

EVIL DEAD

SINS OF THE FATHER

BILLY

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CALIFORNIA

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EPILOGUE

BILLY

SINS OF THE FATHER

EVIL DEAD MC – SECOND GENERATION

BOOK TWO

By

Nicole James

BILLY
Sins of the Father

Evil Dead MC
SECOND GENERATION SERIES

Book Two

By

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“Takes a lot to be in our world, and even more when your man’s a prospect. Prospects are meant to jump anytime a brother says jump. No questions asked. His number one priority will always be this club.”

—Cole

Club President

Evil Dead MC

CHAPTER ONE

STIR THE POT

Billy—

My knuckles rap on the wooden door, the frosted glass window rattling slightly. My eyes drift across the gold letters that once read *President*. Now the only remaining letters are so faded and peeled that the word is left indiscernible.

“Come in,” Cole’s muffled voice calls from the other side.

“Yes, sir?” I ask as I step into his office.

I’m a prospect for the Evil Dead MC, so when my president calls for me, I had better show up with a smile on my face and respect in my voice, least if I want a patch on my back.

He’s turned away from me, talking on the phone.

My eyes travel over his desk while I wait for him to finish. I study the glass of amber colored liquor. Drips of condensation slide down the side to leave a wet ring on the leather coaster it rests upon. I scan the scratches along the wooden top of the desk, trying to avoid where my eyes really want to wander.

I stop resisting and glance at the framed photos. There’s one of him with all the guys, another of his whole family, and finally, a closeup of my friend TJ and his twin sister Melissa. They’re both dressed in caps and gowns, having just graduated high school. Melissa’s long blonde curls hang from her cap past her shoulders, and her smile radiates happiness. Her emerald green eyes call to me like a taunt.

I've wanted to make her mine for as long as I can remember, but she's forbidden fruit. The President's daughter. She couldn't be more off limits if she was the club princess for a rival MC. I've been warned off her several times by different patched members. Thank God Cole doesn't know, or I wouldn't be standing here breathing, and I sure as hell wouldn't have an Evil Dead MC Prospect vest on.

Last time I was warned off, I got my ass kicked for good measure, and yet, staring at her picture has my restraint waning.

The leather chair creaks, and Cole turns his attention to me. My eyes dart from the picture, not wanting to raise his suspicions.

"I want you to take the boys and go do the pickups." Cole sets his phone on his desk.

I cringe at the way he says boys. I've been prospecting for this club since the day I turned eighteen, and he still thinks of us as kids.

He taps his fingers on the wood desktop, thinking, "And all of you can cut off after you drop the collections back here. It's Mother's Day, and I don't need a bunch of ol' ladies riding my ass about it."

I fight the grin at the corners of my mouth. It's always been amusing how these badass bikers can be so afraid of their women. Then again, I know my mom, and she's something fierce. For such a tiny woman, she's always scared the shit out of my father, and he's built like a Viking.

"Will do." I nod, moving to the door, clearly dismissed.

I make my way down the steps and to the bar where Marcus and TJ stand, making the occasional drink for a member.

“Time to count some money.” I wave my finger in a circle, signaling for us to roll out.

We make quick work of several local bars and liquor stores and then head to Sonny’s, the strip joint the club owns.

We turn into the parking lot of the place; the glowing neon sign reads Sonny’s Gentleman’s Club.

We pull up to the front door and park, dismounting. The man at the door turns when he sees us walking up.

“Hey, Billy. How’s it goin’?”

“Good, Bobby. Ronnie in?”

“Yeah. I’ll tell him you’re here.”

“Thanks, man.”

Bobby holds the door for us, and we troop inside. The place is dimly lit, with a stage and tables to the left and a bar along the right wall.

I lead the way and take a seat on a stool. Marcus sits next to me, and TJ leans an elbow on the bar, watching the show across the room.

I swivel my head and see a hot redhead dressed in a sparkling sequined bikini twirling around the pole and dancing to a driving beat.

I scope out the rest of the room. One guy is at the other end of the bar, his back to it as he, too, watches the show. Most of the customers are at the tables and a couple of dancers are making the rounds, giving lap dances while a waitress carries drinks on a tray to a table.

A pretty dark-haired girl tending bar approaches us.

“What can I get you, gentleman?” She flashes a bright smile, tossing coasters down.

I wave her off. “Just waiting for Ronnie, sweetheart.”

“How’s your bike running?” Marcus asks me.

“Fine, now that I changed the plugs.” I fold my arms and lean on my elbows.

“Fouled plugs are the worst,” TJ comments, his eyes still on the dancer. “Goddamn, that girl’s flexible.”

Marcus and I glance back. “Is that the chick you brought to the clubhouse for that birthday party for the president of the War Dogs club?”

“Yep. We hooked up a couple of times, but I haven’t seen her in months.”

The sparkly top came off and went flying through the air as she threw her arms in the air at the drum crescendo.

“Phenomenal tits, huh, boys?”

I can’t argue with him there.

Ronnie comes down the side hall. “Hello, boys. Did Tessa get you a drink?”

I stand and shake his hand. “We’re not staying that long. But thanks.”

“Here you go.” He holds out an envelope. “Tell Cole business has been good.”

“Great.” I slide it inside my vest. “Take it easy.”

I smack TJ’s arm. “Come on. You can ogle the dancers on your own time.”

“What’s your damn rush, Billy? This is all part of the perks. Let’s have a shot.”

“We’ve got a job to do. I’m not screwing up getting my patch by fucking up a simple pick up. Let’s go. Now.”

“Christ. Fine.”

We troop out to our bikes.

“Hey, do you guys mind if we make a stop before we head to the clubhouse?” I turn as I strap my helmet on.

“I’ve got no problems with that. Why?” Marcus asks.

“Mother’s Day. Need to pick up some flowers from me and probably some from my dad, too.” I know my dad loves my mom, but he’s not the best in the romance department, and he’s definitely terrible at remembering important dates.

Marcus throws his leg over his bike. “Oh, shit. It is Mother’s Day. I better pick up something for Mama Mary and Angel, too.”

I smile, knowing what he feels for them. Since his own mom was completely worthless, my mother and Cole’s wife, Angel, took Marcus under their wings when he first started hanging around. He’s always thought of them as the closest thing to the real deal because of it.

“Well, then let’s roll.” TJ twists his throttle.

We roar down the street.

Thankfully, there’s an Asian grocery store only a couple of miles from the strip club. I’ve been here before, and they have a surprisingly nice selection of fresh flowers. The owner hits the markets at the crack of dawn and gets first pick.

We stroll in, and Mr. Chen lifts his hand in greeting. “I knew you’d be in today, Billy.”

“You know it. You’ve got the best.”

I find a nice bouquet and grab a tin of my mother’s favorite pineapple Linzer cookies.

TJ picks out his own bouquet, and Marcus gets two boxes of chocolates. We pay and head to the clubhouse.

I climb from my bike and stroll toward the picnic tables. Cole, Wolf, and my dad, Red Dog, watch me approach.

“Any trouble?” Cole asks.

“No, sir.” I hand over the blue bank deposit bag, now loaded up with a bunch of envelopes from the various businesses we’d stopped at.

“Good.”

“Hey son, you bring me flowers?” My dad gestures to the ones poking out of my saddlebag.

“No, those would be for Mom. What did you get her?” I ask, already knowing the answer. I see the deer-in-headlights look he gives me, confirming my suspicion.

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s Mother’s Day.”

“Oh.” Relief spreads across his face. “I thought I forgot something. That’s a holiday for you to get her stuff.”

Wolf grunts next to him, causing Dad to turn his head.

“What?”

“After the number of kids I’ve had, I learned real quick your woman goes through childbirth to have your kids. You better get her something to thank her.” He tips his beer up, taking a swig. “You can buy flowers for her, or we can buy flowers for your funeral. The choice is yours.”

“You get something for Angel?” Red Dog turns to Cole.

“Yeah, blew up a picture of all of us at the twin’s graduation party and had it put in a big frame made out of old reclaimed wood. You know Angel loves a good photo, especially if it’s family.”

“Well, shit. No one thought to tell me.” He shakes his head.

“Dude, your kid’s got a five-o’clock shadow. Would have thought you’d figured it out by now.” Wolf chuckles.

“How could you leave me hanging?” He turns on me.

“What are you going on about, Dad?”

“Aren’t you a prospect? And yet you were going to go home and outdo me with flowers and who knows what else to surprise your mom and leave me to come home with my tail between my legs?”

I practically snort. “Outdo you? That would involve you actually having done something.”

Cole and Wolf both laugh.

“Billy, don’t get smart with me.”

“Don’t get all pissy. I got two bouquets.” Honestly, he was probably about to order me to go buy something from him, anyway.

“I knew I kept you around for a reason,” he teases.

“Yeah, yeah.” I roll my eyes and walk to my bike to retrieve the red roses. I toss the flowers to him. “I’m headed home now. Marcus, you comin’?”

“Yeah, I’ll stop there first.”

“Hell, I’ll tag along, too, so Marcus can ride with me to my mom’s,” TJ adds.

My mom opens the door as we clamber up the front steps.

“Happy Mother’s Day, Ma.” I hand her the soft pink roses and cookies, and her face breaks into a wide grin.

“Thank you, baby. You boys come in and have some lunch. I made some Kung Pao Chicken.”

I breathe in the aroma of stir-fried chicken, peanuts, vegetables, and chili peppers. It’s one of my favorites.

“Well, I’m not going to say no to that.” TJ pushes past, following behind my mom.

“Have a seat. Have a seat,” she urges, motioning to the kitchen table.

“Mom, I should be the one making you food.”

