snaps back, and he staggers a few steps away. I whip the stone into his gut. He folds in on himself with a breathy groan.

With a smile on my face, I smash my knee into his face. His nose crunches. He starts murmuring garbled Spanish. Perhaps a prayer, but his voice is too thick with blood to tell.

That anger in my chest I folded into a weapon unfurls, reaching for him. We’re a bit outside of the fighting. I could bide my time with this shithead, learn what I can about how they got in.

Someone shrieks behind me, a voice I half-recognize.

Patches. In a lot of goddamn pain.

I yank my revolver back out, sink a bullet into this bastard’s brain, and reload. It’s been a long time since I tasted another man’s blood on my lips. I let myself grow complacent but not anymore.

I spit. We can take our time when we're through. Somebody'll be left standing. I'll make sure of it.

"Prez!" one of my men hollers. "Nine o'clock!"

I spin and find another Rosa creeping up behind me with a knife out. Ruger already in hand, I dump a round of lead into his chest before he can even react, splattering the stones I spent half a summer laying a few years back, with bright, brilliant red.

"Maybe I should switch to those fucking semis everybody's got," I mutter to myself as I reload before entering the fray once more.

CHAPTER 42



Sheriff Grimes

With a grin, I duck past a few of Leo Tate's officers kicking the absolute shit out of one of Beast's scum. This was a perfect plan. I'm sure El Serpiente will see I'm not just some grunt he can push around, now. I'm damn near the brains of this operations at this point, while that forked-tongue fuck sits back in his little warehouse. I got the location from Harley. I sent his men in first through the back to soften up the guards and open the gates for a proper welcoming. I got Leo's men to show up in their blue best so we can call this a raid when the dust settles. All I need to do now is get to that little bitch Bella.

There's only one place in this shithole I might call a house. It's a nice enough thing, painted like it's trying to pretend it's in a nice neighborhood instead of a stretch of dirt covered in squats and criminals. That has to be where she is.

Where he's keeping her. Everything's fallen into place now. Bella didn't run away from me. She would never. I trained her up too well, and even a lying slut like her wouldn't betray her mother like that. No, Harley was the bait in the trap to get Bella outside her comfort zone. Then, when the time was right, when Beast sensed I was on the verge of properly gathering all the power in this city—in this goddamn county—he struck. Harley probably gave her all those fucking novels that told her about bad boys and love, so when Beast landed in her path, he looked like the perfect hero. He started her mind running, and that very night, he kidnapped her out of my godforsaken house. I wouldn't be surprised if he'd been

convincing her she was better off with him, convincing her to turn against her better nature and all I taught her, while fucking raping and telling her she liked it.

Maybe, once we round this scum up and drag them off to prison where they belong, I can arrange a little accident for Beast. Or maybe I'll just keep his daughter for myself.

I dodge a stray bullet and saunter up to the door. I shoot the lock with my service pistol and kick the door in for good measure. My Bella's got a lot of skills, I've trained her well. At least for the most part. She won't flinch over the sounds of battle. I holster my gun.

That bitch Harley said she'd be in Beast's bedroom, but not where in the house that would be. I grin as I take in the living room, dining room, and kitchen around the stairs. Seems to me a good father would make sure to check everywhere he could. I wouldn't want to miss her.

It's not my men dying outside, anyway.

I overturn the couch, the chairs, every table I can find. I pull drawers out and dump their contents on the floor. I kick in every door, just hoping one'll come off its hinges. I shatter the mirror on the medicine cabinet.

There's an office with a few computers in the back. I'll have to tell the lab techs to comb that a little extra when we go through the place.

"Huh," I say to myself through a wide smile. "No Bella."

Finally, I head upstairs. The first room is a bedroom, empty, but plastered in posters. I kick over the desk, rip the covers off the bed, and move on. The next room is a bathroom, plain enough that I only tear down the shower curtain before heading to the end of the hall.

I fling open the door to a plain room with a few patches of color on the wall. Pinks, yellows, blues, different from the colors of the rest of the house.

My vision starts to go red as I turn to the nightstand and see the hideous, craft-framed picture Bella always insisted on

keeping in her room. I didn't even notice it had gone fucking missing.

And I don't have a goddamn clue why a kidnapper would let her take it. Either Beast is smarter than I thought, which I seriously doubt now that I'm in here, or Bella is even more of a slut than I feared.

I snatch the picture off the nightstand and snap it. The shitty little popsicle sticks go easily. I rip the picture up into little pieces and scatter them over the floor. I don't need to ruin the rest of this room. That's all I need to ruin my bitch daughter.

I leave and stalk to the final room at the opposite end of the hall. When I kick it, it rattles in its frame instead of bursting inward. I sneer. She has to be here.

"I'm coming to save you, Bella," I call sweetly. "I'm never going to let him hurt you again."

Maybe if she believes that, she'll come willingly. Maybe I'll get her to apologize before I drag her out by her hair screaming, just like her little friend. It's getting harder and harder to believe she deserves any better.

I pull my gun back out and sink three rounds into the knob. Like sweet music, Bella shrieks inside. *Bingo*.

"It's okay, baby girl," I say as I ease open the door. "Daddy's here to take you home."

Inside, I find a massive bedroom. Bigger than anything I've ever had. I spit on the floor. Criminal scum like Beast shouldn't get to profit like this. King-sized bed in the middle of the floor. Real wood dressers against the walls. A door I can see from here leads into an attached fucking bathroom.

And no Bella in sight.

I grit my teeth and keep my gun raised. I would've expected her chained to the bed when I walked in, but that picture...

The covers on the bed are neatly arranged, with those perfect corners Bella always did on my bed after I left in the

mornings. My face grows hot with fury. How dare she do that on another man's bed? Not even her husband's, but some piece of shit I told her wasn't worth the breath God wasted on him?

"Bella," I call softly. "I know you're in here. You don't ever have to worry about anything again. I'm gonna get you out safe."

That lying, back-stabbing slut doesn't make a goddamn peep, but I know she's in here. I holster my gun. Maybe if Beast's gotten into her head, she'll come out to protect him.

I yank the drawers out of the dressers and dump them on the floor one by one. Each lands with a resounding *thud*, scattering jeans and T-shirts over the ground. Not a scrap of her clothes.

That soothes a little of the burning. Maybe I heard the scream from outside. "I'm just looking for the key, in case he's got you chained up."

Still nothing.

I shoot out a window to see if she really did scream.

Glass tinkles to the floor, scattering over the wood, and the sounds of the fight filter in. Men fighting, dying. Gunshots of all sorts.

Not a female scream to be heard.

Who the hell am I kidding? I know my daughter's goddamn voice. She's in here, and I'm going to find her if it's the last thing I do.

"Your mama was awfully torn up when she heard you were missing," I say. "Damn near broke my heart to tell her in her state."

Still not a word.

"You heartless bitch!" I holler. "I thought you might've had some respect for your mama, since you seem to have lost all I taught for me, and even that won't break you from your self-obsession. You are tearing this family apart, Bella Grimes!"

I stalk into the bathroom, the only place I haven't checked properly yet. I thought any sound would echo too goddamn well, but Jesus only knows what criminals like this think belongs in a bathroom. He put a fucking tire over his bed.

No Bella.

The place is all marble, the sort Maryanne used to *ooh* and *ahh* over when we were fixing up the house, the sort I know costs more than some cars in these quantities. The shower is enormous, with a frosted-glass front. No shadows, but I'm nothing if not thorough.

I slide it back as hard as I can, hoping it'll shatter, but it just lands gently in its fucking track. Rich brown stone, and no fucking Bella.

That's when I hear it. A soft, metallic *clank*, and the crunch of glass. Movement in the room behind me.

A room with a door I couldn't shut if I fucking wanted to.

I whirl around just in time to see the edge of a skirt whip out of view. It's floral, like a good woman ought to pick out, but it looks like it stops at her fucking knees.

"You goddamn slut!" I shout as I wheel out of the bathroom and pull out my gun once more.

She yelps, and I know I've got her. Bella's never been faster than me, and that's not going to change in just a few weeks apart.

I barrel after her. A chunk of metal flies toward my head, spinning, and I have to duck. It lodges in the wall behind me. I stare at it for a long moment.

"A fucking tire iron?" I holler. "I knew you wanted to kill me! I goddamn knew it."

A few weeks is enough to turn her fucking feral, I guess. Her bright blonde hair, my blond, streams behind her as she races down the stairs over—

My heart hammers so hard I think it might just my leap out of my chest to kill her itself before I can reach her. She's not just flouncing around in the tiniest skirt I've ever seen. She's

not just stealing pictures of my wife from my goddamn house. She's not just letting Beast fuck her like I haven't taught her good and well about the sanctity of marriage.

She's wearing one of his goddamn biker jackets like she's part of his territory. Like she belongs to him.

“Bella!” I bellow as I race down the stairs after her. I shut the front fucking door, and that's all the opening I need.

CHAPTER 43



Beast

I explode another Rosa's head, then pistol-whip one trying to snag me from behind again with one of their goddamn fucking knives. The ground shakes under my feet as another of Blue's grenades goes off, with the accompanying second explosion that tells me he hit the gas tank again. Above the fray, I strain to keep an ear out for approaching sirens. The only thing that would really fuck us at this point would be unaffiliated pigs trying to clean up Sheriff Grimes's mess.

Patches fells a Rosa at my shoulder. I duck around the corner of the brewery and swing my sawed-off around. The Ruger's good, but I need to start doing some serious crowd control.

"Patches," I hiss. "Lure 'em this way. Say I'm hurting or something."

The kid doesn't even nod before he starts hollering. "Thor! Sin! Help! The Prez is down, and he's going gray!"

I have to bite my knuckle to keep down my laughter. I brought the kid on for his tracking skills, but it turns out I've been missing out on his acting prowess. Instead, I untie my bag of shells so it sits open on my hip for free reloading as I need.

I'll remember the look on the first Rosa who rounded the corner's face for the rest of my fucking days.

He yells, "*Ayu—*"

And I blow a hole in his chest before he can finish the word. Viscera sprays on the side of the brewery just as the next one rounds the corner, and I get off a second shot without hesitation. The sawed-off isn't quick to reload, but any fighter worth his salt knows those AKs waste bullets on downed opponents. Las Rosas might have territory, they might have backing, but they're hurting for cash like anybody else.

I shuffle down the wall of the brewery to the far corner. Without their guns, I only need a little extra time. I drop the spent shells and start shoving new ones in. From this side, I can see my house in the distance. Malo and his team crawl over the roof, shooting down whenever the fighting starts to wash up onto our steps. God, but I wish we could put Rook up there. I haven't seen him since I gave him his first command.

I slot the second shell into place at the same time two things happen. Another Rosa rounds the corner, sees me standing, and starts hollering just like the others. And, at the same moment, I see Eric Grimes for the first time. He's got his fucking sheriff's uniform on, the brown fabric spattered with blood, and a gun in his hands. And he's disappearing into my fucking house.

That sharp anger burns brighter. He's going for Bella. Beauty. My Beauty.

"Motherfucker," I hiss.

The Rosa turns to run, but I'm faster. I grab my Ruger and fire off a shot, catching him between the shoulders and sending him sprawling out past the edge of the brewery. That's my cover blown anyway.

"Patches," I call. "Lead 'em south! I'm headed the opposite way."

I don't wait for a response. The sharp-edged anger cuts up my insides, burning as bad as the few grazes I've gotten in the fight so far. Nothing bad enough to slow me down as I cut across the lawn toward my house.

My house. My Beauty. My VP. My daughter. I don't even know if Grimes has her or if she's safe tearing up backroads

somewhere. Everything this man has taken from me, or tried to take, coagulates into one tarry flame in my chest, sticking to every inch of my insides. I'm past making promises, past making threats. I can't draw a free breath until I watch Eric Grimes go into the ground.

There is no Earth with both of us on it anymore.

A hail of gunfire cuts off my path toward the house. Not the automatic fire I've gotten used to from the cartel, but a semi-auto. A pistol.

A goddamn service weapon.

I wheel and see a massive wall of a man, maybe even taller than me. Just like Bear described facing off with Thor the other night. Drayton. He's covered in bruises, and I think I see a waver in his stance as he grins and raises his gun towards me.

I lose a split second looking after Eric Grimes. He's in there with Bella, the only place he's not allowed to goddamn be.

Drayton cocks the hammer on his gun, and I dive at him, hoping to hit him in the knees and take him down. This pig bastard knows who I am, I saw it in his smile, and that means I need to take his ass out before I can get to the house.

I hit the man mid-waist. Colliding him is like hitting concrete, but that's true of me, too. Shotgun shells spill everywhere. My brain jars in my skull, sending lights bouncing through my vision, but he topples. He lands hard, breath whooshing out of his lungs, and I use his momentary distraction to grab his gun and jam it in my pants next to my Ruger. Then, I straddle the bastard and slam punch after punch into his skull.

"For Thor," I hiss.

He grins through bloody teeth. I aim my next punch right for them and knock a few out before he rolls us over and presses me into the dirt.

That panicked fury in my chest bellows. I can't save Bella from here, can't save Harley, can't save anyone. Drayton

wraps his hands around my throat and starts squeezing.

“Last time,” he says conversationally, “orders were to let you fuckers limp home to spread the news. I said we only needed one to do that, but no one listened to me.” He leans in close with that same sick grin. “Sheriff’s wised up. He wanted your kill for himself, but I think a body’ll go down just as easy.”

The edges of my vision fade. The sounds, the smoke-choked air, they all slip out of my grasp. All except that fucking anger. I seem to float outside myself, and that’s when I see it.

Drayton’s already made his goddamn mistake. He’s got his hands around my throat squeezing, not bearing down into the dirt like he could, and now he’s gotten fucking close.

I piston my head up into his. Stitches is going to have my ass for this when we’re done, something about each concussion being worse than the last, but Drayton recoils. I flip us back over and find I pulled up clumps of grass with muddy dirt still attached while he strangled me.

He gasps for air, and I shove the grass clumps into his gaping mouth. He splutters and tries to spit, but I yank my bandana out and tie it around his mouth. He tears at my hands. I pull one off, pin his wrist with my knee, and use his own service pistol to destroy the bones in his hands.

He shrieks around his grassy gag.

“Try that again.” I return to tying. “See what else I do.”

Drayton, not very surprisingly, takes orders like shit. He punches my ribs with his working hand. A low ache begins, not enough to make me think I’ve broken anything, and I grab his wrist. He fights and twists, refusing to let me pin it to the ground.

“Fine.” I shoot a clean hole through the middle of his palm, still in the air.

He bucks like a wild bronco, trying to dislodge me as I finish tying the gag on. When I’m done, I stand. He struggles

to get up with me, but I put a round in the same knee he ruined on Thor. When I try to shoot the second, the gun clicks.

“Empty,” I toss it to the ground by his head and grab the nearest of my men. “Back shed. I think I’ll question him later.”

The man nods, and I sprint for my house. I have no idea how long that took, or how much damage Grimes could’ve done in that time. That sharp, sticky anger lashes out again. Reckless. Took my goddamn time. Could’ve been better, faster, smarter. Anything that happens to Bella is my fault.

I’m a couple dozen feet from the porch steps when the front door explodes open. My breath catches. Just inside, I can see Bella in my club colors with her chest heaving and terror painting her eyes.

No Grimes yet.

“Beauty!” I shout. “Your daddy—”

She takes one step out the door as Eric Grimes appears behind her and catches her by the hair. She jerks back with a wince, but not even a whimper of pain.

My conscious brain shuts off. That anger becomes all that I am. I have to reach Grimes and take him apart with my bare fucking hands.

“I knew it.” He sneers down at her. “I knew you were a little backstabber. I knew you were working with my enemies.”

I launch myself toward the house, spinning my sawed-off around on my chest to reach the strap and pull it off to beat him with.

Cool as ice, Bella’s daddy presses his service pistol to the side of her head.

I stop in my tracks and snarl at him.

Bella shuts her eyes, and tears streak silently down her cheeks. I grit my teeth. If only I’d put that cop down faster, I would’ve been here in time.

“There we are.” Grimes smiles. “You bikers must be stupid and stubborn. I can’t get through to you without doing the worst things.”

“You won’t kill her,” I snarl. “Not here. Not where all your precious pigs could see you and recognize just what kind of man you really are.”

He looks out over the fighting behind me. “I think they’re pretty well distracted. In fact”—he drops his service weapon and pulls out a gun I recognize from the cases in my war room—“just in case, I’ll make sure it looks like one of you monsters did it.”

A low, violent sound tears out of my chest. I should’ve been standing at the fucking door, I should’ve made sure she was safe.

“So.” He grins that mega-watt smile I’ve seen in all his pictures. “You’re going to call off your men and let us leave, or I’ll kill Bella and little Harley too.”

My blood freezes in my veins. “You have Harley?”

He laughs, the sort of belly laugh you mostly hear over a few drinks or when someone’s awfully satisfied. “I might even still have her in one piece.”

I manage to make eye contact with Malo who’s up on the roof. If I can just get Grimes off the porch, he and his men can take the shot, and then we’ll make the rest of his fucking army tell us where they’ve stashed Harley.

No one’s ever gotten in before. No one. Did Harley give us up?

What the hell would he have had to do to her to make that happen?

The anger propels me up the first step, ready to grab the sheriff by the lapels and drag him out, come what may.

He racks the slide. Bella opens her eyes and meets my gaze. Silent tears pour in heavy sheets down her cheeks, and I can almost read her mind. She’s telling me it’s okay if she dies, that I should do whatever I have to do to save Harley.

I stop. I have to save them both. I'll find a way. I can't let Beauty give herself up like nothing about her matters. I just have to think.

“Good doggy.” Grimes chuckles. All I want to do is bash his face in.

Instead, I force myself to take a deep breath and step away from the front of the steps.

“Ruthless Kings!” I bellow. “Put down your weapons. We'll fight another day.”

Slowly, the message spreads. Gunfire stops. Altercations break up.

“Get out,” I snarl. “Before I change my mind.”

“Good luck with that.” He pulls Bella forward by the hair, but she doesn't stumble to keep up with him. It looks like a method of walking she's used to.

He leads her to an unmarked car as the Rosas and the pigs separate. The Rosas make way toward the fence near the back shed. The pigs clamber back into their cars.

Once Grimes has Bella in the back of an SUV, he climbs into the driver's seat. I can see him from the front of the house, my goddamn house. He waves and taps the horn twice, jauntily. Confident he's won.

“I'm coming for you, Grimes!” I roar. “Don't sleep. Don't fucking blink because that's when I'll fucking find you!”

Through the windshield, I watch him laugh as he pulls away.

CHAPTER 44



Belle

Daddy makes me ride in the back of the SUV between two cartel members—Las Rosas Negras, one of John’s men said. They ripped off my leather jacket almost as soon as we got in the car, and I instantly felt exposed like I hadn’t in weeks. The skirt, something Harley insisted I get on one of our online shopping sprees, barely hits my knees sitting like this, and the T-shirt clings so tightly to my torso I can already hear Daddy calling me a slut.

Worse, the cartel members seem to have noticed. They keep giving me long, lingering looks and laughing amongst themselves. I squirm like I can somehow make my skirt longer. The streets blur as I try to keep a handle on what’s happening.

“I’m sorry, Daddy,” I say for the twentieth time since we got in the car. “I do love you and Mama, really. I just got so scared.” I sniffle. “I thought you were gonna kill me.”

He sighs, aggrieved. “And I told you to save it, Bella. I told you killing family’s the worst thing a person could do, didn’t I? Don’t you remember the story of Cain and Abel?” He glares at me in the rearview mirror. “Do you really think I’m as bad as Cain?”

“No, Daddy.” I shake my head furiously. “But it’s like you always say, women let their emotions cloud their judgment. That’s why they need a good, strong man to guide them.” I bite my lip. “I didn’t know what to do when you left. I needed more guidance.”

“Oh, so this is my fault?” He slams on the brakes, and the car screeches to a halt in the middle of the road.

Other cars jerk around us, leaning on their horns.

Daddy turns to look at me, a little bit of that hate I saw on my last night with him in his eyes. “You always find a way to blame me, don’t you? But there is no forgiveness without admission, Bella. You know that, or at least you used to.” He throws the car back into drive. “When you’re ready to apologize properly, to admit what you did was wrong, I’ll be ready to listen. Until then, I don’t want to hear whatever poison those people have been spilling into your ears.”

He turns up the radio, his favorite oldies station, and makes a sharp turn, taking us off the path home. My stomach flips. If we’re not going home, it’s going to be an awful lot harder for John to find us.

John. Sweet, stubborn John. I don’t know if he didn’t understand me when I tried to tell him I’d be fine, that he should do what he had to for Harley, but I doubt it. I watched the iron enter his stance, his posture go from furious to determined. His unfaltering love, now I recognize, wouldn’t let him give me up.

He should’ve known better. If he’d killed then, and he saved Harley, he would have saved us both an awful lot of pain.

I inhale deeply, slowly. It’s not like I don’t know I’m going to die. Daddy’s going to kill me if he gets the chance. If I do anything that makes him too mad. If I wait a little too long to take the accountability that he wants. I always thought if I was good enough Daddy would stop hurting me but now I know that was never going to happen. Subconsciously, I think I knew we were always going to reach this point, that’s why I ran.

The flame that’s been burning in my chest since he left me on the bathroom floor has only gotten brighter since I left. I’ve only started to live. I don’t want to die. I have so many thing I want to do. I’ve got to see John again, and make up with Harley, and—

Harley! Daddy said he had Harley in something like one piece. Just thinking the phrase turns my stomach. But if he's not taking me home, he just might be taking me to Harley.

Icy panic rockets through my veins at the thought of her in Daddy's hand. I'm used to what he can do, just how much power he can put out when he wants to, but he has all these new, strange men. If Harley's been left with men, like the ones in the back of the car with me, I don't want to imagine what's possible. I have no idea what I'm walking into.

Daddy throws the SUV into park in front of a warehouse in the port district. It looks like almost every other around us.

I should've been watching out the window to see where we were going instead of getting lost in my head. I should have been paying attention. That's what smart heroines always do in books.

I should've known I'd never be a smart heroine. I'm the stupid one the boy leaves in the beginning for his true love.

Daddy turns to look at me. "We are gonna walk right on into that door"—he points at a single metal door in the side of the concrete behemoth—"and you're gonna put your arm through mine like you used to when I believed you were the daughter I raised. If you scream, just know that I got all kinds of new ways of making you regret it."

Panic washes through my veins but I manage to stay quiet. Fussing makes Daddy angrier. I just have to put my head down and do what he says. I have to bide my time, find Harley, and think of a way to escape. That can't be the last time I look into John's eyes.

His hurt, angry eyes as Daddy dragged me away.

I nod.

"Good." Daddy smiles to himself. "You boys head in first. And take the jacket. You never know when we might need a disguise."

The two Rosas clamber out of the SUV and take my jacket, the last piece of John I have, with them.

I quiver when Daddy gets out of the car and opens my door for me like a gentleman in one of my old movies. I take his arm like I've been told, and he puts his hand over mine.

"I hope you're still in there, Bella," he murmurs. "Because I'm prepared to spend an awful long time looking for the good little girl I had not so long ago."

His words cause a shiver to run down my spine. Whatever Daddy has in mind, it's going to take a good, long time.

Perhaps that's what I deserve for hurting Harley.

We step into the warehouse, and it takes a moment for my vision to adjust to the darkness. He leads me through shelf after shelf until we arrive at a small, clear area with a metal chair bolted to the floor. The two men from the car confer with a few others a bit away. Someone sits in the chair, their head lolling back, and I recognize the mane of chocolate brown hair instantly.

"Harley!" I try to rush forward, to break out of Daddy's grip, but he holds me strong.

"Patience is a virtue," he hisses. "You know that."

I instantly stop fighting. Keep my head down. That's what I have to do to survive. Play his awful game.

Slowly, he leads me around to the front of the chair. My stomach drops to my toes. It is Harley. I could recognize her anywhere, in any state. She's black and blue all over, which doesn't surprise me, nor do the few places she's bleeding from. I can almost see Daddy's handprints. What scares me down to my core are her clothes. Her leather jacket she loves so much sits in a shredded pile at her feet. Her T-shirt and bra are both cut down the middle, such that she's only covered because they happen to be hanging in place. Her pants haven't fared much better, sliced up six ways to Sunday and pulled so low I can only imagine her butt is on the metal of the chair.

I didn't trust the men in the SUV, but this is worse than anything I could've imagined.

I know what John would do. He'd charge in, guns blazing, and turn this place to ash. I know what Harley would do if I sat

in that chair. She'd kick and fight and scream until I was let go.

But they're both so much braver than me. I don't even know how to be brave in the clubhouse, much less when Daddy's got me back again with an aching grip on my arm.

"B...Bella?" Harley mumbles through bruised and bloody lips. "'Zat you?"

The pain in her voice causes my heart to crack. I look up at Daddy, and he smiles down at me like he's glad I'm seeing this. Like he knows seeing my best friend broken like this is causing more pain than his fists ever could.

John said learning to be brave is about trying. Trying, and trying until you can convince yourself that you can do it. I don't have a scrap of practice in that, but I owe Harley my best shot.

"Daddy?" I blink up at him. "Why're you keeping her if you've got me? You don't need her anymore, and I bet J—Beast is more likely to come after us if you've got her."

My hands shake as he stares down at me for a long moment, but I hold strong.

"She's not a very good example of ladylikeness." I force a wavering smile.

He glances at the cartel men behind us. "Have you had your fun?"

A few of them laugh raucously, and the bits of Spanish I learned in school help me translate enough to know they're agreeing. A lot. Bile starts to crawl up my throat, but I keep that smile plastered to my face. I can do this. I've done it before for my own sake. I know how to soothe him.

"Kinkade," Daddy barks.

A lanky guy, only a little older than me with buckets of tattoos and piercings, saunters out of the shadows. "Yeah?"

"Bring the little lady home." Daddy grins.

Kinkade pales. "Sir, Beast is gonna kill me."

“No, he won’t.” Daddy shakes my arm. “I still have something he wants.”

“...ella,” Harley mumbles my name again causing my heart to splinter.

My arm aches from his hold but I don’t care about the bruises I feel forming under Daddy fingers. I have to be brave until I can get Harley out of here. Convince him we don’t need her.

“Daddy, you can’t send her out like that.” I try to look scandalized. “Even if these gentlemen have already seen her, you wouldn’t want to tempt the upstanding citizens of Houston like that.” I glance around like I’m looking for inspiration. “Why don’t you give her m—the jacket I was wearing when you found me?”

“Why don’t you give her your clothes, pretty thing,” one of the cartel men calls.

I shiver.

Daddy drops my arm to whirl on them. “She’s my daughter. And if you like your blighted, criminal packages where they are, I’d suggest shutting up if you want to keep them there.”

The cartel men snicker but don’t say anything else.

Daddy nods at Kinkade to unfasten Harley.

I tuck my arm back through his like I’m the one who wants it there when just the feel of it sickens me. “The jacket, Daddy?”

“Tell me, Bella.” He grabs my chin. “Is this for your so-called friend, or for the citizens of Houston like you said? Are you a liar?”

I shake my head. “For Houston. I’m not a liar, and I’m ready to start taking accountability.”

In the back of my mind, I wonder how often I’ll have to say that before it doesn’t send ice water through my veins.

Daddy grins and releases my chin. “You heard the lady. Kinkade, the jacket. The rest of you, be ready to move.” He begins walking me away from the room where Harley was tortured and God knows what else. “Don’t you worry about those men. I’ve already got a lesson plan laid out for you, and they’re not part of the plan.”

I smile up at him and clamp down on another shiver itching to run down my spine. Somehow, his words are scarier than the leering men behind us.

CHAPTER 45



“Fucking sheriff,” I mutter as I spin the wheel. “Fucking cartel.”

Harley, her eyes covered by a blindfold, somehow still manages to scowl at me in the rearview mirror. I heard her screams as those cartel freaks did whatever they did to her, though no matter what I feel about her, remembering those makes me nauseous. Just another thing about this day I can't tell Gram.

Harley snorts, and I bristle all over again. She's sitting back there with awful little more than that jacket covering up what amounts to her modesty. I can't imagine where she gets off still scowling at me.

“Fucking Ruthless Kings,” I spit.

And fuck the sheriff twice over for making me use my own goddamn car. He said I might need to get away quickly, made it sound smart and reasonable. Even had a grumbling cartel motherfucker drive me back to the Deadman's Hand to pick it up. And what does that get me? A pissed off, half-naked Prez's daughter getting blood all over my nice ass seats. I just got it detailed last week! Gram found a coupon and everything.

But none of my hurt and disdain feels quite as satisfying as it did this morning. It's hard to think about much other than getting Harley into the compound, picking Gram up, and getting as far away as we can manage on whatever I've got in my wallet. Today's been a dark day. I'm just ruffling up my own feathers in the hopes I'll feel a bit bigger.

I turn the final corner onto the compound's street. Sheriff better be right and Beast won't kill me because he's got Bella. I only work the bar. I'm not even supposed to know the location of this place. I've never been here before, but I could tell they got hit even if I didn't see the sheriff walk back into the warehouse looking pleased as punch. Bullet holes pock the top of the stone fence at the front, the only part where the woods don't crowd in so close they block the view. I think I even see slugs still smoking in a couple of them. I've heard some of these motherfuckers talking in the bar. There's an intercom at the gate for anyone without a clicker. All I need to do is talk my way in. Maybe Harley will even help, for once in her goddamn life.

But even that don't feel as good as it ought to. With those screams in my ears, I can't get angry at her like I did earlier today.

Fucking sheriff. Fucking cartel.

Tire tracks chew up the grass around the road, especially as I draw closer to the wide-mouthed driveway and the sprawling gate. I've just started looking for the intercom when I realize there's a young man leaning against the far post, wearing MC colors. I stop and lean around to pull Harley's blindfold off. She tries to bite my fingers, and I withdraw quickly, tossing the blindfold onto the floor of my car.

"Bitch," I say, but it lacks the usual heat.

She just levels glare in my direction.

"Hope you're this talkative when we're meeting your Pops." I pull into the driveway and lean out the window toward the kid.

"Hey, I'm just here to—" I don't have a clue what the end of my statement was going to be, his gaze slides off my face to Harley in the back as she waves with one hand and clutches the jacket tight around her with the other.

He blanches and looks back at me like he's seen a ghost. "Beast is in the clubhouse. Smack-dab in the middle, you can't miss it." He hits something, and the gates judder open.

I pull in slowly. If I thought I could see the carnage from the outside, I was fucking stupid. A few bullet holes are nothing compared to the field of bodies in here. Half a dozen buildings on several acres of land, and almost every inch between them is covered in blood or guts or straight up fucking bodies. Anybody alive seems to be checking them over, gathering the dead into piles and summoning over groups whenever they find anybody alive.

Harley presses herself to the window with a low moan and starts reciting names under her breath. “Rye. Colt. Goblin. Longbow. Serge.”

I tune her out. There are at least as many cartel bodies as Ruthless Kings, if not more. The sheriff might’ve gotten the jump on them, but they had one hell of a home field advantage. There’re enough loose AKs on the ground to make a couple thousand bucks with the right connects, which I think I have. Maybe I’ll load a few up before I leave. Gram can’t really object to guns if I’m just selling enough of them to get us out safe.

I just got to keep my hands steady enough on the wheel to actually get us to the clubhouse. When we bump over something, I don’t think about what or who it was. This isn’t my fight. I didn’t kill these men. I was just dropping Harley off. It’d be crazy to think I did this.

We pull up to the front of the building in the middle. Beast comes pelting down the stairs, so angry I swear I see smoke pouring out of his ears. I’ve got exactly one move.

I hop out, leaving the car running for a quick escape, and yank open the back door. Harley springs out, and I start to turn to Beast to show him I brought her back.

What I don’t expect is the weight of a damn near grown woman landing on my back, pulling me toward the ground. I catch myself on the sideview mirror, barely, and that’s when she starts clawing. My face, my neck, my eyes, anything exposed she can reach. It’s wild, almost primal, and I keep expecting there to be some kind of scream, but she stays dead silent.

I pry her legs off of around my waist, and she drops to the ground, but of course the bitch lands on her feet. Before I even have a chance to look around, she knees me in the balls, and my vision goes white. Bright, sharp pain rockets through my system, nausea sinks its teeth into my gut, and I hear myself groan. Dimly, I'm aware of her grabbing me in some new, awful way, and then her weight is being removed.

Fuck this. As soon as I can stand, I'm just going to get in my car and drive away. I'll go through the fucking gates if I have to. Gram will understand a few scratches.

My vision hasn't even cleared when I feel large, strong hands grabbing me by the lapels of my jacket, lifting me up, and slamming me against the side of my car.

"Who the fuck are you?" Beast slams me against the car again. "And what the *fuck* is going on here?"

I cough and fight to regain my breath as the late afternoon light reaches me once more. "Pleased to meet you, sir, I'm K-Kinkade and—"

He slams me against the car again. "What's your relationship with the sheriff?"

My ribs burn, and I shake my head. "I work at the Deadman's Hand, sir, and your daughter and I were both victims of—"

"Liar." Harley speaks her first words other than that litany for the dead while pacing back and forth behind her father, clutching the oversized jacket closed around her. "You were fucking working with him! Pops, did you get a call from the Deadman a few hours ago?"

"I'm starting to think I might've," he mutters to himself. There's a cold look in his eye that chills my insides. Then, he shakes his head and says louder, "No, should I have?"

"You should've if Kinkade here fucking called you like he said he was," she spits.

Beast crushes me against the car and my ribs groan. "Why don't we hear this story from the only person here I trust, and then see what's worth doing with you?"

I nod. “Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

He snorts.

“Eric raided the Deadman with a bunch of Rosas. There’re bodies there, too.” Harley shivers, and her eyes go distant. “Kinkade turned me over to them. Him. Eric.” She swallows. “Pops, I...I told them how to get in. Not at first, but eventually, I couldn’t hold out any longer.”

“We’ll deal with that later.” Beast’s voice takes on a soft edge, the kind I didn’t even expect a man like him to be able to produce. “What else? Did you see Bella? Do you know where the warehouse is?”

“Bella?” She furrows her eyebrows. “I...think so. I think her dad brought her in right at the end.” She runs her hands over her arms. “I think she convinced him to send me home.”

Beast smiles into the middle distance. “So she’s at the same warehouse.”

“But I don’t know where it is.” Harley spits at my car. It lands on the shiny blue hood, and I wince. “These fuckers kept blindfolding me and blocking my sight. I think it’s in the port somewhere, but that’s all I’ve got.”

“I know where it is.” I smile helpfully and repeat the address I learned today.

“Not involved, huh?” Beast keeps me pressed against the car with one hand and pulls out his phone with the other, then presses it to his ear. “Sin? I got a place for you to check out. Take whoever’s standing and bring Bella back.”

I hiss a breath out through my teeth. “They won’t be there anymore, though. I heard the sheriff say something about moving out just as I was leaving to bring Harley home.”

Beast launches his phone into the dirt and slams me against the car one more time. “Where are they now.”

No question. Just demand, just pure insistence that I answer him. My heart freezes over. If I tell them about Gram, will they hunt her down for more information or get her out of

the city? The softness when Beast talked to Harley makes me think they might get her out.

“I don’t know.” My voice rasps out of my throat. “I’m just one of the sheriff’s informants, really. That’s the first safehouse I’ve ever seen.” I chuckle darkly. “And I’d bet they gave me this particular errand to get me out of the way.”

Beast’s face goes grim. He pulls a police-issue service pistol out of his belt.

“Can I get a last wish?” I ask desperately.

He hesitates for a second.

“My gram. I support her, but she’s not part of the life. She was trying to get me out.” Real tears gather in my eyes for the first time in years. “The sheriff knows about her, where she lives and everything. Just, please”—my voice breaks—“please get her out of the city. She doesn’t deserve this.”

Beast pauses a moment longer, then nods with that same dark look in our eyes. “I’d agree. Family shouldn’t be dragged in just to hurt people.”

I close my eyes, and the last thing I hear is a single gunshot in the quiet.

CHAPTER 46



Kinkade slumps to the ground, his face a bloody mess. I've never seen Pops kill someone up close before. The gunshot roars dully in my ears, but I don't flinch.

He scoops his phone out of the dirt and exchanges a few words with Sin. They roar just like the gunshot. More noise than meaning. I think he says something about Kinkade's grandmother, but I don't know. I don't really care.

Every part of my body hurts. I've been in crashes that sent me to the hospital, and I've never hurt like this before. The insides of my elbows, behind my eyes, the corners of my mouth. There's not an inch of skin I can feel well enough below the pain to believe it's mine anymore.

I close my eyes, and the warehouse appears in my mind again. Low laughter echoes in my ears, and I wrench my eyes open.

Pops turns to me with a worried look. "Why don't I take you home?"

He wraps an arm around my shoulders and my legs collapse, the last burst of energy I got on the ride back leaves me. Pop's is quick in sweeping me into his arms, carrying me across the compound before I can protest. I stare at the ground as he carries me, as much to see the bodies as to keep the scale of the death out of my mind. Whenever I recognize a face, I murmur their name like a prayer.

I don't know how many died. More than I hoped. Maybe even more than I feared. There's so much chaos I can't tell the Ruthless King bodies from the cartel ones at a distance. Sickness settles like a stone in my stomach.

Every dead man would've lived if I'd held out. I may as well have put the guns in the cartel's hands for all I helped. This is the only battle Pops has ever fought on compound grounds, and I made it possible.

But his arm feels strong around my back. I can feel it through the leather jacket Bella made her dad give me, the same strength I've known all my life. He doesn't say anything as we cross the grounds, but it's not the sort of silence that used to warn me I did something that was going to get me in serious trouble. It's different, almost...hollow.

Part of me wishes he would yell. Maybe if he started cussing me out, I could feel like I actually got home, instead of wandering into another war zone.

Another warehouse.

He pushes on our front door and it swings open. Something happened to the hinges, but the idea of asking what, holds no appeal. I stubbornly have Pops set me on my feet and I stumble up the stairs. He's quick to take most of my weight to keep me from falling. It's almost like the first time I got drunk, sneaking beers in the clubhouse at fifteen. He didn't yell then, either, just explained real quietly how stupid I'd been and how I couldn't do something like that outside of the compound unless I knew I was in a place no one could hurt me.

I don't know if those exist anymore.

We pass a tire iron lodged in the drywall on the way to my room. Someone was in here, someone worth fighting off with a tire iron. The knowledge should cause more of a reaction but it only bounces off my brain.

"Do you want to shower first?" Pops asks quietly. "Maybe change?"

My ruined shirt slides under the leather jacket and I heard a low sinister laughter echo in my head. I let go of Pops to race into the bathroom and vomit into the toilet. The tile floor is cool against my knees, and my body shakes as I expel everything left in my body. He kneels next to me and holds my hair out of my face, rubbing my back.

When nothing but bile remains, I spit into the toilet one last time and lean back. Pops gathers me into his arms despite the mess. I feel so small, so young, trembling against his chest. Tears press against my eyes, but I'm too tired to cry. My limbs are heavy with pain and something else, something too big to name. He holds me close without saying a word.

"I'm sorry," I mumble.

He shakes his head. "Why don't I go get you a change of clothes and let you clean up a little?"

Panic seizes me. My heart thunders wildly. Pops is going to leave. I'm going to be alone, just like I was when they got me. I grab his wrist and try to hold on, but even I can tell there's no strength in my grip. "Don't go."

He turns his wrist in my grip to take my hand. "I won't go far enough that you couldn't yell for me if you need me."

A little bit of the thundering panic subsides. I can still scream. My throat might burn and my voice might be hoarse but I can still scream. Pops flushes the toilet, leans me against black-and-white checkered wall I picked out as a teenager, and turns on the water before stepping away. He leaves the door open for now.