She moved across the kitchen, ignoring my comment. “Well, you know what I really want for Mother’s Day, Billy?”

“What’s that, Ma?”

“Grandbabies.”

Marcus and TJ grin from ear to ear at my predicament.

“Thanks assholes,” I mouth.

“Mom, I’ve only been out of the house a few years now. I don’t think I need to be making grandbabies just yet.”

“Well, you haven’t even started working toward it. Or do you have a girl I don’t know about?” She raises her eyebrows hopefully.

“No, Ma. No girl.”

Her shoulders slump like I’ve robbed her of her ability to be a grandma. She recovers quickly, turning her attention to TJ. “So, TJ. Is Melissa home for the summer?”

Marcus chokes on his drink.

“Ma...” I warn.

“What? I’m changing subjects.” She shrugs, but we all know that is definitely not what she’s doing.

Marcus continues to snicker until Ma whacks him with a wooden spoon. “Knock it off.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He sobers immediately.

“So, TJ. Is she home?”

“I’m actually picking her up this week.” TJ’s eyes snap to mine, trying to read my reaction.

“Oh, isn’t that lovely?” Mom stirs the pot, smiling to herself.

“Mary, you know if you go meddling with the President’s daughter, you’re just signing Billy’s death warrant, right?” TJ asks, looking sober. “My sister is definitely off limits.”

“Oh, nonsense. Besides, why wouldn’t my Billy be good enough for Cole’s daughter? He can knock that shit off.”

TJ shakes his head, seeing there’s no way to answer that question without offending her.

The conversation turns to the food as Ma dishes up plates and passes them out, but my mind stays fixated on the one girl I’ve always wanted and the one who has been flaunted in front of me like a piece of candy. I want that girl. I’ve wanted her forever, it seems. My desire for her goes all the way down to my bones.

It’s been easy to stay away while she’s been at college. But now that she’ll be home for the summer, I’m afraid of how much I’m going to be tempted. I hope I can resist long enough to make it to August. Surely, we’ll be patched over in Sturgis when the club comes together for their national meet. Marcus, TJ, and I have been prospecting longer than any of the members ever had to before getting their patches. I know that

for a fact. So, I have to make it a couple more months, and then I can have it all: Melissa and my patch.

CHAPTER TWO

COMING HOME

Melissa—

Summer is here at last. I made it through my first year at San José State. I should be on my second, but I took the year after high school off to figure out what I wanted to do with my life.

The sun shines brightly and the birds call as if in celebration of my last exam as I walk down the steps of the College of Social Sciences building. A tall orange tree sits adjacent to the steps, and the citrusy fragrance permeates the air. TJ should be picking me up soon. I'll be back to take some summer classes in two short weeks, so I only packed a backpack, unsure if he'll pick me up in his truck or on his motorcycle.

"Ms. Austin."

I hear my name called behind me and turn to see my psychology professor pushing forward through the sea of people flowing past me.

"Professor Ling." I smile but feel a little panic. Did I mess something up on the exam?

"Great, I caught you." He breathes a little heavier, having clearly rushed to catch up to me.

"Is something wrong? I thought I answered all the questions on the exam."

"No, no." He waves me off. "Nothing like that. I finished reading the term paper you turned in last week on Depression and Childhood Illness. I really like how you drew from your

own life experience. I wanted to know if you would be okay if I held onto your paper and shared it with a few colleagues.”

“Oh.” I blush slightly. It’s a little nerve-wracking to imagine a bunch of professors reading something I wrote. “Yes, yes, of course.”

“Wonderful.” His eyes snap up at the rumbling of an approaching motorcycle.

I don’t even bother to glance over my shoulder, knowing TJ must have decided to pick me up on his bike. Thank God I only brought my backpack. Don’t know what TJ’s plan would have been if I’d have had a whole duffel bag or my actual luggage. Men.

“Well, I look forward to seeing you in the fall for Research Methods.” I draw Professor Ling’s attention back to me.

“Yes, yes. Have a good summer.”

“Melissa!” TJ yells over the roar of his bike.

“Sorry, Professor Ling. I have to go.” I throw a thumbs up, pointing it in the direction of TJ. “My brother is here.”

“Of course.” He eyes the motorcycle as if it is some kind of monster. “Be careful.”

I smile to assure him and wave goodbye, then cross the concrete sidewalk to my waiting brother.

“You know I hate riding bitch with my brother,” I tease, as I grab the outstretched helmet.

“Yeah, well. I had club shit to do. Hop on.”

I can tell he’s teasing back, but still, he seems harder somehow, like the club or age has taken a bit of his goofiness away.

The ride is short since I stayed close to home for school. San José State is only about a half-hour ride from our house.

My dad tried to convince me to live at home, but I wanted to experience college and I'd been thinking of joining a sorority. I definitely had to be on campus if I was going to do that. My dad scoffed at the idea at first, but when I explained it was a sisterhood, just like the brotherhood he sought in his club, he couldn't argue. So, this year I became an official Kappa Kappa Delta.

When we roll up to the house, Mom comes busting out of the door, and I'm barely off the bike before I'm wrapped in her tight hug. "My girl is home."

"Hi, Mom." We rock back and forth. When she releases me, I adjust my backpack on my arm.

Brayden sticks his head out the door. "Hey, sis."

"Hey, Brayden." I move up the steps.

"How was your first year?" he asks as I step through the doorway.

I'm taken aback at how tall he's gotten. "When did you get so tall? I didn't used to have to look up at you."

He smirks. "Someone around here has to be tall and good looking."

TJ bumps him with his shoulder as he walks in. "Watch it, little brother. I can still lay your ass out."

"Not for long." Brayden slugs him in the arm.

I can't help but think he's not wrong there. TJ is no small man, but Brayden has about two inches on him. However, Brayden is lankier, not having filled out or built enough muscle to match his burst in height.

TJ does not lack in that department. His muscle ripples across his arms, and his chest is broad. He's grown into more of a man these last couple of years, and every bit as handsome as our father. In fact, TJ's the spitting image of him.

“Harley Jean’s graduation is in three hours. Shannon got enough tickets for all of us to go. Hurry and get ready.”

“I know, she’s so excited, and I’m thrilled she got accepted at San José State. It’s going to be a blast to share an apartment next fall.”

Mom gives me another squeeze. “I’m so happy that worked out. We’re throwing a party for her at the clubhouse afterward.”

I rush up the stairs and pull my bedroom closet door open. Quickly flipping through the dresses hung in my closet, I decide on the perfect one.

When I’m dressed, I twirl in front of the mirror. My sun dress is white with a flounce at mid-calf and an eight-inch section above the knee with a lace insert and another smaller one just two inches wide below the bust. Little buttons run down the front, and it’s held up by spaghetti straps. The neckline dips to show a bit of cleavage, and my sun kissed skin gleams golden.

Twisting my hair at my nape in a loose bun, I slip a pair of gold hoops in my ear and wedge sandals on my feet to complete the outfit.

Mom, Dad, and Brayden are waiting when I skip down the stairs.

Twenty minutes later we’re in the bleachers of the football field watching the procession of graduates in their caps and gowns enter. It takes me back to last year when that was me out there.

I fan my face with the paper program as the school band plays and try to make out which one is Harley Jean. Then I spot the decoration on the top of her cap and smile. I’d know her anywhere by the sugar skull of colorful rhinestones.

Harley Jean loves her sugar skulls. She's the biggest free spirit I know, and I love that next year we'll be together.

My mom and dad are on my left, sitting next to Harley's parents, and TJ and Brayden are on my right. The bleachers are packed full.

TJ leans behind my back and taps our father's shoulder. "I'm gonna go down by the guys, okay?"

Our father nods, and TJ works his way to the end of our bench and jogs down the metal steps. My eyes follow him as he makes his way through the late arriving crowd and over to the chain-link fence that divides the stands from the field.

And that's when I spot him.

Billy.

His forearms lean on the top rail as he stands with Marcus. My eyes sweep over the cuts on their backs, still devoid of the full Evil Dead MC patch with only the prospect rocker across the bottom.

I've known they haven't been patched in yet, but still, seeing the proof of it in front of my eyes is heartbreaking. I thought for sure when I went away to college that Marcus would have his by now. That they'd *all* have them by now.

Harley said she overheard her father telling her mother that my dad was being stubborn about it. Without a unanimous vote, there was nothing that could be done.

I can't help feeling I'm to blame somehow.

Though he never came right out and asked me, I can't help wondering how much my father knows about what happened between me and Billy.

I've been terrified he'll find out.

And I've been even more terrified Billy will find someone else. I know if I ever see him with another girl, it will shatter.

Even now, just seeing Billy across the twenty yards that separate us, without him even have turned and looked at me, I know those feelings I have for him have not faded. Not one bit.

Turn around, Billy.

Turn around and look my way.

When TJ approaches, he twists and straightens, and they exchange words. TJ gestures over his shoulder toward where we're sitting, and Billy scans the stands. Our eyes lock, and my stomach does a crazy little flip.

The band music fades, and the crowd disappears, and for that moment, it's like it's just the two of us in the entire world.

I haven't seen him in since last summer, since before I left for school, since that night he took that beating because of me. I know that's what happened. I knew it that night, though no one, not even TJ, would confirm it.

Not even Green would say so when later that night he took me aside and told me it would be best if I stayed away from Billy for a while. Green was warning me off in the sweetest way he could. And when my eyes glazed with tears, he took me in his arms, kissed my forehead, and told me to give it time.

Well, I've given it time. Lots of time. And nothing's changed. I'm still in love with that boy, and he's still wearing a prospect patch. How long can they expect us to wait?