The water screams against the floor of the tub, somehow louder than the gunshot. It sounds like squealing metal, like rattling chains. The raw skin of my wrists and ankles burns as I remember how I fought to get out of those chains.

Nausea rumbles through my body again, but there's nothing left to throw up.

Pops comes back with my pajamas in hand and looks at me, still sitting on the floor. "Need a hand up?"

An old instinct makes me shake my head. I'm an independent woman. I don't need anyone's help, especially my pops. But when he sets the clothes on the counter and closes the door, I regret it. That heaviness in my limbs weighs me down. The tile is cool. I could stay here until I melt away, become part of the house and stop having these memories.

There's a scrape of Pops pulling up a chair outside the bathroom door. He won't go anywhere, not if he can help it, I know that. If I can't take care of myself with him right there, outside the door, the only person I've ever been able to count on one hundred percent, I'm never going to be able to do it again.

And I will not give those men that pleasure as well.

I shove aching to my feet and slough off my clothes. Everything but the jacket, I jam into the tiny garbage can in the bathroom. Fabric spills out the top, but I can't look at them again. I don't even want to look at myself. Instead, I step directly into the spray.

The hot water stings, and I hiss, but it's a clean, bright sting. An uncomplicated pain that blurs all the others. I duck my head in and let it pound over my face. My skin still feels foreign, filthy, but there's something here that's a little bit familiar. My hair hangs heavy and wet against my back, grounding me.

I grab my favorite washcloth and lather it up. Maybe if I just chase that familiar feeling, I can find myself underneath it. I wipe the cloth over one of my arms.

The sting is blunted. It feels like possessive hands on my skin, like untrimmed nails and calluses. I press a hand to my mouth as another wave of nausea rocks me, then turn up the temperature on the shower. The water burns away the feeling.

I don't have the sort of grit on me that comes off with a bit of polishing. I have to scrape away at the build-up, the rust, to see if there's any metal worth saving underneath. I pour all the energy I have left into the hand holding the washcloth and run it over my arm like it's sandpaper.

It carves a path of that same clean, bright sting. Not deep enough, but I know I'm getting somewhere.

I scrape and chip and scrub at my skin, turning the water hotter and hotter. Sensations flake off and slide down the drain. Mocking laughter. Fabric ripping. Possessive hands. Ripping and grabbing and tearing. Bruises and cold metal.

The bathroom door creaks open, and I damn near leap out of my skin.

"Hey," Alex says as she closes the door behind her. "Your dad sent me in."

Alex. My would-be sister, missing for years, back for the summer. I keep scrubbing. I don't have anything to say to her until I get all this off me.

She leans around the curtain. "Jesus!"

Alex grabs my wrist, and I fight her grip.

"I need to get everything off!" My skin is slippery under hers. I can't get purchase, and she's so much stronger than me. I don't know when that happened.

"Harley, look at me!" she barks.

Alex almost never yells. I look at her. Worry hangs heavy in her eyes, her short hair is mussed, and her cheek is split around a massive bruise.

She's hurt. Why is she hurt? Another question crowds against the inside of my lips, next to why she's stopping me.

"You're taking your goddamn skin off." She gestures to my body.

I keep looking at her. I don't want to see my body. I remember what it looked like before I went to that place, and if I just keep cleaning, maybe I can get it back there. If I look at it like this, I don't know if I can ever get back.

I snatch the washcloth back and return to scrubbing.

"Mother—" She grabs both my wrists. "And the water's scalding, too. You have to get out, Harley, before you make everything worse."

How could I possibly make anything worse? I killed everyone outside. Every single one, even the cartel soldiers I don't even care about. I don't know my house, my compound, my own body anymore. Bella saved me by giving herself up. There is no worse than this.

But I can't escape Alex's grip. The water just sears down on my shoulders, my burning shoulders, and I begin to shake again.

"God." She gathers my wrists in one hand, a much looser grip I could break if I had the strength, then turns off the water and steps into the shower with me, fully clothed. Her shirt stings my skin, hot and bright and revealing.

She wraps her arms around me with no regard for how soaked I am. My knees begin to give out, and she catches my weight.

"It's okay," she whispers into my ear. "You're home, you're safe now."

I wind one burning arm over her shoulder and see beads of my own blood raising out of crosshatched scrapes. Scrapes I only could've gotten from the washcloth.

"We're gonna figure out how to make it okay," she whispers.

Even as I let her hold me, her words sound no more true than Eric promising he'd let me go.

CHAPTER 47



I roar up to the port district with half a dozen of the Ruthless Kings in the best shape I could find. Gunfire still rings in my ears. I haven't gotten in to see Stitches or any of his men yet, but I'm pretty damn sure I've got a broken rib or three. Between the cartel and the cops, there was no hiding. I think we might've had them eventually, but Beast just let them walk. Before he called me, I heard more than enough muttering about that to know it wasn't a popular choice. A lot of our men, the ones who came on board after Beast made Houston his bitch, don't understand losing a battle to win the war.

Now, I don't think that's why Beast did what he did. I think that son of a bitch sheriff had his daughter and his girl, and he couldn't lose them both. But we would've lost a lot more men if they hadn't left when they did, so I'll spin the story to make it look strategic.

Beast sounded unhinged when he called me on the phone. I've heard him angry more times than I can count, and I saw the look in his eyes when they carted Thor back in last night, but this was something else. There's a goddamn reason I'm biting back a scream while the engine rumbles through my ribcage instead of waiting in line to get patched up. He's scared about Bella, I know, but I also know Harley got sent back in. According to a couple of guys who were gathering bodies when she rolled in, she's in really rough shape. I know Beast dropped the guy who brought her in because we have to get his grandmother out of town, but I don't know what these

bastards could've done to Harley to make Beast sound like that.

We pull up in front of the warehouse the bartender gave him. It looks exactly the same as the massive concrete cubes on either side of it, but any good operation relies on its ability to blend in. I yank off my helmet and look at the men around me. Of our top guys, only Blue made it out of the scrap unharmed enough to leave when Beast called, so I make eye contact with him. The rest of the men are tried and true Ruthless Kings, but they need a leader.

“We go in quiet,” I say. “Intel says they’re probably gone, but better safe than sorry. We want anything that gives us a clue to where they might’ve gone next.”

Blue nods, and so do the rest. We creep off our bikes and toward the single door. I unholster my gun, put a finger to my lips, and try the knob.

It turns easily in my hand, and I bite back a curse. If they’re this good, there’s no way they left the door open unless they’re already gone.

I swing open the door, and it screeches loudly. We all hold our breath, but no one seems to respond.

“Dead.” I stand with a sigh. “Like we expected. Turn this place upside down.” I stalk inside, and they follow behind me, splitting off to different corners of the packed-to-bursting warehouse.

I’ve never been a man with much of a temper, but there’s only so many times you can attack someone before they start getting a little pissy. The runners were my responsibility. I set all those kids up, gave them the go-ahead. I worked with Jag for years. He was as much of a nine-to-fiver as you get in this life, but a good man. Telling his old lady stung. Then, they set up Storm and jumped our guys with an army of pigs on our goddamn streets. Houston proper has been Ruthless Kings territory since before I joined up, and a group attack like that is just low.

And now, this. An attack on our land, using our people to get it done. Taking Beast's daughter and doing something to her that made him sound like that. Sending her back trussed up like a Sunday roast just to piss him off all over again. I can almost hear the sheriff's teasing laugh.

He thinks he has us where he wants us. He's about to learn the Ruthless Kings don't roll over and die.

I tear through the shelves to no avail. Box after box turns out to be sealed and, when opened, contain nothing more than what the label on the outside reads. Not a whiff of supplies, guns, nothing. If the warehouse flooded with workers right now, we'd be the thing most out of place.

I knew it was the goddamn law. If there's one thing you never want to get involved with as an MC, it's the fucking law. The cartel would already be cleaned up if they weren't working hand in hand with the sheriff. I've lost too many good people already to this unholy partnership. I'm ending this one way or another.

Finally, my anger carries me into a small clearing at the back of the warehouse with a metal chair in the middle of it. I pick my way over. A few of the spindles that make up the back of the chair are bent forward, like someone was pulling on them. The front two legs are also dented, but only in one place each. Then, I see the dark red splatters on the floor around it. Not enough to scare me about blood loss, just a few sprays.

But I know how a not-so-gentle interrogation looks.

I check the spindles and the legs again. They've got the exact dent patterns you'd see if you cuffed someone to it with their hands behind their back and their ankles to each of the legs. Especially if that person fought like hell to get loose, just like I know Harley would. I snap a few pictures with my phone.

"Sin!" one of the other men calls. "I think I got something you should see."

I smile. Pigs always make a mistake.

By the time I make it to him, most of the group has gathered around in a quiet huddle, gaping at whatever he found.

“What do we have?” I ask with a grin.

The man turns and shakes his head. Then, he holds out what looks like a triangle of black fabric. I take it with a frown.

In my hands are a pair of women’s underwear, cut along each side so someone could remove it without, say, needing to move someone’s legs. In red ink along the back, it reads, *Demasiado tarde*.

My stomach flips. Beast’s new tone. Harley’s choppy return. The pieces fall into place to create the sort of awful picture I wish I never had to see.

I ball up the underwear and jam them in my pocket. “We’re done here.” I turn to Blue. “Torch it. I’m done looking.”

He grins and opens up the bulging bag he brought with him, the one I didn’t want to ask about unless we needed it. While he rummages, I turn on my heel and begin marching for the door. I pull my phone out of my pocket and dial Beast.

“Sin,” he answers. His voice is pitched low like he’s trying to keep someone from overhearing, but it still has that serrated edge to it. “Did you find them?”

“Negative.” I scowl. “Whatever the hell else Kinkade did, he didn’t lie. The place is...mostly clear. Blue’s lighting it up.”

“Mostly?” Beast demands.

For a second, I consider not telling him and letting the underwear burn with the rest of the place. No one else needs to know. But then I picture some Rosa taunting him with their “message” in a fight.

I wouldn’t put it past them.

“We found what I believe to be Harley’s underwear.” I fight to keep my voice the even, steady tone I normally use when giving updates. “With a message that we were too late.”

Beast snarls into the phone, more desperate than angry. “Burn them. If they touch the walls of this compound, I will make you regret it.”

I swallow. “Consider it done. Anything else?”

“Go to the bastard’s house.” He blows out a long breath. “If he’s there, call me. If he’s not, let Blue at that, too.”

“Back soon.” I hang up as Blue scampers past me with a wide grin on his face.

“Time to bolt,” he says.

The rest of the men race behind on his heels, and I follow suit. Once we’re outside, Blue pulls out a simple, push-button detonator. We mount up, put on our helmets, and he pushes the button as we race away from the building. The explosion shakes the ground underneath us, wobbling some of the less experienced riders, and I shout our next destination over the noise.

I don’t know where I expected Sheriff Grimes to live, but the charming Craftsman we pull up in front of next wouldn’t be it. I can picture Bella here no problem, tending the flower beds and fixing the pretty curtains hanging closed over every window, but Grimes belongs in some kind of cave.

“This time, we’re going in loud.” I yank my helmet off and hang it on one of the handlebars. “I doubt they’re here, and we want to make the sort of mess the sheriff can’t come back from.” I swallow. “But if you see anything you think belongs to Bella, bag it up. We’ll bring it to the compound for I—when we get her back.”

Beast will like that, I think. I hop off my bike, unholster my gun, and kick in the door. The wood frame shatters, and I storm over the threshold before anyone inside can react.

Just like the last place, it’s completely empty. Here, though, there are at least signs of occupation. Dishes piled up in the sink, rotting food in the garbage, a fridge full of takeout containers. That last one, I unplug. I know we’re blowing the

place sky-high, but I want all of Grimes's neighbors to know exactly what sort of man he is without his daughter around to take care of him. I want the rubble to reek.

Eventually, I find my way to Bella's pink room. Her closet looks like it's been ransacked, and all the drawers have been pulled out of her dresser to lay on the bed. Several articles of clothing lay shredded on the floor.

He couldn't even give her the dignity of leaving her clothes alone.

I turn to Firefly next to me. "Bag anything that's not ruined. Clothes, jewelry, art..." I look at the bare walls. There are no bookshelves either, despite the fact I've only ever seen the girl glued to Harley and Beast or reading. "Anything."

He nods. "I'll grab some garbage bags from the kitchen."

It will have to do.

I prowl through Grimes's bedroom, which isn't in much better shape. Not ransacked, just messy to the point of near ruin. The man seems to have never learned how to fold his own clothes. He's got a picture of himself and his wife on his nightstand, though he's so large in the frame it takes me a second to notice her, and despite his self-obsession, he doesn't seem to keep a journal where I could find his next move.

Useless. All we're going to get from this fucking field trip, from my screaming ribs, is going to be whatever remains of Bella's things and the sheer, undiluted joy of knowing Grimes has nowhere to go home to.

The more I learn about him, the more joyful that feels.

"Another bust," I call through the house. "Clear out. Blue?"

He pops out of what seems to be the bathroom.

"I want it gone, but don't set off the whole street," I say.

He grins. "I saw some gas in the garage."

It only takes five minutes and a few sets of hands for the whole house to smell as much like gasoline as it does like

rotted food. I stand at the end of the front path as Blue trails the last of the gasoline out a few feet.

“Burn, baby, burn.” He lights a match, drops it onto the end of the trail, and the flames race up toward the house.

I pull out my phone to call Beast.

“Empty,” I say as soon as he picks up. “And burning as we speak.”

“Good.” He sounds vicious. “Post a few guards on Bella’s mother just in case.” I hear him crack his knuckles over the line. “And find us some Rosas to talk to.”

I hang up as the flames reach the roof. A siren whines in the distance.

“Mount up.” I hop on my bike. “This is just the beginning.”

CHAPTER 48



Belle

Daddy's hand cracks across my cheek, and I stumble into the wall of the back bedroom in the abandoned house he moved us and the cartel men to a few hours ago. I try to catch myself, but the sodden wallpaper just rips under my fingers.

"The elections are next month. Do you know that? Can you get through your thick little skull what that means?" he hollers.

Of course, I know what it means. I know it means more boots inside the house and more angry nights. Election season always sets Daddy on edge.

But since we arrived here, almost half an hour's drive from where he kept Harley, he hasn't said a thing about her. It's like he's forgotten about her completely. Which means I really did get her out of here safe, or as safe as I could.

A second flame lights in my chest, next to the one that reminds me I want to live.

"I know, Daddy," I say. "I shouldn't have acted out."

"Acted out." He rolls his eyes. "Acting out is when you're late to dinner. This is...is... betrayal! Betrayal of the highest order."

"I know." I meet his gaze. "I'm taking responsibility for that. I'm here to receive whatever punishment you see fit."

"That's goddamn right." He sweeps my legs out from underneath me, and I careen toward the floor.

Rotten floorboards creak under me as I land. Pain lances up my arm as my elbow hits first.

“I should kill you for this,” he spits. “I would if I were a lesser man.”

The twin flames burn a little brighter. I want to live. I want to see what I can do with the little spark of bravery I conjured to get Harley out. All I need to do is hold out until John arrives, because I know he will.

Daddy sinks a few kicks into my stomach, and I crumple around them. He’s angry today, but I knew what I was walking into. I’ve survived him before.

“You’ve really hurt my trust in you, Bella.” He flips me over to face him with the toe of his boot and smashes my head against the floor. “I just can’t quite believe you when you say you’re ready to own up to your mistakes. I want to hear what you did in your own words.”

I stare up at my daddy, his blond hair hanging in his bloodshot eyes. He looks more ruffled than I’ve ever seen him, and a small pang of guilt rips through me. No man should have to manage his house alone. That’s why he looks so bedraggled right now.

No, a voice in the back of my brain that sounds an awful lot like John argues. Any grown person should be able to manage their own house. John did it without a wife until Harley was grown, and now, she helps out as much as he does. And John has just as tough a job as Daddy, if not tougher.

“What do you want to hear?” I ask.

He scowls down at me. “You still don’t really understand, do you? God, I knew you were stupid, but”—he shakes his head, and I remember Harley telling me I’m too smart not to go to college—“I want to know why you betrayed me. I want to hear you say it. Why you did it, and why it was wrong.”

He pulls his belt out of his pants slowly, coiling it around his hand. For the first time, I recognize that as the threat it is. He’s trying to pull the answer he wants out of me with pain. On purpose.

Responses fly through my brain. Daddy wants to hear an answer that flatters him, not the truth. The truth never got me anywhere with him. That's not going to change now that I know I can stand up to him.

I bite my lip. "Because—"

"So there is a reason!" He whips the belt at my shoulder, buckle first, and pain explodes through my vision. "I knew it. I knew you were a goddamn liar. I knew you were working against me."

Clarity dawns on me. Nothing is going to please him. Nothing ever did. I made it worse all the time, but almost nothing I tried ever made him stop hitting me. I can't make it better now, either. I just have to do what I can to survive.

I curl my knees into my chest and tuck my head. It's the one thing that might help from that self-defense lesson. John said if I hold on tight and tuck my chin close, it's almost impossible for an attacker to get at any of the parts that matter.

An attacker. That's who my daddy is to me now. And if Harley had never run away during that red alert, if I had never met John, I'd still be scrubbing the floor under his feet.

"What are you doing?" he demands. "Look at me when I talk to you!"

I don't dare move. Daddy lashes out with the belt over and over again. The buckle lands with bright starbursts of pain all over the exposed sides of my legs, my arms, even my back. All the while, he screams and yells at me about taking responsibility, respecting my father, how badly this would hurt Mama if she knew.

He never hit me in the rare bouts Mama came back to the house after she got sick. She couldn't work, even when she could stay home, so there was never a moment I wasn't with her at the house. I used to think it was just because having Mama home made me such a good girl I didn't make mistakes worth punishing. But if John's right, maybe Mama's a good parent like him. Maybe she didn't believe in teaching me lessons on my skin.

Maybe I haven't let her down at all.

I hold tighter, spinning through all my memories of the compound. Laughing at Harley while she cooks, learning how to do a cartwheel, resting, reading, and John, John, John. The flames in my chest burn so bright, I don't know if they'll ever go out. I'm going to survive until John comes to rescue me.

Daddy drops to his knees, yanks my head by the roots of my hair out of the cradle I created for it, and meets my gaze. "What in God's name do you think you're doing? I thought you said you were ready to goddamn take responsibility."

I stare into his eyes. I always wished I had blue eyes like him, but seeing them brimming with anger like this, I'm glad I got Mama's brown ones. I never want to look like he does right now.

"Answer me, goddammit!" He unholsters his service weapon and presses it to my head once more.

Every time I do something brave, it'll get a little easier to believe the next brave thing won't break me. I take a deep breath.

"Go to hell." It comes out much more whispery than I planned in my head, where it sounded like one of Harley's brassy declarations, but the words escape my lips. I've never even said the word hell outside of church before.

Daddy's eyes grow wide with shock. His cheeks turn red, and he presses the gun harder into my forehead. "What did you just say to me?"

The cold metal bites into my skin, and the flame of bravery quails.

"You heard me," I murmur.

He stares at me for a long moment, like I've just grown a second head. Then, he pulls back the gun and smashes it into my skull. Blood flows instantly into my vision, but the pain comes a moment after, in stinging waves.

"They got right in your head, didn't they?" He sneers. "A few weeks, and you've got so many bad habits, I doubt your

mama would even recognize you.”

He grabs his discarded belt once more and puts his gun away.

“I told you before, and I’ll tell you again.” He snaps the belt out, and the buckle lands on the jutting bone of my elbow for an especially sharp sting. “Killing blood’s the worst thing a person can do. You might not count me as family anymore, but you are my blood until the day you die.” The next hit catches me on the cheekbone, so close to my eye socket I can’t help thinking of Thor and his eyepatch. “That means I’m gonna put in the goddamn work to get my daughter back.” He pauses with the belt wound around his hand. “Whatever it goddamn takes.”

I take his hesitation to curl back into my ball, but I should’ve known Daddy’s smarter than that. He grabs my arm and begins yanking. My fingers on my left hand are still broken from the last time I saw him, so my grip gives far easier than John said it ought to. I lay before him for a moment, gasping for air.

“The first step is changing you,” he snarls. “No daughter of mine wears a skirt like that.”

I realize it’s flown up in the struggle, exposing my panties, and I frantically try to push it back into place. Daddy uses that moment to unleash a flurry of quick hits, the last landing on my ear and making my hearing dissolve into a high, whining noise.

“Slut.” He kicks my hands away, then pries my knees apart to land a few more hits on my sensitive inner thighs. “If I see those again, I’m laying down another onto those bruises. That ought to keep your skirts where they belong.”

John was so gentle when he touched me there. I hold onto the memory of his caresses, of Harley telling me the skirt looked incredible, every scrap of warmth I can find.

I need these memories to keep me alive.

The belt lands on my still-aching ribs, on my face, and on my arms, legs, and back. Daddy teaches me lessons on lying,

on disrespecting, on cuss words. And every place he hits, I have a memory of John touching. He learned my body so quickly, how to tease pleasure out of every inch. I'm not just on this Earth to feel pain like this. I know how to feel good, too, because John taught me.

When Daddy pulls his boot back, lined up with my face, I know what comes next. He's going to knock me unconscious and, if his anger's anything to go by, teach me a lesson about stick-to-itiveness when I wake up. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. Even that spurs the fire on.

I saved Harley. I saved all the MC men still standing by going with Daddy in the first place, even if I got them hurt. I can be brave.

And I'm going to goddamn survive.

CHAPTER 49



Beast

I brace my arm, take aim at the target in the distance, and fire off a tight burst of three rounds. My Ruger judders against my palm, down through my body. Then, I set the gun down and press the button to send the paper target skidding along the clothesline Blue set up a couple of days ago near the back of the compound. It rolls to a stop in front of me, another of the dozens of posters he printed. A classic shooting target, with one modification: Eric Grimes's face pasted over the head.

And a spray of .44 caliber holes in his chest, enough to turn his heart into mincemeat.

I snort and tear the paper down. It beats the cans we used to set up along this back ridge, but I can sink as many bullets into paper-Grimes as I want. None of it tamps down even a hair of that sharp-edged anger that's been burning like somebody turned my chest into a furnace since I lost Harley and Bella.

One goddamn week ago.

I shred the paper and toss it into the garbage can next to the half-cocked shooting range. We've got most of the compound back to the way it belongs. The hole in the back fence has been patched a couple of times over, and we put a guard on it specifically. All our men have been given proper funerals. We had to do so many toasts I damn near got drunk off the motherfucking ale. Spirits would be lower if we didn't drop at least as many cartel and cops. Them, we buried on our

own property, unmarked. If those bastards wanted their dead, they should've taken them when they left.

But the black alert's still running. I walk through a compound crawling with my men, past a fucking tent we had to set up outside the clubhouse for all the less injured ones to get a little patching up until they could actually make it in to see Stitches. I almost had to tap the Cafarellis for medical supplies we could get in quiet, but Sin swore up and down the NOLA crew could do it faster and quieter. I doubted it, but they made an overnight run with everything we needed, and nobody's heard a whisper about it on the wall of scanners we set up in the war room.

A low scream gurgles out of the back shed as I pass. True to orders, Sin and Storm have been scooping up every Rosa they can lay hands on, and a few members of other cartels that work outside the city for good measure. I can't remember the last time the back shed wasn't occupied anymore. We're making scraps of progress on their coyotes, but nobody will give up a shred of information on the sheriff.

Or Bella.

I slam my fist into the wood. The man inside yelps again, and I grin. Nobody can tell me if they don't know anything, or if they're too goddamn stubborn, but we haven't gotten a fucking ghost of a trail. Fury claws at my insides. I let her go. I fucking let her go. That bastard wouldn't have pulled the trigger. He wouldn't have the balls to do it. If I hadn't backed down, my Beauty would still be in my arms every night, would still be smiling up at me with those big brown eyes of hers. Whatever the hell her daddy's doing to her right now is six inches to the left of my own goddamn fault.

My own house looms up in front of me, spurring the fury on. It's been awful quiet since that day, and not just because Bella's gone. I fall asleep alone every night, staring at the tire iron I keep on my nightstand now, but that's got nothing on the days. I had my suspicions when Harley came back so torn up, but Sin's discovery sank the final nail into the coffin. Grimes might've beat her within an inch of her life, might've broken her down enough to get her to give up how to get in, but he

alone couldn't have sucked all the fire out of my girl like this. She floats around the house, barely leaving her room. She hasn't been to class all week. Alex splits her time between Harley and her own pops, who's still beat to hell and now healing up from knee surgery, but I don't hear them talking and laughing like they used to. No, I've taken to spending what time Alex is around outside of the house entirely. When Harley needs me, I'm there, but it hurts to meet her eyes. There's just something...missing behind them now.

But I'm not pushing her. I talked to Stitches a little, the only soul I could trust not to go spreading rumors, and he said it would probably take a while. Even mentioned getting her someone to talk to, but I don't want to cross that bridge until she's ready.

All that, too, feels like my goddamn fault. Harley left because she figured out what was happening between Bella and me. If I'd been a little more careful, taken a little more time to talk to her instead of letting her come to her own conclusions, she never would've run off.

If I kept my head on straight and kept behaving like the Prez, no one would be hurting like they are right now. But even knowing that, it's a fucking fight. I try to fight through reports and meeting and updates. My mind always drifts to Harley at home, to Bella wherever she goddamn is, each of them going through private hells. My men depend on me to destroy the Rosas, to get us off the law's radar before they come up with some kind of justification to raid us proper and wipe us off the map, and those two girls' faces won't leave me alone. Harley's empty eyes. Bella pleading with me to sacrifice her to save whoever I had to.

I retreat away from the house, toward the clubhouse. Most of the training rooms have been packed since the attack. Everyone who can stand wants to be as lethal as they can manage for the next fight, but I moved a heavy bag into my office. I need to pummel something. The shooting range just doesn't quiet my thoughts like I need it to.

Once inside, I pull off my cut, drape it over my chair, crack my knuckles, and let loose. All my experience comes from bar

fights and MC brawls. I don't have the training of half my men, but I've got years of muscle. The bag creaks under my blows.

The worst part of all of this is the constant reports that Grimes has been seen here and there in the city, surrounded by deputies. Bastard hasn't missed a day of work. He scrubbed his attack from the fucking books, somehow, so he's still parading around, claiming Bella's kidnapped and drumming up pity for his goddamn election. A few hours ago, Rook saw fit to show me a fucking interview he did where he called us a "dangerous criminal gang" intent on "harming him at any cost," then begged with tears in his fucking eyes for us to let Bella go because she never did anything to us.

I snap my fist into the bag. The material splits under my blow, shreds of fabric tumbling out.

"Motherfucker." I knew I should've taken one of the leather ones. I drop into the seat behind my desk, pour myself a glass of bourbon, and stretch out my wrists.

Popular opinion on Grimes is higher than ever, especially after that broadcast. Even if he weren't running unopposed, he'd have the election on lock.

I sit up. He hit us—me—where he knew it would hurt. Maybe the motherfucker would like a taste of his own medicine.

An hour later, I sit in the war room with Sin on my left, a still-bandaged but determined Thor on my right, and Rebel at the other end of the table from us.

He smiles and runs a hand through his golden curls. "You need me for something, Prez? After the week we've had around here, I'm ready to try anything."

I glance at my VP and Sergeant-At-Arms. I called both of them in to explain my plan first. Sin smiled grimly and opened his laptop to begin researching requirements. Thor merely nodded with a hard look in his eyes. Stitches removed the covering over his broken eye socket a few days ago, declaring

he thought it would heal without surgery, and the deep bruising only makes my right-hand man look tougher.

“Grimes is up for re-election next month,” I say. “That’s why he’s on such a press blitz right now. He’s running unopposed, but he’s still scared of what is happening with Bella will do to his campaign.”

“Okay.” Rebel frowns. “What the hell does that have to do with us?”

Sin leans forward. “We’ve been assuming the cartel is in the good sheriff’s pocket, but it could just as well run the other way. There’s a decent chance he’s scared because, if he doesn’t get re-elected, Las Rosas don’t need his sorry ass anymore.”

“Which means we need a candidate.” I cross my arms. “Anyone decent enough to present a real threat.”

Thor scribbles something down on the notepad he carries around these days and slides it down the table. Rebel grabs it and reads it out.

“And that’s you.” He blanches. “Anything but politics, boss.”

I slam my fist down on the table. “He marched in here and pissed on everything we hold dear. He hit us where we were weak just to prove he goddamn could. Any Ruthless King worth his colors would want to do the same to him.”

“And I do!” Rebel slides the pad of paper back. “I’ll piss wherever you goddamn please, but I left the family business for a reason. I don’t cotton to all the glad-handing shit. I’ll make a crap candidate.”

“You’re our best choice.” Sin spins around his computer to show Rebel the projected election results he ran. Of every man in the MC, only Rebel stood a snowball’s chance in hell of snatching the win. “You’ve got the look, the education, the pedigree. Grimes might bring up that you’re in the MC, but the Houston chapter has never been formally indicted on significant charges. All you gotta do is play the ninety-nine percent card.”

Rebel huffs out a breath. “My father had all the fucking dominoes in place to turn me into a goddamn state senator right next to him. I know the game. I’m telling you I’m here because I don’t want to play. I got tired of all the lies and half-truths and always looking fifteen steps ahead.”

Anger claws at the walls of my chest. I could force him to do it. Lay down the law, or just call an all-hands in and declare it’s happening. But I don’t want to run my MC like that. The Ruthless Kings are supposed to be better. Rebel made his choices to make himself happy.

Despite the frantic rage that I can’t shake, if he refuses flat-out, I’ll find another way.

Thor scribbles something on his pad and pushes it to me.

“It’s barely politics,” I read. “And there’s no lying after the race is done.”

Rebel crosses his arms. “No, after the race, I’ll just be up to my elbows in pig shit and fending off calls from my father about how I can still levy this into a race for governor.”

I scowl. “We have to beat this bastard at his own game. If Sin’s right, and he’s only in with the cartel because he’s got his slot, we’d be humiliating him and cutting them off at the knees in one blow.”

“And if he’s wrong?” Rebel shakes his head. “No. There’s no goddamn way. I’ll train up whoever else you choose, if that’s what it takes, but I’m not putting my face out there. I don’t use my father’s name anymore. I make my own way in this world.”

Thor shakes his head. Sin looks at me. With the anger sinking hooks into my insides, I spread my hands on the table and play my very last card.

“I get wanting to make your own way. I ran away from my pops, soon as I could. But”—I sigh—“I want everybody to have the chance to make that choice. I’m not gonna force your hand, but if we don’t win this goddamn race, Bella’s stuck with her daddy for life. She’ll never get to make a choice

again. And you know she was well on her way to getting out of the life she came up in, just like you did.”

Rebel scrubs his hands over his face. He leaves them there for a long moment, like he needs privacy to think this through. I wait. My heart thunders in my chest, and that hot, sticky anger pours through my veins. If he won't do this, someone has to, and my odds were the next best for all that they were piddling.

Finally, he looks up. “I'm not wearing a suit.”

I grin.

CHAPTER 50



Sheriff Grimes

I sit at my desk, staring out at a cloud of deputies next to our biggest whiteboard. One of them points to a blurry picture of Beast, taken from the library security cameras on the day I found out he'd set his eyes on Bella, then at the high school yearbook photo of her I've been using for all my missing posters and TV spots. It was a good one. She finally warned me about the fucking picture the week before it happened, so I kept off anything that might've needed to be covered up. Her hair curls loosely over her shoulders, emulating my own curls, and she looks demurely through thick lashes and her mama's brown eyes. She even dressed up a little, in the fine sort of blouse that showed her figure without inviting too much speculation about what lay underneath. The soft blue makes her look even more fragile.

She looks like exactly the sort of girl a city would rise up to protect.

I turn my face to the paperwork in front of me before anyone can spot the sneer on my lips. If only they knew what sort of girl she truly was. A lying whore, tied up on the outskirts of town until I whip her into the sort of shape I could return her to the public eye in. She's been disrespectful, even mouthy since I got her back. That cussword on the first day was only the beginning. She won't look me in the eyes unless I force her to, she never stays or moves when I tell her to anymore, and I swear to the good Lord she is making herself sloppy on purpose. She never fails to spill when she eats anymore, smearing the good clothes with stains and crumbs I

brought for her. She lets her hair fall whichever way it likes, and barely even bothers to fix her clothes when they fall askew unless I let one of the cartel scum into the room. It's like she's trying to wind me up. I can barely visit her on weekdays because she sends me into such a welter it's hard to seem like a concerned father at work the next day.

Beast got to her. And Harley, if the little bitch's manners were anything to go by. I raised my daughter to the very best of my ability, drove myself wild doing it, and they ruined her in a matter of weeks. Nothing makes me believe in the sinfulness of humanity quite like Bella.

Worse, I've been living out of a hotel since someone—the fire inspector has no evidence yet, but he admits it was arson—burned my home to a crisp. Maryanne spent years turning that house we bought into a home, and the whole thing went up in flames while I was getting our slut of a daughter settled in across town. It sells the pitiful-father image, but I'm goddamn tired of taking up collections for eating room service and new uniforms because I'm not going to pay for those out of my own goddamn savings. At least the mayor found the kindness in his heart to put me up in the Post Oak downtown. I don't know how I'd be surviving otherwise.

The disposable phone I keep in the false bottom of my middle desk drawer vibrates, and I scowl. Ever since the attack on the compound, El Serpiente has demanded a much more direct line of communication. According to him, I lost too many of his men on what I claimed would be a “soft target” to be allowed as much leash as I had been.

I glance out the window again. No one is looking my way. Most of the deputies stand at the board now, except for Dogwood and Martinez, who are still chained to the case of the bodies in that development. Dogwood plays a game on his cell phone while Martinez furiously shuffles through crime scene photos, looking for anything he missed.

Sometimes, when I think he's getting a little too close to a break, I have Dogwood take a couple photos at random and shred them. Martinez complained loudly in the kitchenette the other day that he'd lose his head if it came off.

It rankles me to take orders from my sanctum, the one place in the world most under my control since they destroyed my fucking house, but I pull out the phone. The criminal scum I leave at the house with Bella during the day when I can't be there made it very clear that they'd do to her what they did to Beast's bitch daughter if I didn't comply, which means I can't turn state's evidence until she's ready to rejoin society. As much as I think Bella deserves any kind of lesson I can imagine to teach her, I want to be the one teaching.

Little girls learn best at their father's knee, after all.

The text, in blaring black and white, reads: *This doesn't change anything.*

I furrow my eyebrows, then quickly unfurrow them before I can develop worry lines. My youthful complexion is part of what keeps the voters turning out year after year. What the hell does he mean, *this*? Nothing's changed since he raked me over the coals about the failure of the attack on the Ruthless Kings, or at least nothing that I know about.

A hush sweeps over the group outside my office. I look up to find them all gathered around Dogwood now, his phone held out so everyone can see. Even Rhoda cranes her neck like she's trying to see from the front of the office.

A low, cold feeling gathers in the pit of my stomach. Whatever El Serpiente was talking about, has just reached my office. Worse than that, it reached my men before it reached me. And it's the sort of thing that has them all going quiet, even the ones who'd go out scalping Ruthless Kings if I let them.

Andre puts up his hands as if to silence a murmured conversation, and I force myself to look down at the work in front of me as I stuff the disposable back into its spot. If this changes nothing, I still need to be the troubled but hardworking sheriff they know and love. I can't get caught spying on my men like I don't know they'll come running to me with any new information.

The paperwork blurs in front of my eyes during the long moments it takes for Andre to cross the bullpen and knock on

my door. The longer it takes, the more that cold feeling grows. Beast has come up with some kind of scheme, I just know it. Something he thinks will put him back on top. I know I can crush that stupid thug underfoot in the time it takes me to put on my boots in any fight worth having. What worries me is the text. I've got Bella back, but there's no forgetting who she's sitting with right now. If El Serpiente thought it worth risking my cover for, Beast just might have forced a thought worth thinking out of his thick skull.

Finally, the knock comes. I look up to see Andre, haggard from late nights working this case, with an even deeper frown than usual on his face. I gesture for him to come in and sit back like I don't know what's been going on outside my four walls.

He sits in the chair across from me with a heavy sigh. "Sheriff, I don't know how to say this, but I have some bad news."

"More?" I raise my eyebrows like I'm shocked, then force a look of pure dread over my features. "They didn't find her body, did they?"

"No, nothing so bad as that." Andre has the gall to look a little relieved about how far I jumped into worst-case scenarios. "Someone else entered the running for sheriff."

That cold feeling explodes over my body. This doesn't change the fact that Las Rosas Negras need a friendly face in the sheriff's office. I have to win the election, or the only bed I'm going to be going home to is a coffin.

Even knowing Bella's safe and sound at that house on the edge of town, I wish Andre had dumped her body on my fucking desk. That'd be better than this.

I fight to keep my composure and exhale a sigh I hope sounds like relief as well. "Who is it? Do I have to be worried?"

"That's the real bad news." Andre purses his lips. "His name's Bates Underwood."

My skin turns to ice. “Underwood? Like Senator Carson Underwood? Like DA Dahlia Underwood?”

“The very same.” But Andre doesn’t get that gassy, self-satisfied look he has when he’s through giving me bad news.

I pluck one of my fountain pens out of my cup so I have something to hold onto. There’s no way Beast could’ve gotten access to an Underwood. They’re old Texas money, old Texas politics. He’s got one more trick up his goddamn sleeve, and Andre’s too scared to tell it to me.

“What else?” I bark.

Andre swallows. “Well, you may know Bates Underwood better as Rebel.” He pulls out his phone and shows me a grainy mugshot of a young, grinning blond man with perfect teeth.

A man I saw kicking in the ribs of one of Leo Tate’s boys in blue not more than a week ago, wearing Beast’s fucking colors.

The pen in my hand snaps, splattering ink all over my shirt and laptop. Andre hops up to grab me the roll of paper towels from the kitchenette. In his absence, I snarl at the screen.

“That sonofabitch,” I mutter as I scrape ink off my skin with the edge of a document. Ink-stained is just over the line from concerned father to genuine mess the people shouldn’t re-elect.

Andre returns, and I plaster a look of apology on my face.

“Terribly sorry about that.” I accept the paper towels and begin dabbing quickly.

“Perfectly understandable, Sheriff.” Andre sits back down. “You must’ve been thinking hard about running against an Underwood that a connection to *that man*”—as my deputies have taken to calling Beast in my presence—“caught you right off guard. I’ll be clearer in the future.”

“Thank you.” I drop the sodden mess of paper towels into the garbage can. Another shirt ruined, but my hands look all right. Maybe Rhoda knows how to clean it up.

“What are we going to do?” Andre looks properly worried, and that inflames my temper all over again. Not only did Beast dredge up the only motherfucker with half a shot of standing against me in this race, he did a good enough job that he’s got my own men faltering. That is the one thing I can’t have.

“Don’t you worry, Andre.” I extend him a worn but comforting smile. “I’ve been serving the people of this county for eight long years now. They won’t turn on me in my time of need.”

“But, sir—”

I meet his gaze, letting a little of the fury that’s been burning me up inside enter my eyes. Andre flinches back.

“I’ll take care of it,” I spit.

CHAPTER 51



I tug on the red silk tie one of the bastards I used to consider my escape from my family dredged up and glare at the curtain blocking me from whatever audience turned out for a goddamn sheriff's debate. Beast owes me big time. Beyond big time. The newspapers haven't stopped trumpeting about my candidacy. I told him in no uncertain terms that if I see the phrase "prodigal son" one more time, I'll burn down whatever paper printed it.

The big bastard just laughed. And that's why I'm up on this godforsaken stage. Beast hasn't laughed since the attack on the compound, since Harley returned and Bella got taken. I'd give just about anything not to be here, but when a man you respect as much as Beast asks you do to something like this, you find a spot in your withered heart to do it.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. Only two minutes until the debate, and staring at my phone would not be a good look. But the fucking incumbent hasn't showed his face yet, and any kind of "present" beats "absent." I slide the phone out and take a look at who's calling.