What terrifies me more than anything is my father will forbid it even after Billy is fully patched. No, that's not true; what truly terrifies me is that Billy will get tired of waiting and move on to someone else. I couldn't bear it if he did. It would destroy me.

Seeing him for the first time in so long, it's clear those feelings are still just as strong with him as they are with me.

Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye, I see my father turn and look at me. He's caught us. He's wondering what it means. I can feel it. I'm terrified he *knows* what it means. I should break the connection, but it's too strong. I couldn't look away from Billy right now if the football field exploded with a bomb.

But he's stronger than I am, and he does it for us, turning to TJ and pretending a nonchalance I know he doesn't feel.

He can't.

Can he?

CHAPTER THREE

TEMPTATION

Billy—

I'm behind the bar at the clubhouse, busy passing out beer and soda at Harley's graduation party and trying not to let my eyes stray across the room to Melissa. But that damn white sundress she's wearing is making it difficult. It's a little sweet and a little sexy, and damn, it's working for me.

I remind myself for the hundredth time to get my mind off her, especially since her father sits at the end of the bar with Crash, giving me the stink eye.

I need to keep my head down and keep the drinks flowing and stop thinking about how badly I want to run my hands up Melissa's thigh until I find out what kind of panties she's got underneath that dress.

An hour later, I'm refilling the ice cooler when I feel a big hand slap tight on my shoulder and give me a shake. Twisting my head, I see my sponsor, Green.

"Knock off for the night. Go home and get some sleep."

I straighten, disbelieving. This never happens. "You serious?"

He lifts his chin toward the door. "Beat it before I change my mind."

My eyes stray over his shoulder to where Cole still sits, smoking a cigarette and studying me through the smoke.

Green squeezes my shoulder again and moves into my line of sight. "Billy, I'm doin' you a favor. Get the fuck out of here

before Prez sees you look at his daughter one more fucking time.”

I swallow. Guess I hadn't been as nonchalant as I'd thought.

“Does he know?” I whisper.

“He's not sure what he knows. I've got him convinced he's being a paranoid, over-protective father. It's working for the moment, but the man's not stupid either. It'd be best if you lie low tonight and keep your distance from you know who. Understand?”

I nod and wipe my hands on a bar rag, then toss it aside. “Fine. I'm outta here.”

“See you tomorrow.”

Steeling myself not to look over as I walk out the door, I head to my bike and roar off before Melissa has a chance to follow me out. Not that she would. For all I know, the girl's got a boyfriend at college now. I don't really believe that, though the thought works to cool my desire to seek her out. I know she's not seeing anyone. TJ, God love him like a brother, wouldn't waste one second before rubbing that in my face.

The ride across town works to clear my head. Getting on the bike does that for me every time. It's what I love about riding two wheels.

It's not long before I'm rolling up at my place. I park at the curb in front of the corner building, a two-story stucco job built in 1920. I rent a seven-hundred square foot, one bed, one bath over a store that sells Mexican crafts. There are only three units. I have the corner unit overlooking the intersection of 13th and Jackson. The rent is cheap; it has lots of windows and the bonus of the corner donut shop across the street. The biggest drawback is the catholic church a half a block down.

They ring their bells at 6:00 am, noon, and 6:00 pm. Every day.

If I get in late, I may still be awake for the 6:00 am bells. It's the ones at noon that usually wake me. Being a prospect to a biker club, the hours are usually late, unless something is up. Something is up a lot lately.

Stomping upstairs, my energy is dragging. Once inside my door, I shrug my cut off and hang it over the dining room chair, then strip out of my t-shirt. I stride to the fridge and stare at the contents, yawning and scratching my abs. There's not much, just a carton of OJ and a six-pack of beer. I tip the carton and drain the rest, then chuck it in the trash, reminding myself to take it to the dumpster.

I try to keep the place clean. I hate coming home to clutter and filth. I've got a tiny dinette table straight out of the fifties in the dining area off the kitchen. There's a couch, chair and end tables in the living room. The place came furnished, so I can't complain.

I've only got one tv, and it's mounted on the bedroom wall. I roam over to the guitar stand in the corner of the living room and pick up the blue Stratocaster, then sit on the couch and strum a few cords.

Fooling around with a guitar has always been therapeutic for me. I can usually turn my mind off my problems and unwind with the music. I play a blues riff I've been fiddling with and jot down the chords.

I've been looking for the perfect melody to go with the song I wrote last fall. I try the words out with the melody I just created.

The miles stretch between us

And it hurts to know you've gone away

I wonder if you'll ever come back to me.

The longer you're away, the more I miss your pretty face.

Your eyes. Your mouth. Your touch.

I dream about you, wishing you were here with me.

Here with me.

Why can't you be here with me?

A knock on the door startles me, and I stand, assuming it's Marcus or TJ. They're about the only visitors I've ever had except for the landlord.

I swing the door open without bothering to check the peephole. Fatal mistake.

I freeze with the guitar strap over my bare chest, the neck of the thing aimed at the floor, and stare into the face of the girl I was just singing about. A chill runs over my skin like I somehow conjured her up. I blink. She's still there.

Her eyes sweep over my bare chest and low hanging jeans, down to my boots and back to my face.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

She clears her throat. "Can I come in?"

I step back, and she brushes past me. Shutting the door, I turn to her. "How'd you know where I live? I know TJ didn't tell you."

"No, actually, it was Mary."

My brows lift. "My mother?"

"She seems to be my only ally in seeing you."

"That's because it's crazy. You know that, right?" I drag a hand through my hair, my weight going to one foot.

“Do you want me to leave, Billy?”

I suck in an exasperated sigh. Of course I don't want her to leave. That's the problem, and we both know it. “You're here now, so what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?”

“Don't be like that.”

“Like what?”

“All cold and distant.”

“How do you want me to be?”

“I saw the way you looked at me today.”

“Yeah, well... back atcha, princess.”

“It's still there, isn't it? You still feel it, don't you?”

I walk to the kitchen and pull open the fridge, knowing damn well what's inside before I ask the question. “You want something to drink? All I have is beer. But you're not old enough for that, are you?”

“I'll have a beer.”

Why the fuck did I offer her one? Why the fuck am I reaching inside and handing her one? If Cole knew Melissa was in my apartment, I'd be dead. If he knew I was giving his underage daughter alcohol, I'd be dragged behind his bike by a rope first, then he'd kill me. I'm probably not exaggerating. I watch her twist the cap off and invite her to sit down.

I must have a death wish.

She sits on the couch, and I take the chair, trying to maintain some space between us before I'm tempted to jump her bones. She's still in that pretty white dress that looks so beautiful with her long blonde hair.

“Why'd you come?” I ask again.

“What are we doing?”

“What do you mean?”

“Us, Billy. What are we doing? Are you interested in me?” She plays with the fabric of her dress with nervous fingers, as if she’s afraid of the answer.

I should lie. I should tell her I’m not, but when her eyes flick to mine, I can’t bring myself to break her. “You know I want you.”

“Then why don’t you do something about it?”

“You’re off at school. You’ve got three more years. Even if I got my patch tomorrow, how is this supposed to work between us?”

“Don’t say that. Please don’t give up on us. We can make it work.

“Can we?”

Her eyes drop to my guitar. “What was that song I heard you playing before I knocked?”

Well, I guess that cat’s out of the bag. “One I wrote for you.”

“For me?”

I nod.

“Sing it to me.”

Christ, she doesn’t ask for much, does she? I guess that’s one reason I’m attracted to her, and always have been. The girl goes after what she wants. For a long time growing up, I thought it was all one sided on my part—this attraction. Then she hit puberty and noticed me. I think it’s the only thing she’s ever hidden from her father.

Being a prospect for an MC takes guts. I figure I need to dig deep and find a little of that courage to sing this girl her song. I owe her that much. I start strumming the cords, then go

down on one knee in front of her and sing her the words I'd written.

When I finish, I feel more exposed than I ever have in my life. I swear if she laughs, it will destroy me.

When she doesn't respond, I stand and fling the strap over my head. I toss the guitar on the couch, about to tell her it was a stupid song, when she surges to her feet, wraps her arms around my neck, and presses her mouth to mine.

I guess she liked the song.

I'm no fool, so my hands naturally find her waist, and then her ass, and I drag her body against mine.

My tongue presses past her lips to explore while my hands roam over her.

She moans, and I feel it against my tongue. It drives me on. My fingers pull on the fabric at her hip, gathering it up her leg an inch at a time until I can feel the bare skin of her hip and the little scrap of lace. I can't keep from sliding a finger along the edge, over that sweet ass. This is as far as I dare go. Any farther, and I don't think I'll be able to stop. I withdraw my hand and drop the fabric, breaking off our kiss.

She stares at me with wide eyes. "What's wrong?"

"We can't do this. You know we can't do this. Please, baby. You have to understand. I'll lose everything."

"Right. The patch." Resentment drips from her voice.

"Don't be like that."

"I know I'm asking you to risk a lot for me, but I'm making concessions, too, Billy. I chose to stay close. San Jose State is minutes from here. You're one of the reasons I didn't go somewhere else."

I pace to the window. "See. You're already giving stuff up to be with me. I don't want that for you."

“Tell me there’s been no one else, Billy.”

I pause and stare out the windows. “There hasn’t. A couple of girls have tried. But I could never bring myself to do it.”

I feel her presence at my back. “Will you get your patch soon?”

I shrug. “I have no control over that. But they usually do it at Sturgis.”

“That’s the first week in August.” She practically whines.

I shove my hands in my pocket. “I know.”

Her soft hand runs up my bare back, and I close my eyes, clenching my teeth to keep from spinning around and dragging her against me once more. I have to get us out of here. The bed is too close. Hell, the couch is too close. I can’t be alone with her. But I’m not ready to let her go yet, either. “You hungry?”