DAD ASSISTANT #3.

I sigh, silence it, and slide it back into my pocket. Yet another that hasn't stopped since I threw my hat in this circus ring. He keeps trying to reach me through his minions. I don't want to pick up his calls on the best of days, so I certainly don't want to pick them up now.

Finally, Eric Grimes saunters onto the stage and takes the podium next to mine, wearing his fucking sheriff's uniform. I scowl at him. I've done everything I can all my life to avoid putting myself in a position where I have to stand next to men like him and smile so it burns my gut this bastard is the reason I'm here. All I want to do is tackle him to the goddamn floor and punch his lights out.

But, like he can read my fucking mind, he glances at the swarming mass of techs and makeup people and God only knows who else, then tips his hat in my direction with a smile.

I suck in a slow breath. *Backstage constituents are still constituents*, my father's voice reminds me. I nod back.

For how many years have I ignored all those little rules my father laid down? It feels like more than I can count at this point, but they're the only thing that will save my ass now. Grimes has got the bearing. I can see it from here. He leans against his podium with grace as an older, round-faced woman bustles up to him to powder his nose and murmurs something that makes her laugh. I've been skulking around back here, fixing the sleeves of my fucking power suit over and over again to try to make sure they actually cover my ink and scowling at everyone like the MC man I've become.

The stage manager, Rose, walks in and stops in the middle of the stage. "All right, gentlemen, we want a nice, clean debate. We're televising live on all the local channels, and we've even got a bit of a live audience."

Eric Grimes smiles. "Isn't that exciting, Rose? I can't remember the last time we had an audience."

Rose laughs, too, and what I've gotten myself into finally sinks in. Houston doesn't want Rebel. For the first time, Beast doesn't, either. They want Eric.

And they want Bates.

"The moderator will time your answers," she says. "Curtain up in five, four"—She puts up three fingers and backs off the stage.

I roll my shoulders back and pull out a smile I haven't used in a long time, not since I was buying booze at the liquor store near my high school with nothing but my father's money and a little bit of rich-boy charm. I even pull a single lock of hair out of my perfect coif.

Two.

Eric Grimes glances at me and frowns as he watches my transformation. *That's right, you piece of shit. Get scared.*

One.

He snaps forward, and I shove a hand in my pocket. Polished, but just on the right side of it.

The curtain slides open to reveal an audience of maybe thirty people, sitting in a high school gym behind a well-dressed man at a podium, surrounded by cameras. I spot Sin in the crowd, wearing jeans and a T-shirt, as well as a few other MC brothers Beast thought would blend a little better. My connection to the Ruthless Kings isn't exactly secret, so the less ammunition we can give Grimes, the better, but they didn't want to send me out alone. I smile my most charming smile to a paltry applause.

"Welcome, one and all, to this cycle's sheriff debate." The moderator addresses the low camera in front of his table instead of us, and I swallow down a burst of irritation. "Our candidates today are two-term incumbent, Eric Grimes, and late arrival to the race, Bates Underwood." He looks up at us, finally. "We're going start with opening statements, then move onto constituent questions. Sheriff, please start."

Eric grips his podium, glances down at a set of index cards, and smiles. "People of Harris County, it's been an honor to serve you these eight long years." His smile falters. "Some of you may know about certain family tragedies I've experienced of late. I know rumors were swirling that I might drop out, and I won't lie, I considered it." He swallows and makes eye contact with one of the cameras. "But I've said it before, and I'll say it again. I believe a man can do no greater good in this world than protecting those he loves, and after all this time, I find it easy to say I love all of you like my own

family. By continuing to protect and serve you, I feel I'm doing my best by my own as well. I hope you'll let me keep doing that." He beams that winning smile once more, just a little wobbly around the edges.

The moderator nods at me. I swallow. I should've known the pig would be a decent political operator. But given the look on Sin's face, he didn't expect him to be this good either.

My dad always had higher hopes for me than Dahlia. Somewhere deep in my memory, I know exactly what to do with a politically savvy incumbent. I throw them that liquor-store smile, trying to look like just the right sort of trouble, and start spinning a speech right out of my ass.

"My name's Bates Underwood. I know that makes all y'all fine folks thinking about DA Underwood, or Senator Underwood, but I'm not here to use their names to get me where I want to go in life." I chuckle. "If you take any look at my history, you'll see that plain as day. I haven't walked the same straight and narrow as Sheriff Grimes here." I lean forward. "But I don't think lawmen ought to be perfect citizens before they take up the mantle. This is Texas, ladies and gentlemen. We've got a history of turning over new leaves, of making good out of bad. I want to protect you just as much as the man next to me, and I have the know-how to do it."

Murmurs ripple through the crowd as I lean back. Grimes shoots me a look, fury burning in his eyes. I smile softly. The only way to overturn an incumbent without a population change is to be different enough to catch the public's eye, while seeming like you're going to be better than them at their own game. My dad would be proud.

"Right." The moderator cleared his throat. "Let's move onto questions. We're going to go back and forth on who answers first, starting with Sheriff Grimes." He lifts up an index card, and the debate begins.

Questions flow toward us. I devise strategies on how to handle big budgets, keeping incarceration rates low, managing non-criminal emergencies. My dad's words pour out of my

mouth, polished and perfect. Grimes matches me point for point. It's hard to say who's winning.

The moderator lifts another card. "Starting with the sheriff this time, Gloria from Jersey Village asks, 'What are you going to do about the worsening drug problem in Houston and surrounding communities?'"

That's exactly the break I needed. I turn to the sheriff.

"Well, Gloria, I think that's a mighty fine question." Grimes smiles at the camera. "I am aware of how the problem just keeps building, and it's becoming clear it's the fault of criminal organizations operating inside our country's border, such as motorcycle gangs." He grimaces, his mask slipping for a split second. "I intend to refocus department efforts from isolating singular criminals onto these groups."

The moderator nods at me. "Mr. Underwood?"

"Please, call me Bates." I smile at the audience. "Worsening is a good word. I've been running some of my own numbers, and they indicate that most of the drug problem in and around Houston originates with cartels, groups operating on both sides of the Mexican border." Grimes face frowns in the corner of my eye. I spread my hands welcomingly. "That said, I want a sheriff's department all the county's citizens can rely on, so I wouldn't want to focus too much on any one class or group as the problem. I think we need to start working interdepartmentally, with our boys in blue here in Houston, with the DA, and with Congress itself to get the resources we need. Then, we can address the problem from all angles."

I could puke. I sound like everything my father dreamed I would be, even dropping little hints about my heritage without mentioning it outright. But Sin nods, the crowd murmurs, and I try to choke down the nausea.

On the other side of the stage, Grimes clings tightly to his podium. That little dig about the cartels cut deeper than I even hoped. A few more jabs, and a man with his temper is bound to show exactly who he is.

The moderator leads us through a few more questions, and I find a way every time to poke at Grimes's family life, his relationship with the cartel, his oh-so-moral stance. He grows redder and redder by the minute.

“For the final question of the evening, I have different ones for each of you.” The moderator looks at me. “Henry, from Bellaire, would like to know how you feel you can enforce the law on others with your history of lawbreaking.”

I duck my head and chuckle. “I asked myself that a few times before entering my name, Henry, and I kept circling back to one answer. As the old saying goes, it takes one to know one. I think my unique perspective will help me reach folks who have just lost their way.” I gesture to Grimes. “My *estimable* opponent, with his spotless record, just doesn't know what it's like to need a hand out of a sticky spot.” I smile that liquor-store smile. “Most people can't live up to that, and I'd like to be a sheriff for them.”

“Sheriff Grimes,” the moderator says, “Andy, of Humble, wants to know how you're going to keep your personal tragedies from distracting you from the rest of the county's business.”

Grimes, now bright red in the face, smoothes a shaking hand over his hair. “My sainted wife Maryanne has been in and out of the hospital for most of my tenure as your sheriff, and I haven't let that distract me one whit.”

The audience murmurs. Jackass may as well have said he prioritized work over his sick wife, and he'll do it again for his kidnapped daughter. Grimes somehow turns redder as he realizes his blunder.

“And that will be our debate.” The moderator stands. “Thank you for your time, folks and don't forget to—”

I turn toward him for the customary shake before the program cuts. Grimes stares at my outstretched hand, rage and panic alight in his eyes, and storms off the stage.

Real pleasure infuses my smile as I turn to the cameras and wave instead. The moderator gestures to cut the feed, and I

stride off the stage as well, out to the grocery-getter Beast insisted I take to the debate.

The Prez himself sits in the front seat, a laptop on the dashboard now playing some news channels instant analysis of the debate. I just know he watched the whole damn thing. As soon as I close the door behind me, I whip off the jacket and tie. On his little screen, I smile, looking for all the world like the Underwood my father wanted me to be.

I can't stand that man.

"You better hope I don't win this," I grumble.

Beast stares at me, long and hard. "You'd better hope you do."

CHAPTER 52



Belle

My eyes flutter open, and consciousness swims hazily through my mind. I remember Daddy coming to the house yesterday in a high temper. That stuck out in the blur of days alone, silent rebellion, and avoiding as many of the cartel men as I could. It took a long, long time for him to finish enough sentences for me to figure out what all happened.

Rebel, a man I remember as little more than a blur of golden hair and puff-chested attitude around Beast's compound, entered the race for sheriff. More than that, it turns out he comes from some sort of political family that just might give him enough clout to win the election. They had some kind of debate, which Daddy hadn't had to do yet because he ran unopposed, and his poll numbers took a significant hit.

When he told me this, I smiled. That's when the night becomes seriously hazy.

As memory filters in, so does the pain. Every part of me screams with it, even parts he usually doesn't think to touch. Bright and hot, dull and pounding, there's no escaping it. It slams into every corner of my mind and tries to consume my thoughts.

I swallow and think of Thor, who insisted on being part of John's meetings even immediately after he got hurt so bad he needed multiple surgeries. I need to stay together enough to pay attention. John might find me and rescue me any day now, and I need to bring whatever information I can back to him.

First, I have to find out how bad it is. Daddy dumped me in the creaky twin bed under a light blanket, nothing like the hospital bed I stayed in at the compound. I try to move my legs. Pain rockets through me, so sharp I can barely choke down the scream. Both of them twitch, but there's no way I can put weight on them. I grimace. The details of last night's beating remain hazy, and I'm thankful for that all of the sudden. I try my arms. Much the same story. Screaming pain. Some movement, but not a lot.

I hiss out a breath, and even that burns. No point in trying to sit up. I couldn't get anywhere if I wanted to.

Footsteps shuffle outside my door, and my heart leaps into high gear. Like this, I couldn't run from any of the cartel men if they decided to try something, nor could I even imagine fighting them off.

One of them, a younger one about my age, opens the door and steps in with a tray of food. He stares at me as he shuffles over and drops it on a low coffee table by the chair I've been eating in for the last...however long days. Instant oatmeal again, and too far for me to even imagine reaching. Then, he turns and starts to shuffle out.

I have to be brave.

"Wait," I rasp.

He stops and turns to me with a smile. "Getting lonely, *señorita*?"

I pale. "No. I just...can't get up. I can't reach that."

"You can't?" He prowls closer.

Another cartel member sticks his head in the door. "Rayo!"

The man stalking toward me freezes.

"*Conoces las reglas*," the new one says. "*Lo llamaré*."

He pulls out his cell phone and dials, then turns away to have a quiet, rapid conversation. The first man, seemingly named Rayo, stands over me, hands twitching at his sides like he's waiting for the go ahead to snatch the thin blanket over me away. I swallow.

The second cartel man turns back. “Feed her. Touch her and you lose your hands.”

The words, obviously spoken in English for my benefit, rattle through my mind as he walks away. Rayo sneers. Who did that second man call? Daddy? But it didn’t sound like English.

Rayo grabs the tray and marches back, then drops it unceremoniously in my lap. Oatmeal splatters. My legs scream, and I can’t hold back a whimper.

“*Bien,*” Rayo mutters.

Then, he lifts a spoonful of oatmeal to my mouth and begins feeding me.

I float in and out of consciousness for the rest of the day. Rayo, seemingly as punishment, is forced to feed me lunch as well. Well, I think it’s lunch. It’s the next meal. But sometimes I get a few breakfasts in a row, or sometimes they wake me in the night for food. I struggle to hold onto time, to detail. There are only a few things I know for certain. John loves me, and he’s doing everything he can to find me. I’m here to protect Harley somehow. And I need to stay alive.

The room is dark when I next blink awake, and someone’s dragged the chair near my bed. For one halcyon moment, I think I’m back at the compound, that all the weeks in between were another fever dream, and that John is about to take my hand and murmur that I’m safe.

When he flicks on the blinding light over my head and reveals himself to be my daddy, the pain in my skull almost rivals the pain in my heart.

“I came here to check on my bitch of a daughter and maybe let off a little steam,” he snarls. “You didn’t even have the respect to be awake when I showed up. What kind of woman are you?”

I don't answer him. That always made him angry, and now, it's one of my only ways to fight back.

"Goddammit, Bella!" He slams a fist down on my bed, and even the springs bouncing underneath me shoots a burst of pain through my system.

I bite my lips to keep from making a sound.

"I bet you can move." He stands and stalks back and forth. "I bet you can move all you goddamn please, and you're just lying in that bed to make me look bad."

John loves me. I'm protecting Harley. I hold myself still.

"You want to be like that?" He turns back to me. "Fine. I'll prove it. The scum around here may not be able to lay hands on you right now, but rest assured, I still have all my fatherly rights, no matter how much you spit on them."

He storms over to the bed and grabs me by the shoulders, then lifts me into a sitting position. My bones screech against each other, and when he releases me, I drop instantly back to the bed. I can't contain a whimper on impact.

"Fucking dramatic bitch." He cracks his knuckles. "We can do this the hard way."

I grit my teeth and do not beg. I'm done begging Daddy for anything. It never helped anyway.

He grabs me by my ankles, spins me around, and yanks me off the bed. I hit the rotten wood floor and scream with a pain that threatens to swallow my consciousness whole.

Tonight might be the night he kills me.

"You—"

Before Daddy can finish his sentence, a broad cartel member I haven't seen around before steps into the room without knocking. Daddy straightens up. Through fuzzy vision, I watch the cartel man look from me to him slowly.

"Grimes," he says. "We need to talk."

"Certainly." Daddy brushes off his hands and turns to leave the room, but I can see the tension in his shoulders. He's

furious.

“I don’t see a reason to leave.” The cartel member looks at me again. “Do you?”

The implication in his words settles on me like a heavy blanket. There’s no point in keeping anything from me. He believes there’s no way I could ever talk. Because this big man assumes I’ll be dead before I ever leave this house.

With the way my body burns against the floorboards, I can’t disagree. The flame in my chest that wants me to live flickers and brightens, but wanting doesn’t make too much of a difference right now. I can barely stretch out a hand.

Either John is going to save me, or Daddy is going to kill me.

Daddy doesn’t even glance my way. “Of course not. What can I do for you, Fenix?”

“What would you say about your poll numbers since the last debate?” Fenix leans against the wall.

Daddy swallows and takes the chair once more. “Well, it depends where you look. In some towns, I’m still polling over fifty percent—”

“Over fifty percent?” Fenix roars. “Last week you had a hundred percent, and we were still worried your sorry ass wouldn’t pull off.”

I’ve never seen my daddy scared before, but he flinches back when the big man yells. That anger still knots his shoulders, a bomb waiting to go off, but he’s not in control here. Fenix is. My daddy almost looks small next to him.

He nods. “Yes, of course. I’ve been in touch with a few networks for solo interviews to try to recoup the numbers, and there are still two more debates to be had.”

“More debates? More appearances?” Fenix stalks the room. “After that performance, you want to put yourself in front of people again?”

“I’ve always shone in solo interviews.” Daddy twists his hands together. “And now that I know what that scum is doing,

it won't rattle me as much the next time."

"You should have anticipated it from the start." Fenix advances on Daddy, and me on the floor behind him. "You should've done whatever you had to do to knock that fucking debate out of the park."

"I thought the public would be more offended by his affiliation!" Daddy throws his hands up. "And I expected him to look more like it. Before the curtain went up, he looked like somebody crammed a gorilla into a suit, but as soon as the audience came into view he became...that."

Fenix lunges forward and grabs Daddy by the throat, lifting him a few inches up in the air. "That sounds like an excuse. Do you want me to go back to El Serpiente with excuses?"

Daddy shakes his head frantically. Fenix drops him back into his chair.

"That's what I thought." He brushes off his hands and stalks to the door. "Don't forget, Mr. Grimes. We have no need for a *former* sheriff."

With that, the big man marches out and slams the door behind him. On the other side, I hear him shout, "Rayo! I need this place ready in three weeks."

Daddy remains in the chair for a long moment as my aching brain fights through the words they said. I know there's meaning in them, meaning John might need.

Finally, it settles on me. They have no need for a former sheriff. If he doesn't win, he'll become nothing more than an unmarked grave, somewhere outside of Houston.

The thought stokes the fire in my chest, and I smile.

"What's making you so happy?" Daddy snaps as he climbs to his feet and starts pulling his belt out of his pants.

I don't answer him. With any luck, I can live just long enough to see his empire crumble.

CHAPTER 53



Beast

I hang up the phone, drum my fingers on the steering wheel of the truck, and stare at the laptop Sin set up for me on the dashboard. It's the same as the first two debates: Rebel smiles as he says something the oh-so-good citizens of Houston won't understand about Grimes's character, and Grimes grinds his teeth so hard I start expecting his next smile to have a few black spots where he turned his teeth to dust. It's the same garbage as it has been for the last three weeks, and not a goddamn thing has changed.

"Fuck!" I slam my hands against the steering wheel as the audience applauds something Grimes says. All the reputable polls have Rebel out ahead, according to Sin, but the longer this goes on, the stupider it fucking feels.

We haven't caught the slightest whisper of Bella. Grimes goes everywhere but his fucking PR appearances with a small army of pigs, and Rebel's already semi-successfully passing as one of the upper crust, so we don't exactly have another man lying around who's slick enough to pose as some news fuck. We haven't been able to get within spitting distance of him since the attack. Closest was a leak in the maid service at his fucking hotel, but we only learned that he doesn't spend most evenings in his room.

I drop my head onto the steering wheel. A month. A fucking month, and we can't find her. A month where we've been winding him up just about as much as we can manage, humiliating him in the biggest settings we can find. When I think about my Beauty, how badly I've failed her, an abyss

opens in my chest that I don't know how I'm ever going to crawl my way out of.

We had one goddamn night together, and if I lose her, it's going to tear me up for the rest of my days. It sounds ridiculous when I lay it out like that. I keep trying to talk myself through only wanting to protect her or owing her for getting Harley out, but it always comes back to the same goddamn thing.

I fucking love her.

I lie awake at night thinking about her eyes, the small smiles she gave me when no one else was looking, the way her tiny hand fit into mine. Worse than that, I think about the wonder in her face when I told her about my family, the murmured stories of her mama, how small she looked on the bench that first night despite being the bravest goddamn woman I'd ever met. I'd do anything to hold her again.

The door to the truck opens. I look up and realize the debate ended while I wasn't paying attention. Rebel climbs into the passenger seat and, like always, rips off his jacket and tie.

"Did you see Sin's poll numbers?" he groans. "I'm looking like a sure fucking shoo-in. What the hell am I gonna do as sheriff?"

All the guilt and heartbreak in my chest congeals back into rage, and I whirl on him.

"Whatever I goddamn tell you to do!" I bellow. "You're a fucking MC man, and that means you do what your Prez fucking says, without all the bitching and bellyaching, or I'm gonna send you right back to your daddy's door for a brilliant fucking political career."

Rebel blinks. He runs a hand through his hair to loosen the gel and let it hang wild again. He takes a deep breath.

"You're losing it," he says quietly.

My vision goes red.

“The fuck do you mean?” I press my forearm against his chest, almost against his throat, pinning him to the seat and wrinkling his nice white shirt.