She frowns at the change in topics. “A little, I guess.”

I look over my shoulder. “You still like Chocolate Long Johns?”

She turns her head and stares through the glass at the neon sign across the street. “Donuts? Sure.”

I throw my shirt on and we head out.

The place is open until 10:00 pm because it’s always busy. They’re that good.

We order at the counter and take a seat at a table in the back. There are several other customers.

I sip on my coffee, trying not to think about that kiss or the way she felt in my arms, but knowing after she leaves, I’ll be thinking of her when I lie in my bed.

Melissa moans around her first bite. “This is so good.”

“They are. When I first moved in across the street, I came over here. I had like a buck and some change in my pocket.

I'm standing at the counter, trying to count it out and see if I had enough to order something, when the owner"—I nod to the short Asian woman behind the counter—"tells me it's on the house. Anything I want. Her name's Lee. If Mama Lee hadn't fed me for free now and then, I don't know how I would have survived."

"That was nice of her."

"Well, I repaid the favor one night."

"Oh? How so?"

"I was sitting about here when a dude came through the door. I was the only customer, and I guess he didn't see me in this corner. He pulled a knife and ordered her to hand over the money in the register."

"Oh, my God. What did you do?"

"I snuck up behind him and knocked his lights out. One punch to the side of his head, and he slid to the floor, out cold."

"He could have hurt you."

"Lot of things in the MC could hurt me worse, Melissa. You get that, right?"

She stares out the window and nods. "Sometimes I hate the club."

"Why?"

"It takes everything, and I'm afraid it's going to take you, too."

"What do you mean? You afraid I'm gonna die?"

"That scares me."

"I'll be fine."

"You don't know that."

“I thought you loved the MC.”

She shrugs. “It always comes first. Not just with you, but with my father and brother.”

I swallow and feel a coldness grow in the pit of my stomach, really questioning for the first time if I’m right for her. She’s right for me, but am I good for her? Is it selfish of me to pursue her? Will her life be better off without me in it? Perhaps if I dissuaded her, she’d find some civilian guy, someone from school. Someone with a bright future as a lawyer or computer geek or such.

She turns toward me. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“The last night I saw you...”

“Yeah?” I know what she’s referring to.

“Was it because of me? Is that why they beat you?”

“That’s club business. I can’t talk about it.”

“Yes, you can. That wasn’t club business, and we both know it. It was about me, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. It was about you.”

“I’m sorry that happened because of me.”

“We need to stay away from each other a while longer, is all.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t be in your way. Summer classes start in two weeks.” There’s anger in her voice now. She stands and moves toward the door before I realize she’s walking out on me. I catch up with her at the driver’s door of her car and snag her arm.

“Hey. Look at me.” She looks everywhere *but* at me. “You think I want this? You think I like the way this has to be?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know what you think. You never say.”

I lift an arm toward my upstairs apartment, then let it drop to my side. “Then what the fuck was that? I sang you a song I wrote you. We kissed. You really doubt how I feel about you? You think I didn’t want to carry you to my bed?” I’m pissed now and glad the sidewalks are empty, because we’re having this out right here on the damn street.

“But you never seem to have the balls to do it.” She jerks her arm out of my grasp, slides in her car and slams her door.

I fight the urge to shout her name, to stop her, because I know I have to let her go. At least for now.

She throws the car in drive and stomps on the gas, peeling out, leaving me standing in the street to watch her taillights fade away.

CHAPTER FOUR

A GHOST FROM THE PAST

Billy—

The hot August sun beats down on us as we ride down Main Street in Sturgis, moving slowly. The crowds have already rolled in and the traffic has us feeling like we're sitting in rush hour, but I don't mind. All of us prospects are living in the moment. I feel like I've run the gauntlet, and I can see the finish line. A little traffic isn't going to rain on my parade. If anything, it gives me a chance to fully absorb the experience that is Sturgis.

Cole pulls his bike to the side, and the rest of the pack follows suit, backing our tires to the curb.

"Let's get a drink," he calls as he swings his leg over.

"Good. I'm fuckin' thirsty." Green climbs off his bike.

Crash smacks Marcus on the back. "You boys go get us a round."

"Yes, sir." Marcus takes the fifty from Crash's hand.

We move inside the dimly lit bar. Wooden tables are scattered in the open area, and a long bar with a line of already filled stools stretches across the left wall. The tables are also full of patrons ready to get the party started.

The brothers walk in and approach a table full of riding enthusiasts, the kind who aren't associated with any club. They see the troop of MC brothers headed their direction and quickly get up. They seem to scramble away, freeing the table for our use.

We each carry drinks to the table, and I make sure to set the first one I carry in front of Green. The brothers fill the table, leaving us to procure the one next to them.

We sit for a while, drinking and fetching refills.

“Looks like a storm’s moving in,” Wolf calls over his shoulder as he moves to the door to have a smoke.

Crash turns to gaze out the window at the gray clouds.

“We better haul ass to the property and grab some bunks before Alabama and Louisiana get here,” Shane suggests.

“Bullseye!” Crash calls.

Marcus immediately turns. “Yes, sir.”

“You and TJ go to the property. There’s a tall metal building. Claim enough bunks for us.”

“Yes, sir.” He stands, his chair scraping the wooden floor.

“Man, I gotta remember your nickname. Ten years of calling you Marcus makes it hard to change.” TJ slaps him on the back.

“You got the address of where the hell this place is located?” Marcus whispers.

“Yeah.”

“What about Billy? They may need the extra hand to save all our bunks.” Jake sips his beer.

“Yeah.” Green grins. “But I think we need a beer boy more.”

Marcus and TJ give me an apologetic look as they push out the door, but I can’t help but feel they’re the ones who drew the short straw. Not sure how they’re going to follow orders and save cots if another chapter’s brothers arrive and tell them to get the hell out of their way. They might find themselves between a rock and a hard place.

The bar slowly fills with more and more riders trying to escape the coming rain. The thunder rumbles overhead.

I carry a beer out to Wolf, where he leans against a brick wall.

“Thanks, Billy.” He takes the cold longneck from my hand.

“Man, this place is wild.” I can’t keep the smile off my face as I watch the mass of motorcycles riding past. The crowd bustles down the sidewalk, giving a wide berth to MC members.

“Yeah, it sure is.” Wolf’s mouth breaks into a broad grin as a woman pulls her handkerchief style halter top up to flash us with her perky tits. “And it never gets old.”

The bikes and crowds continue to spill past.

“Check out that bobtail.” I point to one with a burnt orange paint job and purple pinstriping.

“Yeah, you see some expensive bikes out here.”

We watch it pass in the parade of motorcycles.

Wolf pushes off the wall, pointing his beer a few feet in front of us. “You know, I was standing right about there when I saw Crystal ride past on a bobtail with Jameson O’Rourke and his crew from Brother’s Ink Tattoo.”

“Oh, man. That must have been a gut punch.” I cringe at the idea of seeing Melissa with another man.

“It was. But it’s water under the bridge now.” He turns toward me, smiling at the faraway memory. “Besides, she was always mine.”

I know the feeling. Downing some of my beer, I frown. “Jameson O’Rourke is the famous tattoo artist, right?”

“Yeah, he sets up a shop here every Sturgis. Rakes in the dough.”

My eyes flash with excitement.

“You boys should go check it out while you’re here. He’s talented. Did this.” Wolf tugs the collar of his gray t-shirt, revealing the top of his elaborate wolf tattoo.

“I’ve always thought that tattoo was awesome,” I admit sheepishly.

“He’s the real deal. You know, you boys get patched in soon, you’ll be able to get your club tattoo. Well, you gotta wait a year. And have two brothers go with you, but can’t be that much longer.”

“That would be amazing.”

“Tell Jameson you’re a friend of Crystal’s. Should get you a discount.”

“What about you?”

“Probably don’t say my name, or he might charge more.” He chuckles.

“Really?”

He starts telling me why, but my attention is drawn over his shoulder at a pair of young guys about my age moving through the crowd. The air of them and the way the crowd gets out of their way tells me they’re one-percenters. I continue to watch their approach, not wanting to interrupt Wolf, but I can’t see their insignia, and they’re almost on top of us.

I finally interrupt. “Wolf, there are a couple of MC members approaching behind you, and I don’t recognize them.”

With a jerk of his head, Wolf twists to take in the men now directly behind him, coming face-to-face with the first man. Wolf staggers against me, his arm reaching for the wall.

Looking up, I see the closest man elbow the other, and they laugh as they walk past us. I keep my eyes locked on them as they move on; I spot the Devil King patches on their backs.

We have a truce—albeit a shaky one—with the Devil Kings MC, but I’m afraid Wolf is about to blow it out of the water. You don’t laugh at a member of the Evil Dead MC and walk away—at least not on two working legs. But when my attention returns to Wolf, he’s still braced against the wall, and the color has drained from his face.

“Wolf? Are you okay, man?”

Lightning strikes nearby, and the sudden crack of thunder seems to knock him out of his stupor.

“Come on,” he growls, already three steps ahead of me.

I follow, not sure if a war is about to break out or what the hell is happening.

Crash looks up from the table and takes in my panicked face. His brows furrow, and he glances toward the shell-shocked Wolf.

“Dude, are you okay?” he questions, half rising out of his chair. “You look like you just saw a ghost.”

“I... I think I did,” Wolf stammers. “I swear I just saw Taz.”

Cole cocks his head to the side, worry spreading across his face. “Wolf, he’s dead.”

“Yeah, I buried him myself.” Green frowns.

“Six feet under,” Red Dog confirms.

My mind is racing a mile a minute. I’ve heard stories about Taz. He was a mean son-of-a-bitch. Caused all kinds of trouble for Cole and the club. Then he almost killed Wolf... Crystal, too. But that was years ago. I was a kid when all that happened. The only bits I heard were from whispered

conversations between my parents when they thought I was asleep. Wolf was hurt bad. He was laid up in the hospital. He was supposed to have all kinds of scars on him, but I've never seen much of any over the years, except the thin line that peeks out of his beard. I never wanted to ask when I was young and admit I knew more than my parents thought, and then so much time had passed. I figured he'd be pissed if I asked.

Wolf rubs his hand across his chest where the wolf tattoo he just showed me sits, and suddenly it makes sense. He wouldn't be the first person to cover scars with a tattoo.

“Swear to God. It looked just like him from when...” His voice trails off. “He hadn't aged a bit; like time had frozen, ya know? Except he didn't have his scars anymore. Am I going crazy?”

Crash looks at me. “You see him, Billy?”

“Yeah. Him and another guy. They had Devil Kings cuts on.”

I could cut a knife through the tense silence that falls over the table.

CHAPTER FIVE

ENOUGH

Billy—

Cole digs through his pocket, pulling out his phone. His fingers swipe across the screen, and he holds it to his ear, his eyes tracking Wolf's every movement, concern etched across his face.

“Hey, Shades. You in town yet?” He pauses for a response. “Good. I need you to do something for me.” Cole chuckles. “No, not this time, brother. Can you get in touch with your Devil Kings’ contact? I have some things I need you to ask him.”

Cole stands from the table and walks out the front door to finish his conversation.

I take a sip off my longneck and study Wolf. The dude is shaken. He's trying hard to cover it up, but I see the tremor in his hand when he lifts his beer bottle.

My father slaps a hand on Wolf's shoulder and squeezes. “That shit's over and done with, brother. It had to be someone who looks like that asshole. That's all.” When Wolf doesn't respond, Red Dog prods him. “You know that, right?”

“Yeah.” Wolf stares at the table. “Must be. That or I'm goin' crazy.”

“You're not going crazy,” Green insists, leaning forward on his elbows, he murmurs low. “Maybe it's just being back in Sturgis, the scene of the crime, so-to-speak.”

Wolf drags a hand down his face. “Green, that was decades ago. I’ve been here a dozen times since then. Now, all of a sudden, it’s affecting me?”

“There has to be an explanation. Cole’s gonna get to the bottom of it. Trust me.” Crash bumps Wolf’s shoulder with his own. “Okay?”

“Yeah. Sure.” Wolf polishes off his bottle.

When Cole walks inside, the downpour has subsided to a drizzle.

“Let’s head to camp.” He glances over his shoulder toward the door. “Before the weather starts up again.”

It’s a short ride to the club property. The crowds fade away as we make our way toward Deadwood. About halfway, we turn down a side road. A large steel building comes into view set at the back of the acreage. We trudge through the muddy grass and into the big shed doors. There’s not much inside. Bunks mostly fill the space with a door leading to a large, multi-stall bathroom and shower room at the far end. Other than that, and some rough wood counters, it’s not much of anything except a place to get out of the elements. I see TJ and Marcus stretching across as many bunks as their bodies will reach, and the sight makes me snicker.

“About damn time,” TJ grumbles under his breath as we approach.

“I thought we were going to go to blows with a prospect out of Louisiana, but two on one made him change his mind,” Marcus admits.

The brothers lay their rolls out on the saved bunks, freeing Marcus and TJ from the shit job.

I glance around, seeing all the bunks are taken or saved by other prospects, and suggest we find a place on the floor against a wall to lay claim to for our own mats.

Marcus lowers his roll, and TJ unwraps his with a flick. As I do the same, I hurriedly whisper the details of what happened at the bar, not wanting to be overheard.

TJ glances toward where the members talk across the room. “That’s crazy. I remember how tore up my dad was after that shit went down. I think he blamed himself.”

“Why’d he blame himself?” Marcus stands from straightening his mat out.

“No idea.”

I scratch my chin, pondering that question as Green makes his way over to us. “He called Shades after it went down. Asked him to get in touch with the DKs.”

“Isn’t Shades the President of the Alabama Chapter?” Marcus furrows his brows.

“Yeah, but they’re pretty cool with the DKs in Georgia. Hell, almost friends.”

I pull my head back. “Didn’t they kidnap Shade’s ol’ lady?” I try to remember everything I know about the Bama chapter or everything I’ve overheard.

TJ chuckles. “Yeah, but I guess they worked that shit out.”

“I’d hope so.” Marcus shakes his head. “I can’t imagine us suddenly being friends with the Death Heads after the shit they pulled last year.”

“Different chapter, different world.” TJ shrugs.

I glance over his shoulder as Green makes his way over to us.

“Hey, why don’t you boys cut out for a while? Wolf said something about you guys going to check out Brother’s Ink. Maybe head there.”

“Yeah, okay.” TJ nods.

“Just remember, you represent the club in how you act and whatever you do. Don’t cause any problems with another MC. Steer clear of ‘em if you can. Understand?”

“Yes, sir,” I reply.

As Green walks away, I dip my head to the others. “Why do you think they want us out of here?”

Marcus shrugs. “I don’t know. Maybe they’re discussing our patch-over.”

I nod, thinking he probably hit the nail on the head.

An hour later, we’re on Main Street, sitting in the line of traffic. This time we’re on our own, and there’s freedom in that. We can actually enjoy ourselves.

I look over at TJ, and he’s got the same ear-to-ear grin on his face that I do. This is the bomb. This is the kind of shit that I love, the fun part, the reason I wanted to be a patched member.

The sun has come out and the skies have cleared, and I feel like a kid at Disneyland.

TJ catches my eyes and lifts his chin to the opposite side of the street where a couple of blondes are waving and blowing us kisses.

The tattoo shop is right off Main, in all the hustle and bustle of Sturgis. We have to drive two blocks to find a parking spot and walk back. But that’s okay, since it gives us a chance to really see the town.

There’s a stage set up in an empty lot and music is blaring from the speakers piled tall on either side. A dozen bikini-clad women with sashes across their chests are up on-stage, waving to the crowd that’s collected for the Miss Sturgis contest.

We stop and watch for a few minutes, then move on down the street.

Brothers Ink is packed when we walk through the door. All the chairs are filled and people are milling around and checking out the art on the walls and the body jewelry in the long glass case.

I peer over a few shoulders and spot the man himself bent over a chair, working on a customer. I recognize him from the magazine covers he's been on. His long blond hair is a dead giveaway.

His younger brother is even more famous than he is these days with a huge music career. Rory has practically become one of those artists known on a first name basis like Cher or Madonna or Sting. I heard he got his big break when Charlotte Justice dragged him onstage to do a song he'd written. Now she's hooked up with the president of our Las Vegas chapter. What a crazy world this MC life is.

Marcus bumps my shoulder. "They say the wait is three hours."

"I think I'll pass. Maybe next year we can come back and get our club tattoo here, huh?"

"Sounds like a plan. What about you, TJ?" Marcus turns.

When he doesn't answer, I turn to find him staring at something. I follow his eyes and see a gorgeous girl working over a customer. I study the tattoo she's doing. The work is good. Damn good. Whomever taught her knew their stuff. My gaze flicks to her face and then over to Jameson, and it clicks. This chick's gotta be his kid.

"She's somethin', isn't she?" TJ murmurs.

"Yeah, she's something all right. She's also Jameson's daughter."

He snaps out of his daze, and his eyes flick to the man, then back to her. “Son of a bitch. I think you’re right.”

“Come on, Romeo. The wait’s too long.” Marcus is already heading for the door.

I turn that way, then slow. “You comin’, man?”

I can tell immediately TJ wants to stay, but he nods and follows us out.

We spend a couple of hours wandering the town and having a good time. We end up in a place a few blocks from our bikes and manage to find a spot at the bar. The place is packed, and there’s only room for one of us, so the other two stand halfway in the flow of passing customers moving in and out of the bar.

TJ slaps the back of his hand against my chest and lifts his chin toward a big round table in the corner. A couple of the bikers are facing away from us, and I can read their top rockers. Devil Kings.

Shit.

“Maybe we should find another bar,” I mutter.

“Is the guy you and Wolf saw one of them?”

I shake my head and try not to get caught looking over there. I don’t want to draw attention to us. We’re just prospects, nothing to them, even if our clubs are supposed to have a truce.

It’s then I feel a shoulder ram into me as somebody pushes past.

“Get out of my way, fucking prospect.”

I straighten, my body tightening, and turn to see the very asshole we were just talking about. My fist itches to drive into his smirking face, but Marcus grabs my arm, and I remember

what my sponsor told me about giving the other MCs a wide berth.

The dick chuckles and leans toward me. “Douchebag.”

My jaw clenches, but I refrain from snapping a comeback, and the two men move on past toward the other Devil Kings at the table.

“Let’s get out of here before they decide to give us trouble,” TJ mutters.

We all drain our beers and head for the door.

It’s close to midnight when we arrive at the Evil Dead property.

When we roll through the gates, a tall bonfire is visible. There are a ton more bikes now than when we left, and I know that all the chapters across the country have arrived. Besides the California’s San Jose and Temecula chapters, there are chapters from Oregon, Nevada, Missouri, Louisiana, and Alabama. With about a dozen members or more in each location, it makes for quite a group. The Dead have always used the Sturgis Rally for their National Meet. Two birds, one stone, I guess.

There’s a big full moon out as the three of us park our bikes at the end of a long row of gleaming chrome and dismount. I see a bunch of other guys with prospect patches just like ours, but I don’t know any of their faces.