He doesn’t flinch. “I mean, you got too much on your plate, and you’re not talking to fucking anyone.”

I press harder. His sternum bends slightly, and he gasps.

“I am your Prez,” I growl. “Watch your fucking tongue.”

“Everybody’s been tiptoeing around you for too long.” He sounds winded already. “Somebody has to say it, and you need me enough that I figure I’ll survive the encounter. Fucking talk to me, you big bastard!”

His eyes bulge out of his head, and just as fast as it came, my anger melts back into the pit inside me. I slump against my seat as Rebel catches his breath.

“Just heard from Stitches,” I mumble. “Thor’s throat surgery didn’t go as well as he hoped, and the knee guy is worried about his progression. Nobody knows how long he’s gonna be out of commission.”

“Okay,” Rebel says as he unbuttons his shirt and shucks it to reveal a plain white tank top underneath. “What else?”

I glare at him. “Who put you up to this?”

“No one.” He grabs his cut out of the backseat. “I’m just watching you fray at the edges. I won’t tell anyone shit.”

He’s a good kid. Always has been, even when he stumbled up to my door in a dirty private school uniform. I suck in a deep breath and try to trust him.

“You know none of the Rosas we’ve picked up are saying shit.” I stare out the windshield. “But not just about Bella, about anything. And we’re not even picking them up at a rate to thin numbers.”

He nods as he slips the cut on. Something in him relaxes. “There’s something else.”

I wring the steering wheel. “You swear you won’t tell anyone?”

“On my good name.” He grins.

I can’t make myself smile with him.

“Harley won’t come out of her room,” I whisper. “Sometimes she lets me in, around dinnertime, but she doesn’t talk like she used to. She barely talks at all, just sits there, staring out the window.” The other gulf I’ve been carrying around opens in my chest.

Rebel blows out a long breath. “She let anyone in?”

“Alex, most days.” I nod as if to convince myself that’s good. “But with Thor’s complications, Alex is running ragged splitting time between Harley and her pops, so I don’t know what’s going to happen. And Alex won’t tell me shit, just keeps saying she needs time.”

He nods with me. “And with Thor in and out of surgery, you aren’t talking to the people you usually do.”

I drop my head back to the steering wheel. “Sin’s taking on all the responsibilities he can. I can’t put my fuckups on his shoulders, too.”

“They’re not—”

My phone rings. I snatch it up and check the number.

Unknown.

Something in my chest sings. Rebel goes silent as I fumble to pick up the call.

“Bella?” I whisper into the receiver.

“Close.” The sheriff’s voice oozes over the line, smug condescension layered over what sounds like a rage almost as deep as my own.

I sit back in my seat as anger threatens to consume the fragile hope I still harbor that everything will turn out alright. It takes all my will power not to crush the phone in my hand. “What can I do you for, sheriff?”

Rebel’s eyebrows shoot to his hairline. I gesture to him, and he pulls out his phone to text Sin and see if he can come up with anyway to get a trace.

“You could die,” he offers conversationally.

“Not on my to-do list,” I counter smoothly, trying to keep my cool when all I want to do is rage at this bastard. “Give me a goddamn reason to talk to you or stop taking up my day.”

He hesitates for a long moment, and I can almost hear his teeth grinding again. “I’d like to make a deal.”

I snort and change the call to speakerphone just as Rebel shows me a message from Sin.

Already left the venue. No dice.

That’s all right. I’m happy to find the bastard the old-fashioned way.

“Pull your golden boy from the race,” Grimes says.

“And why the fuck would I do that?” I cross my arms and don’t look at Rebel.

That same long pause. The same grinding. “Because I’ll give her back to you.”

The hope in my chest burns brighter. It worked. The plan fucking worked. He didn’t even wait until the ref called the match to hand it over to us. He’d rather lose his only daughter than lose the respect of his stupid fucking constituents. I look up at Rebel.

He grins and mouths, “Thank fuck.”

“And how the hell am I supposed to believe you?” I ask.

“Well enough to make the trade, if you ever want to see her again,” he spits.

Part of me warns that I’m playing with fire, but I’m the fucking Prez of the Ruthless Kings that’s run Houston for over a decade now. A man like Grimes can’t be trusted, and I’m not going to make a rookie fucking mistake like that with Beauty’s life on the line.

“I want proof,” I say. “Proof that she’s alive before I do anything else.”

“Christ.” Grimes huffs out a breath. “You’re the fucking murderer on this call. You really think I’d do that?”

Thor, covered in bandages. Harley, in her room. Bella, even that first day.

“I wouldn’t put a thing in this world past you, Grimes,” I say quietly.

“Fine.” He stomps through wherever the fuck he is and opens a door on the other end. “Say something, you bitch.”

A soft, pained sound filters across the line. After a moment, there’s a sharp *crack*, and the pained sound becomes louder.

My heart breaks and falls into that abyss of guilt. That’s my Bella, my Beauty, and I just got her hurt again.

“Good enough?” the sheriff snaps.

“Yes.” I bite the end of the word off, sharp enough to cut. “We’ll make the exchange in an hour. There’s an abandoned gas station just off the Eastex Freeway where nobody’ll see your precious ass. Don’t shut off this number, and I’ll send you the address.”

“Now, where’s your spirit of compromise?” Some of his humor seems to have returned now that he’s got his position secured again. Or maybe now that he’s hit her one last time.

That thought burns in my chest.

“You picked the place, so how’s about I pick the time?” he says. “Noon tomorrow, instead of in an hour. I’m a bit busy this evening, planning my new campaign strategy.”

I snarl. “No! I want her back in an hour, or no deal.”

He hums thoughtfully. “You don’t mean that, do you? There’s nothing you wouldn’t do to get her back.”

Rebel begins texting furiously next to me.

“I have your fucking number now, you bastard,” I growl. “There’s no way I don’t find you, and if I find you, I bet I can fucking find her. You want to wait, be my guest, but that’ll only get her back in my arms and Rebel kicking your ass all

the way to the polls. You don't want to lose your precious position a sheriff do you?"

"Jesus Christ, you've got a hair trigger," he says. "Relax." He exhales slowly. "Fine. That development where you found the bodies. One hour. It'll be clear."

"If you fuck me on this," I say, enunciating every word so I know he hears me, "it's war, Grimes. I will end you one way or another, fuck the consequences."

"Same to you." He hangs up with a decisive click.

Hope and fury war in my chest, and I turn to Rebel.

He smiles. "What are you waiting for? We've only got an hour!"

I throw the car into drive and peel out of the lot, something between a snarl and grin tearing at my lips.

I'm coming for you, Beauty.

CHAPTER 54



Belle

John. Harley. Burning, aching pain, covering my skin, my bones, my thoughts. I don't know how long it's been since my world contained anything but this. Daddy's attempts to make me lose track of time were pointless. I don't even know if he's trying anymore, but time is gone, gone, gone.

The door opens. Food time. Eating hurts just as much as not eating. The trash can next to my bed and the sick stains on the sheets are testament to both. I let whoever comes to feed me decide which I do by how pushy they are about feeding me.

My eyes flutter closed. There's no point in watching. Whoever handed down the order about not touching me has enough clout to make it true. They'll either force a spoon into my mouth or they won't.

John. Harley.

My skin lights up like a Christmas tree on fire when somebody slides their arms underneath my body. I moan. I gave up on not sounding hurt minutes or years ago.

The arms stop under my shoulders and my knees. Then, with a grunt, whoever it is lifts me off my bed.

I don't remember asking to go to the bathroom.

"*Vamos,*" the person holding me says.

The door creaks open, and I force my eyes open with it.

Rayo cradles me against his chest, his face screwed up with the effort of it. When he walks past the bathroom attached to the small bedroom that has become my world I ask where he's taking me but he just grunts. For the first time since I walked into this house, he is carrying me out of the door.

My head screams, but I stare out of the corner of my eye to try to see where he's taking me. Cartel men run this way and that. Some of them laugh. Some of them scowl at me. Some wear no expression at all. None of them look bloody like I would have expected if John finally came for me. Something else is happening.

I look up at Rayo. I can only see the underside of his chin, his patchy facial hair. He wouldn't betray the cartel for me, I don't think. He has never shown tenderness, just increasing frustration as more and more of my mind and body melted away from me. Something else is happening.

John. Harley. The pain. I just have to hold onto them until my world starts making sense again.

I shut my eyes.

Another door opens, and if the blinding, burning light behind my eyelids is anything to go by, Rayo walks me outside. The sun touches my skin, and that, too, hurts. I'm almost grateful when he tosses me down a moment later, even though the landing tears a scream from my lips.

He slams a door that sounds a little different and then, I am moving.

Whatever I'm on slides under my face. I start to tumble. Someone swears in Spanish, and something latches over my waist with a *click*.

"You're far more trouble than you're worth," someone says.

No, not someone. I know that voice. Daddy.

"Your mother always got the same goddamn way when it was time to go back to the hospital," he spits. "She should've been grateful I was even taking her in the first place.."

My mind swims. The surface underneath me bounces, and while the belt holds me in place, fingers of pain flicker over my skin like flames. I moan.

“Shut the fuck up,” he snaps. “If I were a lesser man, I would’ve goddamn killed you and dumped your body at his feet. None of you bitches know how to be grateful.”

Grateful. Grateful. The word echoes in my mind, detached from meaning but calling up images of John and Harley. After that, I see people whose names come less easily to me. A redhead. A gray-eyed man. A man with a laptop. Person after person in leather cuts with the same patch. *Grateful. Grateful.*

I fight to hold onto them every time I bounce and pain screams through me again.

Finally, blissfully, the bouncing stops. But somebody opens the metal door, pouring sunlight down on me, and there are hands under my armpits. I try to protest, but they move too fast. Someone pulls me forward, and I tumble off the bench. Down, down, down.

When I land, my whole body screams at me. Something gritty makes its way between my lips, and that is all it takes. I roll onto my side and retch, calling up stomach acid that barely burns as much as my smallest injuries.

“Here she is,” Daddy spits. “Just like you fucking wanted. Now get Underwood out of my election.”

It is like dying trying to open my eyes in the sun, but I make myself do it. For John. For Harley. For half-kindled fires in my chest I can’t remember the names of anymore.

Houston’s dark dirt greets me, as well as a pile of my own sick. Heavy footsteps march toward me, and after a moment, become steel-toed boots at the edge of my vision. My muscles burn as I tense them.

This is some trick. Daddy dragged me out here just to hurt me again, or to turn me over to some worse group who will hurt me more than he ever could.

Instead, arms wrap around me again with the same white-hot hurt. I’m pulled to a broad, muscular chest. My cheek

lands fabric that feels familiar, smells familiar. I fight through the pain to place it.

Leather. Like all those people. Like John. Like Harley.

I can't move well enough to look properly, whoever picked me up isn't supporting my head, so I let it fall back. The sun sears into my eyes, and it takes me a long moment to adjust.

The first thing that swims into view is the underside of a jaw. A wide, square jaw, speckled with black and gray stubble. A jaw that looks carved out of granite. My heart thumps unevenly in my chest.

He looks down at me then, and I see him, really see him. John. His dark eyes, his heavy brow, the jagged scar I traced over and over again during our one night together.

Something in my chest bursts, and I deflate. My body hurts more and less as tension leaks out of my muscles. I struggle to compose something like a smile for him.

He doesn't smile. In fact, he stares down at me with a pinched look I can't understand. His eyebrows knit, and his mouth pulls down at the corners.

My face aches, and I remember Daddy didn't worry too much about protecting my face this time around. John spent so long calling me beautiful, but I'm probably ugly to him now. I want to throw up again, but there's nothing left in me.

John's expression doesn't clear, but he bends and presses a soft kiss to my forehead. The imprint of his lips on my skin burns out of rhythm with the rest of my pains, warm and comforting and terrifying all in one. We spent one night together. He might not want me anymore.

He hands me to another man. The reedier one, with the computer. His arms are surprisingly strong as John tips me into them as gently as he can manage. I whimper, and the man's name resurfaces. Sin.

Sin begins walking away from John. His every step shoots pain through me, but I think he, too, might be striving for gentleness.

Why am I being taken away from John? Am I so ugly now that he can't even look at me? Has Daddy finally taken everything from me?

The words don't make it to my mouth as we walk through what seems like an endless army of men in leather. I close my eyes.

"I see I should've put some kind of condition clause in our agreement," John calls.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Daddy asks.

I open my eyes again. Something huge and silver looms out of the distance. I blink a few times, and the picture starts to make sense. It's a truck, a pickup truck. It looks familiar, but I can't remember where I've seen it.

"I'm talking about the fact that I think Rebel's gonna keep running," John says. "I think that's right, after what you've done to her."

Sin picks up the pace, sending more needles of hurt shooting through me, and ducks behind the truck.

"The vote is next week!" Daddy hollers.

John laughs, low and angry. "Guess you should've thought of that."

"Fucking—shoot them!" Daddy barks.

My world becomes light and sound and pain. Sin keeps me cradled to his chest, murmuring words I can't understand through the all-consuming noise. I've heard noise like this only once before, on the day Daddy took me back. I have to pull myself together, be strong for John, strong for Harley, but nothing will listen to me. A single tear leaks out of my eye and drips down to the dirt below.

Years pass, and the sounds slowly die away. Sin waits until it's silent, until nothing pops and no one screams. Then, he stands slowly.

I squeeze my eyes shut. I don't want to see what it looks like on the other side of the truck. I remember the bloody battlefield Daddy walked me out of the compound through.

Those men's faces will live in my mind for the rest of my days. If I saw John like that, bleeding and dying, I think all the fires in my chest might just go out on the spot.

"You can look," Sin says quietly. "We won."

It's the word "we" that makes me want to open my eyes. Sin has never seemed to like me all that much. I never spent time with him in the clubhouse, and whenever we happened to be in the same place, I always caught him staring at me with this hard look in his eye. Not like he was thinking anything untoward, just like he was trying to figure me out. If we're a *we*, maybe there's something worth seeing.

I open my eyes and take scene. One or two of the men in leather lay on the ground, clutching various wounds, but my daddy stands alone on the other side, surrounded by bodies.

John still has his gun out, staring at Daddy.

"Go ahead," Daddy says. "Kill me. I radioed my deputies exactly where I'd be. They'll be here in say the next two minutes."

John snarls. "You wouldn't dare."

Daddy grins. "Believe me or don't. I'm more than happy to pin all these murders on you."

"Mother—" John stares off at the horizon for a moment. Then, he levels his gun a bit lower. "Fine. But this one's for Harley."

I've never seen a gun fire before. The burst of light and sound sends my head spinning, but I can't deny there's a certain grace in John's stance, in the easy way he pulls the trigger.

Daddy collapses to the ground, blood soaking the front of his pants. Distantly, my mind calls up images of Harley when I last saw her, her ruined clothes, and the way the cartel men watched me. I know exactly what John is getting revenge for.

"Somebody get him his fucking radio," John snaps. Then, he rushes toward Sin and me. He passes Sin what sounds like

keys and takes me from his arms. I'm almost getting used to the aching pain of the transfer.

John climbs into the back of the truck and sets me in his lap, peppering gentle kisses across my head and face. I curl against his chest as best I can without moving too much.

"I've got you, Beauty," he murmurs into my hair. "We're going home."

CHAPTER 55



Beast

I've never walked so gently as I do with Bella in my arms. Every bump of the truck made her flinch. She finally stopped bothering to contain her pained cries when I noticed her biting her lip to hold them in and told her to stop. But I'm not focused in that now. All I see is the sunset tangling with her blonde hair as we cross the compound to the house, her big, brown eyes locked on my face like she can't quite believe I'm really here. Weeks of anger fizzled into nothingness as soon as she looked up at me like that. I don't think I can feel anything right now but a new softness that's taken up residence in my chest, a softness that I have no choice but to call love.

"Send Stitches up to my room," I murmur to Sin. Stitches and his team are still working on men from the attack a month ago. I don't know if Stitches even really leaves anymore.

My sergeant-at-arms glances at Bella, then at me, and nods like I've just confirmed something he's been thinking for a long time. I don't care. I couldn't hide how I feel about Bella in this moment if I wanted to.

I'd shout it from the rooftops if I could.

Her eyes flutter open as I walk up to the house. "John, where are you taking me?"

Her voice sounds like her throat's been rubbed all over with sandpaper, whether from lack of use or from the thick layer of bruises encrusting what seems like every inch of her body, I don't know.

“Up to bed, Beauty,” I reply.

“No,” she rasps. “I belong in the infirmary.”

“Don’t you worry your pretty little head.” It takes a bit of juggling to open the door while holding her, but she doesn’t whimper, so I imagine I’ve done the best I can. “I’m gonna get you all the care you need.”

“I don’t need special treatment.” She sounds on the verge of tears, and her eyes go glassy.

“Yes, you do.” I cup her face and pad up the stairs. “You’ve been through hell, and I intend to do everything I can to make up for it. That includes sleeping in my wonderful bed.”

She swallows, though that seems to hurt her as much as anything else, and nods.

We reach the top of the stairs, and I like I’ve been praying for weeks, Harley’s door swings open. Alex stands outlined in the door, with Harley sitting behind her.

“Is that—?” Alex asks.

I nod. She turns back into the room and speaks quietly to Harley. My daughter usually moves like a fucking zombie, but she lurches out of the chair and into the door now.

“Bella?” she says.

“Harley?” Bella’s eyes roll this way and that, like she’s trying to find her friend but can’t actually move to do it.

I step closer and lower Bella so the two girls can meet each other’s gazes.

Harley’s instantly fills with tears. “You didn’t have to...for me...” She shakes her head. “I’m so sorry.”

Bella struggles for something like a smile. “I’d do it again. Anything for you.”

Harley’s tears roll in fat droplets down her cheeks, but she just trembles in the doorway.

My heart aches. The two most important girls in my life, in some of the worst pain of their lives, and both of them are trying to make the other feel better.

Alex places her hand on Harley's shoulder. "You want to sit back down?"

She shakes her head and doesn't quite look at me. "Where are you taking her, Pops?"

"My room." I swallow. "It's got the best bed, what with the infirmary being full up."

"You're gonna let me see her." Harley doesn't say it like a question, but it's not exactly as flat or panicky as the rest of her words have been since she returned. It's got the first hint of her old fire I've seen.

"Whenever you want." I smile. "Or, whenever you both want."

Harley nods sharply. Bella makes a small affirmative noise.

"I'll be around if you want me, too, okay?" Alex says to Bella before guiding Harley back into her room and shutting the door again.

Bella stares up at me with questioning eyes. I avoid her gaze. I don't know what she knows, having been who knows where for days, but I know that Harley's story is hers to tell.

Finally, I nudge open the door to my bedroom and lay her down in the middle of the bed. She looks so small, so frail. Her clothes cling to her with dirt and grime, and her hair hangs lank. I want to take her into the bath, clean her up before Stitches even gets here, but I want to take my time with that and the good doctor is nothing if not prompt. Her head lolls to the side, releasing me from her gaze, and I run a hand over my face.

Having her back is damn near overwhelming.

"What's that?" she asks quietly.

I follow her gaze to the one thing I managed to put back together in her weeks away. The popsicle-stick picture frame I

found shattered on the floor of her room and the picture within. I don't even know how many hours I spent sitting in my office, not quite listening for Harley upstairs, and gluing back together every single splinter I could lay my fingers on. Then, in a fit of petty rage, I taped the picture back together without her father in it.

I rub the back of my neck. "Well, I guess you know what it is."

"I do," she rasps. "But what happened to it?"

I perch on the edge of the bed, careful not to jostle her. She still winces.

"Grimes turned the place upside-down when he came looking for you," I explain, "and he broke that in the process. I...tried to put it back together. I know it's not very good."

She twitches her hand off her lap, onto the sheets next to her, just like that first night in the infirmary so long ago. I wrap my hand around hers.

"It's perfect," she murmurs. "Thank you."

"Hello?" Stitches calls up the stairs.

I hop up and usher him into my room. He takes one look at Bella, clicks his tongue, and sets his bag down on the end of the bed.

"This might be a minute." He looks at me. "And you may want to leave."

"Do I have to?" I ask as Bella's gaze flickers to me in a panic.

Stitches sighs. "I suppose not."

I retake my spot on the side of the bed and take her hand. "Then I'll be right here."

Stitches works on her for damn near an hour, earning his title and the not insignificant fee flowing into his pockets time and again. More of Bella's bones are broken than I even feared, and most of the ones that aren't broken are bruised. Her

healing ribs and fingers are now compound fractures, which are going to take even longer to patch back up. She has enough head trauma she's somewhere beyond a concussion, and Stitches says she has to get a brain scan before he can give her anything approaching a clean bill of health. But, eventually, he gives her a small, white pill for the pain I recognize and nods at me.

"This is gonna be an even longer heal than last time." He shakes his head. "I'd imagine she and Thor will be able to have a competition at the rate they're both going."

I grimace. "Thanks, Doc."

He drops a pot of arnica cream for her bruises on the nightstand and trundles out.

Bella squirms to reposition the pillow under her head, and a wave of something warm breaks over me. She can move, at least a little. I cup her splinted fingers in mine and exhale a sigh of relief.

She twists to look at me and frowns. "You've been real kind but you don't...don't have to pretend to like me anymore." Her good hand flutters toward a jagged cut on her face the doc had to stitch up, running from the middle of her forehead, through her right eyebrow, and down onto her cheek. "I know I'm ugly now."

My breath whooshes out of my chest like I've been punched. A month with her POS father. I left her alone with that man for a month, and despite everything, he found a way to crawl back inside her head.

"I can't pretend to like you," I say to keep the silence from stretching long enough to worry her.

Bella's face contorts in shame and despair.

"Not like that." I smooth a hand over her hair. "I can't pretend to like because I...I love you."

She stares up at me as wonder blooms in her big, brown eyes.

“I love you.” The words come a little easier the second time, a little more confident. “And you could never, ever be ugly to me. You’re the most beautiful creature I’ve ever seen. I wouldn’t change a thing.”

Her lower lip trembles. If I hadn’t just gotten a rundown of everything that bastard did to her, I’d take that lip in my mouth to make it stop. She traces the big gash, then a few smaller ones that didn’t require stitches on her other cheek.

“I was plain before,” she murmurs. “Now, I’m a monster.”

“You were beautiful.” I grab her hand and pull it to my lips. “You are beautiful.”

She frowns.

I lean down, careful to shift the mattress as little as possible, and brush my lips over the smaller cuts, then down over a place on her collarbone I found a scar on our night together. Her skin is too warm under my lips, but thankfully not fever-hot. I don’t know how recently the bastard hit her, but it wasn’t long ago from the coloring of her bruises.

The anger tucks itself away in a box for later. Like leaving him alive at that fucking place. Eric Grimes will suffer, and it won’t be where Bella can be hurt by it, she’s suffered enough but he hasn’t. Not nearly enough.

“All your scars, even the ones that aren’t scars yet, make you more beautiful to me.” I smile at her, then kiss her just as softly on her cracked, dry lips. “They show the world your courage, your resilience. Your bravery.”

Her eyes fill with tears, and they roll soundlessly out onto the pillows underneath her. She doesn’t move to brush them away.

I can’t take it any longer. I kick off my boots, pull off my cut, and slide onto the bed next to her. Where it barely dipped under her weight, the whole frame creaks for me. *Gentle*. She doesn’t move as I stretch out with my head on the pillow, but when I wrap my arms around her and pull her as softly as I can to my chest, she squirms to get just a little closer. The pill Stitches must be working. I press my face to the top of her

head and inhale deeply. Under the grime, there's a scent I couldn't name beyond to say that it's hers. I don't even know when I learned it, but it calms my heartbeat even as hers beats a frantic rhythm against my arm. Home. Bella's home. And I'm never letting her go again.

“You don't gotta say anything now,” I whisper into her hair. “But we're gonna get you all healed up, and then I'm gonna show you just how much I love you.”

She sniffles. Her fluttering heartbeat starts to slow as well, and she relaxes in my arms. “I'd like that.”

CHAPTER 56



Thor

Alex leans her head into the doorway of the clubhouse bedroom we've been sharing since the black alert went into place and smiles. "Care for some company?"

I look at my busted knee, only a few days out of my second surgery. Stitches is hopeful, this time, that I'll actually be able to get something like my old range of movement out of it this time, once I'm done healing up. "Always."

She laughs and walks in. "Anybody given you the update?"

"I ain't seen the Prez since the surgery," I croak.

Alex laughs again, so much like her mother, and something in my chest actually twinges. The rest of the guys have been in to see me once or twice at least, all swearing up and down they're taking care of my bike until I get the go-ahead to mount up. They even hosted a poker tournament in here yesterday, while Alex was away with Harley. But when my daughter looks at me with this new lightness in her eyes, like she's finally not scared of me doing something stupid, when she laughs about how little I know, it's hard not to feel like they're getting ready to put me out to pasture.

"Well, there's something like a reason for that." She sits in the chair beside my bed. "Right as you were going into surgery, Beast got a call from the sheriff. He wanted to make an exchange. Bella for Rebel pulling out of the race."

I whistle, though it scrapes up my still-fucked throat.

“He gave Grimes an hour instead of the day he asked for, and didn’t even pull Rebel.” Alex’s smile turns a little worried. “I spend most of my days in his house, and I’ve barely seen him since she came back. The whole MC knows there’s something between them.”

I nod slowly. Sin mentioned worrying about them getting together, but I didn’t worry one whit. First moment I saw the way he looked at her, I knew it was over. Once I saw how she looked at him, I stopped stockpiling bourbon for when he got his heart broken. I’ve been standing at Beast’s right hand for a decade. There wasn’t a chance in this world he wouldn’t try to pursue Bella when he looked like that, and once I got past the bit that came with my best friend going for a girl younger than my daughter, I recognized he wouldn’t push her or hurt her. Beast is not that type of man.

Alex blows out a long breath. “I don’t know how I feel about it.”

I shrug my unbroken shoulder, but the other collarbone still hollers. “Sometimes...it gets you.”

“Like you and mom?” she asks.

I smile. I met my Sarah’s eye across a crowded bar passing through some flyover city, and that was it for me. You don’t get a love like that twice.

Alex pats my knee, and there’s that look again. The “my old man only has the good old days to reminisce about” look. The “glad he’s staying home now” look. I grab the glass of water I keep constantly on my bedside table to try to calm the scratchiest damn throat I’ve ever had in my life and chug it.

“What else?” I ask.

She shrugs. “Harley’s back, of course. Sin’s well on his way to—”

I shake my head. “She ain’t been to see me yet.”

Alex looks away. “She didn’t have the best time in Grimes’s hands.”

I offer the cup to her, and she refills it. With my throat so fucked, I haven't been able to demand answers yet, but I'm well on my way to healed enough for full sentences. I just need some more damned water first.

She fills it up and returns.

I chug it down and frown at her. "Details."

Alex swallows. She stares at me for a long moment, then whispers, "I promised..."

Sin appears in the doorway with his arms crossed. "He deserves to know."

She stands, hands fisted at her sides. "That's not your call, and you know it."

I look back and forth between them. Alex's expression is thunderous, defensive. Sin just looks tired. After a long moment, the sergeant who's been running more of the MC than any of us ever thought he would for these past couple of weeks steps into my room and closes the door.

"I found her underwear on the floor of the warehouse Grimes's bastard brought her back to us from, cut down the sides." Sin shakes his head. "I think we can guess the rest."

"Sin!" Alex says.

Her voice just roars in my ears. Something deep and powerful blooms in my chest. Last we tussled with the Rosas, they were shitheads, nuisances on the tail end of a long and successful campaign with a bad habit of popping back up when we least expected them. I heard worse rumors about them—you always do, about cartels—but I didn't see any kind of proof, so I wrote them off as either their own legend-building or people trying to make a mountain out of a persistent-ass molehill.

This ain't no molehill. This is Harley, a girl I've barely ever seen with anything but the brightest fire in her eyes, brought the kind of low you hope you never see.

"Kill...all...Rosas." The words scratch out of my throat without water, sending bursts of pain through my collarbone

and even up into my eye socket. It's worth it.

Nobody touches our girls.

Sin grins a low, hungry smile. "I can't think of a better idea." He opens his laptop, types a few things, and puts it down on my bedside table.

Alex snatches the cup and stomps away. I stare at a map of the port with one of the slips circled in red.

"Bella and Beast are all wrapped up in each other, predictably, but Beast passed me a tidbit she overheard." Sin taps the circle on the screen. "Since the border tightened up, they're moving their shit on the water. You remember the name Tiburón? Apparently, he's their boat guy, and he's running a shipment in there tonight. Container 67739."

I feel a grin start to pull at my lips as the pieces start to fall into place.

"We thought we'd hit it," Sin says. "You in?"

I glance at my knee. I still can't ride for shit. But that thing in my chest strains at the edges, fighting to get out. If I don't do something about it, I'll burst. Somebody can take Beast's fucking truck.

I reach into the drawer of my nightstand and pull out my Colt 1911 just as Alex opens the door.

She pales. "Dad, you had surgery three days ago. Whatever it is, you can—"

"I'm going." I swing out of bed and throw my good arm over Sin's shoulder. My knee fucking screams, but I'll find a way to bear it. If I don't spill some Rosa blood, this thing inside me is going to eat me alive. I can't keep sitting on the fucking sidelines.

Alex steps closer and offers me the water. I can't take it. If I put down my Colt, she's going to grab it, and I'm not using anything other than my 1911 for this.

"Stitches said—"

"Go see Harley," I croak. "Needs you more."

She slams the water down, spilling water everywhere. “Fine. Whatever. Kill yourself. See if I throw you a nice fucking funeral.”

She storms out, and Sin looks at me.

“Lock and load,” I say.

An hour later, I’m sitting in the shadows of a customs warehouse, watching tugboats pull in a massive container ship into the slip on one of Sin’s live fucking feeds. The cartel bastards haven’t even shown yet. A little bit of palm-greasing got us the container location, near the front of the ship, the only all-black one, and that Tiburón sets their shit up but he doesn’t acquire himself. Instead, he sends an army of lower-level Rosas to pick it up once the dock monkeys move it to a different warehouse than the rest of the containers. A couple of extra dollars even got us the exact warehouse they send their shit to. It’s almost too goddamn easy.

Customs is fucking crowded, and loud, but all the containers come in through one place where the movement is mostly concentrated. That means Sin and I set up with a dozen Ruthless Kings no problem in the mostly empty warehouse. The cartel has to come to us. I dragged a chair onto one of the scissor lifts and shot it up a couple of levels, giving me a bird’s eye view so I can call down tactics. The rest of the men, including Sin, all stand around on the ground level with their guns drawn.

Dark figures appear at the edge of the feed on bikes and start heading for us.

“Incoming,” I whisper across the earpiece Sin gave all of us.

The sound of guns racking and safeties clicking off echoes through the warehouse. I cock my Colt’s hammer.

The massive door slides open, and a dozen bikes rumble in before it shuts. We don’t even need to let them dismount.

“Now!” I wheeze.

Gunfire fills the warehouse. After a moment, the automatic rattle of the cartel's AKs joins us. I take careful aim at the lead biker and squeeze the trigger. The recoil jars my collarbone, and I almost scream, but the .45 makes paste out of his skull. The thing in my chest deflates a little. Not enough. I miss feeling the blood on my knuckles, watching the bastards go down up close.

One of the Rosas whirls and begins shooting up at me. I flatten myself below the edge of the lift, and bullets ring off the metal shelving behind me.

"*Ayudame!*" one of them shouts.

More ringing behind me. One clips the front of the lift.

"They found me," I whisper. Below, I watch Sin focus on the two shooting up.

I can't just keep sitting around. I fit the muzzle of my Colt in between the bars of the lift and take aim through the gap at one of the fucks shooting at me. As Sin takes out the other, I explode another skull.

Suddenly, the warehouse falls silent. All the cartel members lay still in the middle of the room. I grab the laptop I dropped during the fight.

"Container incoming," I hiss. "Clear the way."

Ruthless Kings swarm over the bike and body-covered platform. One of the bikes has a nice muffler. Maybe I'll take that to fix up my baby.

By the time the door opens again, there's no sign of the violence here other than the red patches on the ground. The dock monkeys roll the container up and in, then leave without a second look.

Maybe I'll have to come back here. Having a few of these guys on our payroll couldn't hurt.

Sin saunters up to the door of the container as I buzz the lift down to the floor. Blue joins me, and I sling an arm around his shoulder to limp over. Sin throws the twist-lock, and the door swings open.

Even in the darkness of the warehouse, the pile of supplies we've been chasing for the last month seems to glimmer. I don't cook, so I don't know exactly how much product we're looking at when all's said and done, but I grin.

"Torch it," Sin says to Blue.

Blue laughs with delight. "We're gonna have to close the container back up, or this whole place is going down."

Sin shrugs. "Let—"

I shake my head and pull out a canister of spray paint I found rolling around in Beast's truck. I didn't know why I brought it with me, but I know now. In large, red letters, I write, *Thanks, Grimes* on the side of the container.

Sin laughs. As our men gather, the laugh echoes through them, quiet and sinister. Blue nods, lights a match, tosses it into the container, and swings the door shut. Mere moments after we lock it back up again, there's a low *boom* from inside.

"Let's see the sheriff come back from this," Sin says.

I look at a puddle of blood on the ground and bark out a low, rasping laugh.

CHAPTER 57



Belle

A week disappears back at the compound faster than I could've imagined. John spends almost all his time with me when he's not hovering over Harley. I'm back to seeing Doc Stitches daily. My fingers will take a good while yet, and my ribs ache whenever I breathe in too sharply, but much of the rest of my injuries are already a lot better. I don't even have any permanent brain damage, thankfully.

The night of the election has finally arrived. All the MC men piled out on their bikes to vote earlier in the day, and now the huge TV in the den is blaring up-to-the-minute election results while everybody drinks and cheers. I spent some time down there, but my head still hurts when I sit in bright light for too long, and hearing my daddy's name that often wasn't doing much for my mood. Harley's at the house with Alex. I offered to go back with them, but John insisted on accompanying me, so we decided to head up to one of the crash rooms upstairs instead. I lay in a surprisingly small-feeling double bed with a romance novel I'm only half paying attention to in my lap, and John sits in the chair next to me, reading some war history book he swears helps him lead the MC better.

My heart thumps unevenly. With a little bit of stubble, in the dim light, he looks so much like he did those first few days when I couldn't even leave the infirmary. He has the same carved-wood look, and kindness in his eyes despite the worry and the years. It's sort of like a dream. I never really believed

I'd get away from Daddy again, but here I am, in a soft bed next to the man I love.

I love him. I love the way he touches me, the way he looks at me, his quiet refusal to leave my side. I love the way he cares for his men, and the way he cares for Harley. There's so much love in his heart, tucked away behind that leather vest of his, and I want to let it wash over me for the rest of my days.

I suck in a breath. It burns, but not too awful. My left hand won't work, but I trust him not to mind. I'm more skin than bruise for the first time since I left the compound. I reach out and put a hand on his knee.

He looks up and smiles when he finds me looking at him.

"You said something about showing me how much you love me?" My voice comes out low, a little raspy.

John snaps his book shut and moves to the edge of the bed without a moment's hesitation, but he cups my cheek. His thumb lands on the edge of what I'm sure will soon be a scar on my face to rival his.

"Are you sure?" he murmurs.

I turn my face to kiss his palm and whisper the words against his skin, "I love you, too."

His smile grows so wide I think it might split his face. "God, do I love you."

I reach up with my good hand and pull his mouth to mine. My book tumbles off the bed, forgotten, as I drink in the taste of his mouth. I missed it, somehow, after only one night. He parts my lips and slips his tongue in beside mine, that same strange-wonderful feeling.

John holds my face in both hands and kisses me like the world is ending. My breath races, burning as the fire starts inside me. I pull him closer, weave my hand into his hair, and he groans.

Delicately, he reaches a hand under my shirt. At his convincing, I put on my only tank top this evening. He said my injuries are nothing to be ashamed of, and I wanted to

believe him. When he grazes calloused fingertips over half-healed bruises and cuts, it feels true. Goosebumps pebble in the wake of his touch, and I arch.

Too much. My ribs scream. I drop back to the bed and gasp for breath.

He pulls away. “Are you okay?”

I smile up at him. He cares so much.

“I’m good.” I slide my left hand up his chest. “Just gotta be careful.”

“Always.” He kisses down the side of my neck, over my shoulder. “I will never let anything hurt you again, Beauty.”

He slides my shirt up, over my head, and off, then stares at my plain cotton bra like it’s the most amazing thing he’s ever seen.

“Yours, too.” I squirm. The fire is building, and I just want to touch him. I need to feel his skin on mine to prove it’s real.

He laughs and pulls off his cut and T-shirt, then presses his mouth to my chest.

I gasp. It’s like fireworks, like fire. He pulls the cup of my bra aside and covers my breast with his mouth. After the weeks of pain, pleasure feels just as unreal, but the scrape of his chest hair against my skin keeps me here, with him. I can feel his arousal against my leg. John loves me, I love him, and I’m finally home.

He unfastens my bra with one hand and palms my other breast. The twin sensations almost overwhelm me. I moan his name.

“Shhh.” He smiles. “I know they’re rowdy downstairs, but this ain’t soundproof like my room.”

I clap a hand over my mouth and giggle. The rule feels playful. If I break it, the worst that’ll happen to me is a little teasing. John will keep me safe.

He returns his mouth to my breast, but his hand slides down my long skirt, over bruises and scrapes.

“Do you even know how spectacular you are?” he mumbles against my skin.

A tremble rumbles through my body as he reaches the hem and slides back up underneath it.

“Do you know how much I think about you?” he asks.

I clutch his hair as the words vibrate over my sensitive skin and the fire in me burns even hotter. He thinks about me?

“No,” I gasp. “Tell me.”

I can feel his smile around my nipple as he reaches the elastic of my panties.

“I think about reaching up here one day to find nothing underneath,” he says. “I think about you coming to my office like that, about fucking you over my desk, covered in paperwork, because I just can’t resist you.”

“Take them off,” I moan.

He groans, and suddenly, I know the feeling of a skirt with nothing underneath but John’s hands. I feel intensely naked despite still being half-dressed. His vision blooms, bright and brilliant in my mind. I imagine myself sitting on his desk and spreading my legs.

I pull him back to my mouth, frantic, as his fingers ring my clit. Wetness spreads over them quickly, dripping down my thighs, and the skirt makes it so much more intense.

“It seems like you like that.” He presses his thumb against my clit and slips one finger inside.

My fire blazes into an inferno. I nod wildly, knocking our teeth together. He laughs and presses closer and—

I can’t breathe. My ribs shriek. The weight of him is too much. I push him back, and he stops entirely with a frown. I put a hand to my bare ribs as I gasp for breath.

“Okay,” he says. “Let’s try this.”

He lies down on the bed next to me and, once I’ve caught my breath, settles me on his lap. His cock is hard through his jeans. My hips move automatically, seeking friction as my

skirt settles over us both. We moan in unison, then both fall silent.

“That’ll work, then.” John’s voice sounds tight. “I can fuck you just like this.”

The vision shifts in my mind. He’s in his chair. I’m on his lap, just like this.

He toys lazily with my breasts, running his thumbs over my nipples in slow circles. I grind against him.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” he says.

Something inside me lights up.

“I’m ready,” I say.

“Are you sure?” He circles my nipples again. “I’m happy just like this for now.”

The fire is burning me up. I reach under my skirt and unfasten his jeans.

“Bit of a rush, Beauty?” He smiles wickedly. “Really liked my little secret?”

I nod and tug on his jeans.

“We have all the time in the world for that.” He grabs my wrists and pulls them away, then frees his cock himself. “But tell me what you like.”

I can feel his hardness underneath me, so close, but he doesn’t line it up and thrust in. I wind my good hand through his chest hair and tug. I push myself into it. He only smiles.

He’s waiting for an answer.