I notice Cole and Wolf standing off to the side with what I realize are all the other chapter presidents, in a deep discussion about something.

“I can’t believe the Devil King’s would patch him in after the shit Taz pulled,” Cole grumbles.

“I can’t believe Taz has a son.” Wolf looks disgusted.

I keep walking. Until I get my patch, it's none of my business. I spot the rest of our crew over by a picnic table and lead TJ and Marcus that way. It's dark and crowded, and they don't notice us coming. I know they don't because of what we hear them discussing.

Putting an arm up, I stop Marcus and TJ behind me. We're still on the other side of a few guys arguing about football.

I know I shouldn't, but I can't help hanging back to hear the rest of the conversation.

"I can't believe we're still discussing whether we're going to patch these kids in," Shane says. "Me and Jake prospected for less than a year before you patched us."

"Yeah, but you served in the military and were way more mature. You had life experience," Crash replies.

"These boys have already done illegal shit for our club. They've more than proved themselves," Green defends us.

"Prez isn't sure they're ready," Crash cuts him off.

"They're too young," I hear my old man mutter and can't believe my ears. After everything we've been through, could they really leave us hanging another year?

"So, where do we currently stand?" Jake asks.

"Four in favor, three against," Shane replies.

"Three undecided," Green corrects. "Votes can still be swayed."

I exchange a stunned look with Marcus and TJ.

The guys who were talking football move off, leaving us exposed, so we shuffle to the table.

"Hey, it's our prospects. You boys have fun?" Green asks, glancing at us with glassy eyes, and I know he's three sheets to the wind.

“Yeah.” My voice is short and sharp.

“Any problems?” Crash asks, frowning as Cole and Wolf make their way over.

Yeah. A big problem. We may not be getting patched. I want to yell the thought burning in my brain. My eyes shift from Crash to Wolf. “Saw those same two again.”

He straightens. “Where?”

“Place called Mug Shots. They walked past us, told us to get the fuck out of the way, then moved off to the back, where there was a tableful of DKs.”

The guys all exchange a look.

Green jerks his head. “Go grab yourselves a beer.”

I take that as an order to disappear and stalk toward the shed where I know some coolers are, Marcus and TJ on my heels.

We all grab a beer and pop the tops.

I’m so pissed, I want to fling the damn can into the darkness.

“You think what they said is true? You think Cole’s really gonna vote against us?” Marcus asks.

“That or not call the damn vote in the first place. It’s all up to him, isn’t it?” I reply.

“Your dad didn’t sound like he was a yes vote either,” TJ states.

I nod, all too aware of how deep that cuts. I’m beyond pissed.

Seeing my reaction, Marcus shrugs. “You’re his kid. He’s probably being overprotective.” His eyes shift to TJ. “Yours, too.”

“I get that, but Jesus Christ, what do we gotta do to prove ourselves? Why even let us prospect?” TJ mutters, downs his beer and crushes the can in his fist.

“That’s no excuse for Marcus, though, is it? I hope they don’t hold you back, too, for this bullshit.”

Marcus’s jaw grinds. “Right. Because I’m not family, am I?”

My eyes slide closed for a second, realizing how I’ve just fucked up. “I’m sorry, Marcus. I didn’t mean it that way.”

“Yeah, you did.” He tosses his half full beer in a rusty oil drum and stalks off. I guess I can’t blame him.

“I should go after him. Apologize.”

TJ grabs my arm. “He’ll be fine. Just give him a minute.”

I stare into TJ’s eyes. “You ever feel like quitting?”

“I can’t, man. This club is in my blood. It’s all I’ve ever wanted. And I don’t think my father wants me to quit. Maybe this is all a fucking test.”

I shove my hands in my pockets. “Some fucking test. I swear to God, if I have to stand there tomorrow night and watch all these other prospects from every Goddamn chapter get patched in, and we’re left out, I’m gonna have to do some heavy thinking.”

“Then you don’t want it bad enough, Billy.”

I snap and grab TJ by the shirt and slam him against the shed. “Don’t you ever say that to me again. Understand?”

He holds my eyes, and I know we’ve drawn the attention of several patches.

I don’t wait for an answer. I shove him free and stalk after Marcus.

We stand in a line and watch as Alabama, New Orleans, Oregon, Nevada, and Temecula each send prospects down the gauntlet. They're bruised and bleeding by the time they get to the end, but they've got smiles on their faces as they hold their cuts, the patch across the back, making them full members.

I can't smile. Can't even feel excited. I notice how my dad refuses to look my way. I stand here with knots in my stomach, ready to punch someone in the fucking throat.

"Hey, San Jose Chapter, do you have any prospects to patch in?" Shades calls.

Cole looks over at us, dragging the moment out.

I refuse to get my hopes up.

TJ shuffles next to me as if his nerves make him fidgety.

Cole's jaw tightens, and he gives a shake of his head. "Not this year."

I release a slow breath, trying to lower my blood pressure.

Thankfully, we don't have to stand here much longer. We were the last chapter to be called.

The crowd dissipates, and Green squeezes my shoulder, a sign of solidarity, before stalking off himself.

We retreat to our own mats, beers in hand.

TJ and Marcus are silent, probably from shock. But I'm just brooding. Going over and over in my head all the shit I've done over the last years. Over what I've given up.

I've had enough and throw my beer can violently to the ground before storming to the exit. I see my dad watch me as I go, and I stare at him, daring him to say one fucking word to me.

CHAPTER SIX

RUN IN

Melissa—

I stare in the mirror. “At least it’s not another stupid toga party.”

“You look rockin’ in that shirt.” Harley Jean bumps my hip with hers. “What about me?”

“You look great, too.”

“I’m nervous.”

It’s her first frat party; all pledges are invited to this one. The theme for tonight’s party is Risky Business, as in the Tom Cruise movie. Everyone wears a man’s dress shirt, white socks, and Ray Ban style sunglasses.

I’m so happy I was allowed to be Harley’s big sister. It makes everything easier. We’re already besties, so who better to show her the ropes in Greek Life than me?

I slip on my white tennis shoes. “You ready?” Harley spins and strikes a pose. I chuckle. “Yeah. You’re ready. Come on.”

Ten minutes later, our entire sorority is walking through the front door of the frat house. The place is packed, and the music is blasting. We’re directed to a keg in the back room and each fill a red cup.

Taking a sip, I study the room. Some of those in attendance have obviously gotten a head start on the party and are already shit-faced drunk. Before I headed back for this school year, both my mother and Harley’s made me promise to look out for her, so I plan to stick to her like glue.

We're standing near a traffic pattern and people are moving past us. I wave at several of the guys I know from last year and suddenly feel a smack on my ass, the hand actually going under my shirt to squeeze my cheek through my tiny black bike shorts.

I spin, shoving the hand away and come face to face with Jason Biggs. My mouth literally drops open, and my eyes widen. "What are you doing here? I thought you went to CalTech."

"I transferred just to be near *you*, beautiful." He smirks.

I don't believe a word of that, but his being here is crazy. His family is wealthy. His father has big plans for him. San Jose State doesn't even come close.

"Thanks for joining our party." He winds one of my curls around his finger until I slap it away.

"Your party? You're in this fraternity?" I'd hoped maybe he was a guest.

"Yep."

Of course, he's in the Greek system. Just my luck. Now the chances of me running into him quadrupled. Wonderful.

His eyes drift to Harley. "Hey, cutie-pie. You a pledge?"

I want to barf as his gaze travels over Harley, and I step in front of her, the protective Mama Bear inside me awakening. "Don't even think about it, Jason. She's not your type." I eye him up and down. "And you're definitely not hers."

That brings his attention back to me. Not that I want it, but if it'll keep Harley safe from him, so be it.

"Jason." One of his frat brothers calls from across the room, and lifts a bottle of clear colored liquor his direction. "We've got the good stuff."

Jason grins and lifts his chin, then turns to me and winks. “See ya ‘round, Melissa.”

Not if I see you first, asshole.

“Who was that?” Harley whispers, her gaze trailing after him with interest.

“Someone you don’t want to waste your time with, believe me. He’s a dick.”

“How do you know him?”

“He went to my high school. Be glad you didn’t attend the same school as me.”

“Did you date?”

“God, no. Not that he didn’t try. Thinks he’s better than everyone and thinks the world’s his for the taking. Women included. Know what I mean?”

“Oh.” Her gaze returns to Jason where he stands by a makeshift bar. “Too bad, because he’s pretty cute.”

“Not once you get to know his personality. Come on. Let’s go outside where the DJ is set up.” I lead the way, with a gnawing feeling in the pit of my stomach.

The music pumps a base loud enough for me to feel it vibrating in my chest. Jess, one of my sorority sisters, pulls me into the crowd of dancing girls and I grab hold of Harley’s hand, tugging her along behind me. We cut loose and dance and sing at the top of our lungs to one song after another.

We’re all scream singing Old Time Rock’n’Roll when I notice Jason Biggs leaned against one of the walls outside watching as he sips on a red cup. Lots of guys are laughing, singing, and watching us all carry on, but the fact that Jason is, makes me lose interest in this night.

“I’m going to run to the restroom,” I yell in Harley’s ear, wanting to escape his leering eyes.

She nods. “Want me to come, too?”

“No, no.” I wave her off. “You stay and sing. I’ll be right back.”

I move off to the side and around the crowd of raucous sisters sliding around in their white socks, a pile of discarded shoes in the grass.

I make it down the hallway and into the bathroom. Standing at the sink, I stare at my reflection. I’m a sweaty mess. My hair looks tousled, and my face glistens with perspiration. I grab a folded paper towel and pat my face, careful not to mess up my makeup. Thank God I wore waterproof.