I moan. “I like this being our little secret that I can pull out anywhere. I like the bravery. I like”—his cock twitches, and I roll myself over it with a groan—“I like being yours.”

“Beautiful.” He lines up with my entrance and thrusts into me.

My vision explodes with pleasure. Not the apex, but it’s so good, so full, so perfect. I roll my hips again, like I did before,

and he moves within me, pulling even more sensations from me. I hold on tight and begin fucking myself on his cock.

“I pictured us in your chair.” The words pour out of my mouth, his warning to be quiet forgotten. John doesn’t shush me. “You, all dressed in your Prez outfit. Me, just like this on your lap.”

He grabs my hips. “That’s so fucking hot. Keep going, Beauty.”

That bright thing in my chest gets brighter. He’s pleased. And somehow, that makes the fire in my gut brighter, too.

“I’d f...fuck you like this. No underwear. No shirt. However you wanted me.” His cock hits a new, deeper place inside of me, and I break off on an even louder moan.

“I want you every way.” He slides a hand between us and toys with my clit.

I squeeze my eyes shut to try to keep the thing he wants in mind, but pleasure overwhelms me. All that matters is his cock inside me, so good, so full. I move faster and faster.

He sits up suddenly, shifting the angle and pressing his mouth against mine. I gasp into the kiss. The new angle is even better, and his hands are in my hair, and his chest is against mine, and I love him, I love him, I love him.

My orgasm explodes over me, and I hear John grunt before he, too, goes still. Pleasure ripples through me in waves until he collapses back on the bed, taking me with him.

A massive cheer goes off downstairs. I stare at John as my face turns bright red. He told me to be quiet, and I failed. Did they hear everything? Are they making fun of us?

John looks as confused as I feel, but less frightened. He cups my face, and I can see on his lips the promise that he’ll keep anyone from talking about this.

Then, a chant starts. Quiet at first, then louder. Two syllables.

“RE-BEL! RE-BEL!”

The election! John and I burst into helpless laughter, and I collapse back against his chest. Pleasure ripples through me at the movement, and I wonder if we have to stop before the celebration makes it up here.

John kisses the top of my head. "I love you, Bella."

"I love you, too." I smile against the safety of his skin.

CHAPTER 58

A WEEK LATER



Beast

I take Bella's hand as we eat breakfast at the kitchen table. "It's been quiet for a while now."

She swallows. "I know. It's sorta spooky."

I chuckle, but I know what she means. Grimes disappeared the night of the election, leaving all his things in the hotel room he'd been staying in since Blue torched his house. There've been a few missing posters, even a few calls to check and see if we scooped him up, too, but our new sheriff squashed those quick enough.

She and I both know what happened to the bastard, though. The only other piece of information she got during her capture were direct and implied threats of what Las Rosas would do to him if he didn't win the election. If I didn't know he was dead, I'd be hunting his ass down right now. Privately, I can't help hoping they kept Grimes alive for a while, made him suffer before he died.

"I was thinking we might go out on a date," I say, trying to sound casual.

A surprised smile crosses her face, but then she puts her hand to the healing gash on her face. "What kind of date?"

"Any kind you like." I grin. "I just want to see you happy."

She bites her lip. "Are you sure it's safe?"

I nod. With Grimes's disappearance and Rebel's sudden acceptance of the mantle, Rosa actively has dropped down, too. Sin's keeping an eye, trying to guess if they're licking

their wounds and gearing up for another round, or if they've finally remembered this city belongs to us, but either way, it's quiet.

"We'll even take a couple guards, if that'll steady you," I say.

"Okay." She takes a deep breath and straightens up. "But I think it's awful rude to ask me to plan my own very first date."

My laugh rumbles up through my chest, and she smiles once more.

I take a deep breath and pull off my cut. I haven't been on a first date—or any kind of date—for a long time. My romance muscles aren't in the best shape, and I want the best for my Beauty. Planning took a few hours, but finally, I think I'm ready to leave.

I meet my eyes in the mirror, and I barely recognize the man in there anymore. I don't look tired as I used to, but there's something else. Something light I haven't ever seen before.

Something Bella gave me.

I march downstairs to find Beauty standing in the living room with her hair unbound, wearing a soft pink floral sundress that cups her hips before falling to the floor. The ribbon at the center of her chest sends my imagination spinning with visions of pulling it, exposing her to my eyes. She smiles sweetly, and the visions melt away. I'll have her falling apart tonight. Right now, I want her to feel like a princess.

I take her hand and lead her out to the grocery-getter I pulled up to the house. Someday, I'll teach her how to ride. Four of my men stand around it with their bikes nearby. I nod to them—they already know the location—and open the door for my Beauty.

Her face lights when she sees what sits on the passenger seat.

“Is that a picnic basket?” she asks.

I smile and lift it out of her way. “Malo helped me put it together.”

She climbs up, and I settle the basket I had to dig out of a back closet on her lap. Crowds would make her nervous, so I found a private spot for us to spend the day, a little park on the south side of the city.

“You’re sweet,” she says when I climb into the driver’s seat.

The compliment lands somewhere squarely on my chest. I’ve been called an awful lot of things in my life, but sweet has never been one of them. It’s strange. But I want to be sweet for her.

I take her hand and pull out of the compound, my men thundering alongside us.

She’s enchanted from the first moment we pull up to the park. Her big brown eyes glow as we walk through a bit of bayou to reach the spot I found.

“I didn’t realize how much I missed trees on the compound,” she murmurs. “We had the prettiest apple tree in our backyard that Daddy always said he’d hang a swing on someday, but I just liked to go sit underneath it on the rare occasions I had nothing else to do.”

“We can always plant some.” I tuck her hand through my bent arm. “They won’t be big enough for a swing for a while, but...”

I trail off. I want to tell Bella that we have time, that I’ll hang the swing when our little girl asks for it, but we haven’t talked about anything like that yet. I can’t imagine her ever leaving, but I don’t want to scare her away by saying that.

“But that just means we get to watch them grow.” She squeezes my arm.

I grin down at her and pull aside a curtain of weeping willow to show her our picnic spot. “Exactly.”

“Oh, John!” she gasps.

Even I have to admit it's pretty. Right overlooking the river, trees blocking us from anything remotely like the public, lush green grass to sit on. Bella runs forward, and I motion to my men to stop outside the trees. They obey, and I follow my girl to the riverside.

"Right here." She turns to me with the summer sun in her eyes and points at the last bit of grass before the riverbank. "I want to sit right here."

I grin and flick out the quilt my grandmama gave me. It settles over the grass, and she sinks right down. I begin unpacking the basket.

"We've got some char-koo—" I frown at the label Malo wrote. "I don't know, it looks like cold cuts."

She laughs. "Charcuterie. But cold cuts works just as well."

I hand her the covered plate of meat. "And some blackberries, some bread, and..." I pull out the last bottle. "Bourbon."

She puts a hand to her mouth. "I've never had any alcohol. Not even communion wine."

"You don't have to start here." I try to pull it away.

Bella shakes her head, her golden curls catching the sunlight. "I'm a biker's girl now, right? I should start getting used to the life."

Something in my chest warms. "A biker's girl?"

She blushes and looks away. "I guess I made some assumptions. We don't have to be any—"

I catch her chin. "I'd love you to be my girl. I'd love to be yours, too."

The grin that blossoms on her face is more beautiful than any riverbank I've ever seen.

"Well, then I have to try the bourbon!"

I laugh and grab a red Solo cup, my main contribution to the basket, then pour her a tiny sip. "Don't hold it in your

mouth, just let it slide right now.”

She sniffs the cup and grimaces. “And you like this?”

“It’s my favorite.” I grin. “And when we get home, I’ll let you try all the sweet crap other people like.”

Bella takes a deep breath, her breasts heaving under the thin fabric of her dress, screws up her face, and knocks back the sip.

She splutters and coughs, just like she did with the coffee. I laugh myself damn near breathless. Then, she puts a hand to her chest.

“Ooh, it’s warm.” She trails the hand from her collarbone down to her stomach.

I lay my hand over hers. “Perfect for a lonely night.”

She meets my gaze. “Then you’re gonna have to find a new favorite drink.”

“Why?”

“You’re not gonna have those anymore.” She smiles.

I can’t help it. I take her face in my hands and kiss her. My mouth slots perfectly over her soft lips, and she parts for me on a sigh. So perfect. So beautiful. So utterly mine. Her tongue dances into my mouth, and the kiss grows hungry. I shove a hand into her curls and pull her closer. Her breath rasps into my mouth. I cup her hip, feeling the fabric slide like a promise of what I’ll find underneath, and all thoughts of my men on the other side of a thin screen of leafy summer branches leaves my mind. Some similar magic seems to happen in her. She climbs onto my lap, her long skirt pooling around her in a way that will make me think of election night, and cups my face. Her teeth sink into my lower lip, and I groan in the back of my throat as all the blood rushes below my waist with the bright burst of pain. So much of her life has been having pain inflicted on her. There’s something electric about receiving it, about knowing she feels like she can.

Someone coughs behind us, and the spell breaks. I won’t ruin her very first date with rumors around the compound. It

takes all the will in my body, but I pull my mouth from hers.

“Company,” I murmur when she looks up at me in confusion.

She nods and leans against my chest. I cradle her close. Her heart beats against my chest, steady and strong. Everything feels right in the world.

“Blackberries were my favorite fruit as a kid,” I say after a long moment.

“Why’d you stop liking them?” she asks.

“I don’t know if I stopped, exactly.” I stare out over the river. “We had a wild bush in my yard as a kid, and all the store bought sorts just don’t ever taste as good.”

Bella grabs one out of the bowl. “We could plant that, too.”

I smile. Apples and blackberries cover the scrub grass of the compound in my mind, crushed under little feet. But she’s young. I can’t say that yet.

She presses the berry to my lips. “For now, maybe you just haven’t been eating them right.”

Blood rushes below my belt. I wrap my mouth around her offering, but the berry doesn’t taste near as sweet as her fingers.

A shot cracks through the air behind us. We both whirl, and I watch one of my men topple.

I leap to my feet and grab the final item out of the lining of the basket, my Ruger, and push Bella behind me.

More shots go off. Two more men fall. I can’t see the attacker through the trees.

The same curtain of willow that’s kept us hidden whispers out of the way, and Grimes limps into the clearing with us. My heart slams in my chest and anger boils in my veins. Bella shoots to her feet, but she doesn’t try to move around me.

“You...” He lumbers forward.

In the bright sunlight, he looks like shit. One side of his head is matted with blood, and from the way his hair flattens, I can tell they took his ear. One of his eyes is closed, too, and it sinks into his head like there's nothing behind it. His precious sheriff's uniform hangs in tatters, and more injuries peek through the shreds.

"I hope that hurt," I spit.

"This is all your fault." He starts to raise his gun, one of the cartel's AKs. "You and my bitch daughter."

I take a deep breath. For Thor. For Harley. For the love of my life, quivering behind my back. I squeeze the trigger, not letting him say another word.

Former sheriff Eric Grimes's head explodes in a bright spray of gore. Beauty flinches.

As his body falls to the ground, I uncock my gun, drop it to the blanket, and whirl for her. For a moment, she just stares past me, trembling. Then, she meets my gaze.

Her brown eyes fill with tears. "He's dead?"

"He's dead." I open my arms to her.

She steps into my embrace, and I press her to my chest as she shakes with sobs.

"It's over, Beauty," I murmur. "It's really over."

EPILOGUE



Belle

I stare down at the textbook on the picnic table in front of me in the waning fall light. The symbols swim and dance in my vision, and I groan.

“You’re telling me,” Harley grumbles. “You just have to take your math requirement to get your English major. I had to take an Incomplete on Calculus after everything last semester, and it’s not any easier the second time around!”

“Come on, girls.” The Count taps the list of problems I have to complete before my next Contemporary Mathematics class. “Bitching doesn’t teach you anything.”

I nod and try to focus again. *Variables are correlated if...*

I drop my head onto the table. Classes only started a week ago, and I’m already lost.

Harley laughs, and I peek up at her with a smile. She couldn’t finish her summer semester, but she’s slowly started coming back out, started smiling again. She won’t talk about what happened. She can’t even be around when the MC men are talking about Las Rosas, the cartel my daddy turned out to be working with. But she laughs. She comes with me to school, even when we don’t have classes at the same time, and I go with her. The summer was quiet, but it’s tough not to keep looking over my shoulder when I’m all alone.

It’s hard to believe Daddy’s really gone. I dreamt about the bright red of his death for months afterward, but waking up with John’s arms around me had helped chase the lingering

panic away. I just keep expecting to round a corner and see him there, with the red-painted smile my dreams always gave him, ready to take me back to the little yellow house we shared.

I don't call it home. The green house I share with John and Harley is home, now, and I think it will be for a long time. They're my family. John took charge right away paying for Mama's care, even moved her to a hospital closer to campus so I can visit when I don't have class, and the doctors say she's starting to get a little better. I haven't mentioned it to John yet, but I've started thinking maybe she could move into our spare room when she gets better.

Someone clears their throat behind me, and I pick my head up. John stands a few feet back with a tray of sandwiches in his hand. I smile and stand to greet him.

"Come on, Bella," The Count groans. "You've done one out of ten. At least stay sitting 'til you get halfway."

I sink back to the seat, grumbling. The man I thought looked so friendly when he was only tutoring Harley has become my worst enemy.

John laughs and sets the tray on the table. "Lunch courtesy of Malo, but I can leave if I'm causing too much trouble."

"No trouble, Pops." Harley snags a sandwich and shoves her textbook away. "We needed a break."

"Going that well?" He smiles at me.

The Count grimaces. "These college professors don't know shit about math."

I pick a sandwich off the stack that looks like one of the hot tortas Malo makes sometimes that I've fallen in love with. The bread warms my chilling fingers, and when I take a bite, rich cheese blends with savory carnitas and acidic jalapeños on my tongue. I hum, and John strokes a hand over my hair. I dart my tongue out to lick a crumb off my lips. His eyes are quick to follow the movement.

I smile. I know why he's really here. The Prez doesn't deliver lunch, even to his daughter and his—I've learned over

the past few months—old lady, unless he wants something.

Harley looks from me to him. Once, before she started coming out of her room, she took my hand and whispered, “Are you really happy with him?” I answered as emphatically as I could without telling her anything she didn’t want to know about her pops. She squeezed my hand, nodded, and she’s never said anything about us again. It’s almost strange not to hear her teasing, but maybe one day. For now, I’ll accept that she isn’t hurt by my and her father’s relationship.

Thor stomps out of the clubhouse and up to the picnic table we set up on the covered porch, still resting most of his weight on a utilitarian metal cane he got after the third surgery on his knee. John turns to him.

“Rebel was bitching about his job again,” Thor grunts. “I couldn’t take another goddamn second, so I told him you needed my help.”

“With math?” John raises an eyebrow.

“I finished high school, unlike some people on this porch.” Thor drops into the seat next to Harley with a groan.

“I’m just a delivery boy.” John smiles.

“Hmph.” Thor nods at The Count. “Well, it looks like you’re all set on tutors anyway. I’ll just rest my sorry bones somewhere I can’t hear our sainted sheriff.”

Harley shakes her head. “We need all the help we can get. How are you on differential equations?”

I take another bite of the sandwich, and a globule of refried beans lands on my jeans. My heart pounds. I ruined these pants, and they were new, too.

John produces a fistful of napkins from a pocket. “Forgot these.”

I grab a few and blot at the stain. “I’m gonna need to get cold water on this right away.”

“Don’t worry about it.” John kisses the top of my head. “We’ve got people willing to put in the elbow grease to get out a dried stain, but no other librarians-in-training.”

I suck in a deep breath and try to calm my racing heart. If I stain these jeans, I'll have jeans with a stain on them. John keeps whole sets of clothes covered in stains just for working on his bikes. Even if I decide I don't want stains on my clothes, I'll buy new jeans. No one's going to start yelling. No one's grabbing a belt.

Now that the Rosas aren't breathing down our necks every day, being brave has started to look more like facing down these bursts of panic and old instincts without giving in.

"Right." I force a smile. "I'll just...leave it."

Harley bumps my shoulder. "Should we get back to it?"

The Count holds up the spiral notebook I take my class notes in. "How the fuck are these professors getting qualification to teach?"

Harley giggles, and the sight of it chases away the lingering darkness in my chest until I can't help but giggle with her. If she can survive what she did and laugh, so can I.

John swoops in and plants a warm, lingering kiss on my neck.

I pull away and look at him with a teasing smile. "What was that for?"

"You're just too adorable." He grins, then looks at Harley next to me. "And it's good to see you smile."

Harley's smile flickers, turning a bit sad at the edges. "Good to smile, Pops."

I take her hand under the table and squeeze. She squeezes back after a long moment.

"If my services are no longer needed..." John looks at me, and I just know he's hoping for any reason to swoop me back to the bedroom. Warmth blossoms in my core, and I want to give in to him, but Professor Masters implied a pop quiz soon.

I shake my head.

He sighs. "Then I'll go listen to Rebel bitch until I feel justified smacking him upside the head."

John marches inside, and I turn back to the hated textbook in front of me. *Variables are correlated if...*

“I’m glad you girls are both going to school,” Thor says.

I squeeze Harley’s hand again. She almost took another semester off, and I would’ve taken it with her. We spent long nights, sitting up and just talking. We talked through her dreams, how quickly she wanted to get out into the world, maybe even away from the compound. She pried my half-thought-out plans from me. I love John, and if he’ll let me, I’ll spend the rest of my life here, but I need something for myself outside of the compound walls, or it’ll be just like living with Daddy again. School is the first step, but I can’t go to school forever. I want to make something of myself other than a good wife and homemaker.

Though—and I didn’t admit this to Harley—I think I might be a good wife someday. Maybe even sometime soon. Maybe just as soon as Mama can make it to my wedding.

Harley just nods, staring down at her textbook. After a long beat of silence, she says, “I think X equals forty-eight?”

The Count groans.

By the time both of us have finished our homework, the sun is well and truly set. Harley leans back, stretches, and looks at the brightly lit den in the clubhouse behind me.

“I, uh, think I’m gonna head back to the house.” She grabs her things and stands. “I still gotta properly organize my bag for the semester.”

The Count nods absently, still grumbling over a nominal inaccuracy my professor taught me, and storms inside. Harley marches off into the dark without another word, and I stare after her. Her bag’s organized. I saw it on the first day of school. But she keeps coming up with reasons to hide in her room. I just wish she didn’t feel like she had to lie.

Hiding what my daddy did to me didn’t make it any easier on me, it just made it easier on him. If I talked about it,

somebody might've stopped him sooner. Maybe I'll tell her that soon.

I pack up my own things quietly. Insects start to sing, a song I've grown used to over the long summer months. John admitted he picked this place because of that very reason, because he wouldn't know how to sleep without it. Every piece of him I learn is a little more vulnerable, a little less like the rough-edged Prez he shows the world. He still has his rough patches, but there's far more to love in him than there is to fear.

The door slides open, spilling noise into the quiet, and I turn. John steps out and shuts the door behind him.

"Count said you were done." He looks at the house just as Harley's light comes on upstairs. "She already gone?"

I nod.

He sighs. He worries about her almost as much as I do.

Then, he covers the distance between us and swoops me over his shoulder. I squeal and squirm in his hold.

"What are you doing?" I demand.

"You've been working all day," he says. "I'm here to make you stop."

"My books—"

"Will be here in the morning." He starts walking toward the house. "Relax."

I beat lightly against his back, but his warm arm around my waist soothes me. I want to let him carry me away, let him take care of me.

"I waited all day." He swats my backside. "Ain't I a good boyfriend?"

The sting of his swat sparks something. A promise to take care of me and a threat all in one. The warmth spreads through me.

I laugh and swat his backside. "Aren't you a little old to be a boy?"

He shoulders open the door and marches me up the stairs.
“Is that any way to talk to the only man who loves you as much as I do?”

I drop my head to his back and inhale the thick leather scent of his cut. It smells like safety. It smells like home.

John opens the door to our bedroom and carries me inside for a long, long night.

ALSO BY K.L. SAVAGE

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