Glancing at my phone, the time glows back at me. It’s pretty late already. Maybe I could convince Harley to call it a night soon.

It’s been fun, but the night was soured the moment I saw Jason. It took me straight to the last time I saw him. He’d tried to throw me into the pool at his high school party. I’d called TJ to come get me, but Billy was the one who strutted into that party like a badass in his cut. He’d saved me from the plunge into the water and instead threw Jason in with a splash. If I hadn’t been so pissed at Billy for treating me like a child, I probably would have laughed. Of course, Jason didn’t think it was funny and tried to tackle Billy. Big mistake. I thought Billy had killed Jason or paralyzed him when he threw him headfirst into a brick wall and knocked him unconscious. If Billy knew Jason was here now, he’d probably lose his shit. I wonder if he’d come here to get me. The thought almost makes me reach for my phone. Instead, I run my fingers through my hair, trying to brush it into something presentable, and head for the door.

I make it barely five steps before Jason blocks my path. Great, what’s he want now? I’m not scared or worried, just

annoyed.

“Hey, Melissa. Where you headed?” he slurs.

“Back to my friend. Now, if you’ll excuse me.” I go to push past him, but he stretches his arm out.

“You know...” He eyes me up and down with a lustful look that makes me want to throw up. “We’d be good together. You could be mine.”

“I could never be yours.”

“Why?” He trails his fingertips lightly up my arm.

“Jason, I’m not into you.”

That doesn’t seem to faze him at all.

“I bet you could learn to be into me.” He stumbles close, trying to whisper in my ear, but in his drunken state says it much louder than necessary.

“Besides...” I decide to try a new tactic to handle him. “My dad would probably kill you.”

“That’s right, you’re a”—he holds his fingers up to make air quotes—“club princess.”

“Like you could forget. Or did that concussion Billy gave you mess with your head?”

“Billy.” He sneers in disgust.

“Yeah. You know, my boyfriend,” I lie after seeing his reaction to the memory.

That causes him to step back and stammer. “Wh-what?”

“My boyfriend. Remember? You met him,” I continue, seeing I’ve poked a nerve. “Well, I guess you weren’t introduced, but I can’t imagine it’s hard to remember the guy who humiliated you at your own party.”

His eyes flare with anger. “He’s your boyfriend?” It’s more of an accusation than a question. He stands sputtering behind me as I push past him and down the hallway.

CHAPTER SEVEN

LET LOOSE

Billy—

TJ, Marcus, and I pull into the parking lot of Joey's Bar and Grill. It's our first weekend back from Sturgis, and the club has given us the night off. There's been a ton of tension since the patching in ceremony... or should I say, the 'not-patching in' ceremony. I expect this rare Saturday night off is probably consolation for that. Plus, maybe they don't want us around for the welcome home party they're throwing tonight. Things have been pretty strained for the last ten days. The trip back we barely spoke.

Since we arrived in San Jose, things haven't improved much. We get looks from the patches, but they haven't brought up what happened. Seems no one is anxious to talk about it. What did we expect, really? That they'd pat our backs and tell us how sorry they were?

We shove through the doors of the rustic place. Joey's sits in its own building, surrounded by a large parking lot. The place is the "in" spot for people our age. There's a circular bar in the center, with pool tables off to the right and a stage and tables off to the left.

Tonight, a well-known local band with a good following is playing, and they always pack them in. Especially chicks. Hot chicks. Which is why TJ wanted to come. He's always on the prowl.

Usually, Marcus and I would argue against this place and push to go somewhere else, but we've both been too depressed to give a shit, so we caved, and here we are.

I'm regretting this already as we stand near the bar, trying to get a drink. Marcus eventually flags the bartender over and passes me a cold longneck. I tip it back, watching the band.

Marcus stands next to me and clinks his bottle to mine. "Here's to another year of prospecting."

"Another goddamn year. I can't believe it." I watch TJ already striking up a conversation with a hot redhead sitting on one of the barstools near us.

"Nothing we can do about it," Marcus replies. "We're stuck."

"It doesn't piss you off?"

"Hell, yeah, it pisses me off. But that's not gonna get me anywhere, is it?"

I can't argue with him, so I tip my bottle up again and watch the band. Several women pass us, eyeing our cuts. Some women it turns off, some women it turns on. It's hard to tell until you see a smile.

I feel a body nudge past me from behind and twist to look.

"Oh, excuse me. Just trying to get a drink." It's a sexy girl with long dark hair and curves in all the right places.

"No problem, darlin'."

She makes it to the bar, and I turn to the band, wondering how long I've got to stick this out until I can make an excuse and cut out.

"You heard from Melissa?" Marcus's question takes me by surprise. I suppose it shouldn't. We're as close as brothers, and he knows everything.

"Nope. Trying to stay away from her."

"I heard she's back at school. Left a few days ago. Harley's rooming with her in some apartment this year."

I nod, thinking of the two of them together. Wondering if they're more likely to get into trouble now that they're together or if they'll keep each other out of it. I'm betting on the former.

"Maybe you should see someone else," Marcus suggests. "After all, we're looking at another goddamn year of this shit. How long can you hold out for this girl?"

As long as I have to.

I let my eyes stray over the crowd, taking in all the single girls. Sure, lots of them are attractive, and I'm a red-blooded man. But would I be able to look at any of them and not think of Melissa? As I fucked them, would I stare into their eyes and wish it was Melissa staring back at me? Would I imagine it was Melissa my cock was sliding into?

"Brother, it's got to be hard on you. How long can you live like a goddamn monk?"

That's what worries me.

"What if she starts seeing another guy? There are literally thousands on campus. All her age. All single."

I spin and glare at him. "What the fuck are you doing? Trying to get a rise out of me?"

He grins. "There he is. Thought I'd lost you to the "I don't give a fuck" depressive funk you've been in."

"So, taunting me about the prez's daughter is your answer?"

He shrugs. "Worked, didn't it?"

"Knock it off."

"Fine. But just so you know, none of us expect you to wait for her for three fucking years and never fuck another woman. That's crazy town, bro."

Was it? Perhaps it was. She'd be away at school and wouldn't graduate for another three years. Would we both be different people by then? I was young and a prospect for one of the baddest MCs around. Women were literally available at every party. Wasn't that one of the perks of being part of the club?

"Am I right?" he prods.

"I'm going out to get some air." I stalk away and slam through the doors. Dipping my head, I light a smoke and suck in a long drag, letting the nicotine flood my system. The door opens behind me, spilling a stream of golden light and rock music out before it shuts.

Marcus comes to stand beside me.

"Sorry, man. Didn't mean to piss you off. I was out of line."

I nod, staring at the moon and saying nothing.

The door opens again, and TJ walks out. "You guys leaving already?"

"Just needed some air," I reply.

TJ's phone goes off, and all of us straighten. Usually when one of our phone's rings, it's the MC wanting us for something. I wonder what hoop they want us to jump through this fucking time.

TJ looks at his screen, then meets my eyes and puts it on speaker. "Hey, Melissa. What's up?"

I look away, not sure I want to stand here and listen, knowing the sound of her voice will do things to me. Apparently, TJ knows too, otherwise he wouldn't be putting it on speaker and smiling.

I can't for the life of me figure out if he's for or against the two of us. Sure, he gives off the big-brother protective vibes,

but he sure never misses a trick when he's got a chance to rub it in my face, almost as if he's egging me on. Which is crazy. Maybe I'm the crazy one, spending way too much time worrying about this shit.

"Guess who I ran into at a frat party?"

Just as I suspected, the sound of Melissa's voice goes straight through me and grabs me by the heart. My eyes slide closed, and I try to picture her in my mind. I try to ignore the part where she's at some damn frat party, but my jaw tightens.

"I don't know," TJ replies. "Who?"

"Jason Biggs."

That name has my eyes popping open. Jason fucking Biggs. I remember that asshole from the party I had to drag her out of one night. He and I came to blows over her, and I slammed his face into the wall. I was lucky to get her out of there before they called the cops on me.

"Really?" TJ stares at me as he says the word. "He bothering you?"

Every muscle in my body tenses as I wait for her reply.

"He got a little grabby, but some of the other guys in the frat have been keeping him away from me."

"That's nice of them." TJ waits for my reaction. I try really hard not to give him one.

I can hear a male voice in the background. "Come on, Missy. Let's dance."

Missy. She always hated being called that.

"In a second, Ethan."

Ethan? Who the fuck is Ethan?

"Stay away from Biggs, sis. Promise me. That guy's a dick."

“I know. But he’s in a frat here, so I’m bound to keep running into him.”

“You want me to come up there and put the fear of God in him?” TJ growls, truly the protective big brother now.

“No. I’ll be fine.”

“He bothers you again, call me. Understand?”

TJ is saying all the things I want to say.

“Babe, let’s dance. Hang up the phone.”

There’s that fucking guy again. Ethan. Waiting to dance with the girl I’ve always thought of as mine. And apparently, she’s letting him. Apparently, she’s enjoying herself at school, taking full advantage of parties and guys. Fucking fantastic.

Marcus and I exchange a look, and I know what he’s thinking. Dude, she’s not waiting for you. Why are you keeping yourself on a chain like her pet dog? Okay, maybe not that, but close.

TJ hang ups, and he slips his phone in his hip pocket.

And just like that, I feel that thread of connection to her break. She’s miles away, and the distance never felt so great. I think seriously again if it would be best if I let her go. She’s young and has her whole life ahead of her. We both do. Perhaps getting tied down, even in a year, is just too unrealistic at this point in our lives.

“You comin’ back inside?” TJ asks.

Marcus looks at me. “Come on. Let’s have some fucking fun for a change. We’ve got the night free. How often does that happen?”

I give in and finish off my beer, chucking the empty bottle in a trash can. “You’re right. It’s time we had some fun.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

SINS OF THE FATHER

Billy—

It's late when we return to the clubhouse, but the place is packed and hopping with the usual welcome home party that happens every year when the club returns from Sturgis. Marcus broke off as we rode through town, heading home to Brandy. I don't blame him. He's in love, and only has eyes for his ol' lady.

I park my bike, and TJ parks next to me. The girl on the back of his bike hops off, and he dismounts. I feel the arms around my abs give a squeeze, and the girl at my back does the same.

She stares at the building. "So, this is the Evil Dead clubhouse. I've heard of it, but I've never seen it."

I snag her hand, trying to remember her name. Trina. That's it. "Well, come on, Trina. I'll give you a tour."

She snuggles against my arm and stretches to give me a kiss. We follow TJ and his girl inside.

The place is crowded with hang-arounds here for the welcome home party. We make our way to the bar, and TJ moves behind it to snag us four longnecks.

"Come on." He tilts his head and leads us to an empty pool table in the back of the room. I squat and start filling the rack with balls.

TJ breaks and makes three good shots before it's my turn. I nearly run the table on him before it's his girl's turn.

As I straighten from my shot, Trina lays her palms on the bumpers and leans to give me a kiss. “You’re pretty good at this game.”

I wrap a hand around her waist and drag her against me. “I’m pretty good at a lot of things.”

That gets me a lift of her brow.

She’s about to say something but is suddenly jerked back by the arm.

“What the hell is she doing here?”

It’s my mother looking ready to kill this girl, and for the life of me, I don’t have a clue what her problem is.

“Ma!” I snap. “Quit.”

She shoves a finger in my face. “You brought her here?”

She doesn’t bother to wait for an answer, just drags Trina out toward the door.

Trina fights back, trying to tear her arm out of my mom’s grip. Before she manages to pull free, Crystal moves forward to seize Trina’s other arm and aids in pulling her toward the door like they’re taking the trash out. No one in the club dares to stop them, and all eyes turn to me.

“What the fuck is wrong with Mary?” TJ hisses at my side.

“No fucking clue.” I search the crowd and find my father, though he’s got his shoulders hunched over a beer at the bar, trying to look like he wants to be anywhere but here. What the fuck? I shove through the crowd to him, knowing he can handle my mother better than anyone.

When I reach him, he shakes his head. “Don’t, son.”

“What do you mean? Mom’s lost her shit again. Do something.”

He points a finger toward the door. “For that girl? Hell no. I can’t be seen with her. It would be like adding kerosene to an already blazing inferno.”

A hand clamps on my bicep, and I twist my head. It’s Green with a stoic look on his face.

“Come on, kid. We need to talk.” He pulls me through the door and into the hall that leads toward the big room where we do cage fighting. It’s suddenly quiet when the door closes on the blaring music beyond. Green shakes his head “Damn, your choice of women really makes me question your sanity, boy.”

“What are you talking about?”

“First the Prez’s daughter and now her?” He lifts his arm toward the room we just exited. “You ever hear the expression, sins of the father? Well, you just brought one in here.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“That’s Rosalie’s daughter.”

I shrug, getting more agitated. “Who the fuck is Rosalie?”

He sighs and drags a hand down his mouth. “Look, kid. Remember when you were about fourteen or fifteen and your Mom broke every dish in your house, and you drove her to Crash’s place?”

“Yeah?”

“That fight was over Rosalie. Your mom thought your dad was seeing her again.”

“What do you mean, again?”

“There was a lot of shit going down back then and—”

The door opens, and Angel comes in, interrupting my sponsor and putting her arm around me. “Let me talk to him, Green.”

He bails all too happily, holding his hands up and backing away.

Angel gives me a side-squeeze and walks me toward the warehouse. It's empty of people, and we can barely hear the party going on up front. "I'm not sure if you are aware of this or not, but your mom has had several miscarriages before and after you were born."

"Yeah. I know about them."

"Well, it was really hard on both your parents, but your mom especially. One of the ways she reacted and dealt with her pain was to push your dad away. He was hurt and didn't understand what he'd done wrong. From that, it became like a spiral effect, and they drifted further and further apart. In his anger and hurt, your father made a mistake with Rosalie that hurt your mother very badly."

"You sayin' my dad cheated on my mom with Rosalie?"

Angel just stares at me, and her silence tells me everything I need to know. I slump against the wall and thread my hands through my hair. "Jesus Christ, and I brought her daughter here."

"Exactly. So now you see why Mary was so upset. Rosalie is kind of a trigger for her." Angel pats my arm. "Your mom and dad got past it. It wasn't easy, but they love each other. But now you see why she had to go, right?"

I huff out a breath. "Yeah. I get it."

"I know it's not fair to that girl, but—"

"Wait." I cut her off as a thought hits me like a ton of bricks. "Is my dad Trina's father?"

Angel shakes her head. "No, Rosalie already had a kid before she met him."

I slump with relief. "Thank God."

“You better go give that girl a ride home.”

“Yeah.” I turn to leave, but she stops me with a hand on my arm.

“Billy.”

I turn back. “Yeah?”

“Be kind to your mother. Mary’s had a hard time of it.”

“I will.” We both return to the party, and I walk out the door.

Trina is smoking a cigarette and fuming.

“Hey.” I touch her arm, but she jerks it away.

“Thanks for leaving me to that shrew.”

“That shrew is my mother.”

Her brows shoot up. “Your mother? So, you’re Red Dog’s son?” She begins to laugh. “Unbelievable.”

I frown. “You know my father?”

She doesn’t answer, and we’re both distracted as an arc of headlights flashes over us. The car guns up to us, and I grab Trina’s arm to yank her back.

“What the fuck?” I mutter, staring at the piece-of-shit blue sedan with its front bumper wired on and its side mirror jiggling, a bunch of silver duct tape barely holding it on.

A woman climbs out who looks a lot like Trina. She slams her door and takes Trina in a hug.

“You okay, baby?” she whispers in her ear as she glares at me over her shoulder. When they part, she turns her venom on me. “You. I remember you when you were a little boy. You’re Billy, aren’t you?”

“And you’re Rosalie.”

Her chin pulls back. “So, you remember me?”

“I don’t remember shit about you, lady. But I do know you need to leave before all hell breaks loose.”

“What happened between me and your father has nothing to do with Trina. She doesn’t deserve to be treated this way.”

“I agree. She and I have nothing to do with what sins our parents committed.”

“I’m glad you agree, though I committed no sin. I wasn’t the one who was married.” She meets Trina’s eyes. “Where is she?”

“She went back inside.”

Before I realize Rosalie’s plan, she’s moving toward the clubhouse door. Oh, shit. I dash toward it and slip between her and the entrance. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Move out of my way. I’m going to give that bitch a piece of my mind.” She yanks on the door handle, but I slam it shut.

“Hell no, you’re not, Rosalie. You’ve got no business here.”

“That so? You think you can treat my daughter like the dirt under your boot?”

“I didn’t treat her that way.”

“Right. Well, then my problem is with your mother. Trina told me the names she called her.”

“That was uncalled for. I agree. I made a mistake bringing Trina here. I didn’t know she was your daughter.”

Her fists slam on her hips. “Oh, so that changes everything, does it? So because she’s my daughter, she’s not welcome? She’s not good enough for you, is that it?”

“I didn’t say that.”

The door shoves open behind me, and I whirl, coming face-to-face with my mother. Mary is more pissed than I’ve

seen her in a long time. Her eyes connect with Rosalie's, and I can see the rage about to explode. I grab her by the upper arms and hold restrain her as she surges forward, her fingers like claws taking swipes at the air.

“Get out of here, you whore. You're not welcome here. You or your slutty daughter.”

“Mom!” I bark, and it's taking more muscle than I thought possible to control her. Mary is a tiny woman, but she's got the strength of a bull backed by all the fury of a woman wronged.

Rosalie lunges at my back, trying to get to my mother. I elbow her aside, wondering how long I can keep these two from tearing each other apart.

The door opens again, and half the club pours out behind my father.

He looks every bit the formidable Viking warrior I always thought of him as a child. He stalks past me, going straight for Rosalie and grabbing her by the wrists.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“I came for my daughter.”

“Then take her and go, and don't ever come show your face here again.”

She spits at him, hitting him in the face, and his head jerks to the side. He shoves her away and drags the back of his hand down his cheek. Then points toward the gate.

“Get the fuck out.”

The club forms a wall of intimidating bikers, and Rosalie hesitates and seems to rethink continuing her shit.

“Come on Trina. Let's get out of here.” She stalks toward the car, slamming the door, causing her side mirror to fall.

Rosalie rolls down the passenger window and leans over Trina. “Fuck you, Red Dog, and you too, Mary.”

Red Dog takes a step toward the car, but Rosalie jams her foot on the gas, kicking up rocks as the car peels toward the gate.

Trina leans out the car, extending her thumb and index finger in the shape of a phone and yells back at me. “Call me.”

My brows lift at the gall of this chick. *Call me?* Not a chance in hell. Before the thought even leaves my brain, my mom turns her rage at me, shoving her finger in my face.

“Don’t you fucking dare.”

I throw my hands up in surrender. “I won’t. Chill out.”

“Chill out?” She glares at me a second longer and then stalks into the clubhouse.

The rest of the club moves inside, leaving me and my father standing, watching the taillights fade into the distance. We don’t say anything for a few long, tense minutes.

Finally, my dad turns to me; anger drips from his voice. “Don’t you ever bring her here again.”

His rage infuriates me. “This shit isn’t my fault. This is yours. Own it. I’m not at fault for the sins you made years ago.” I shake my head. “What the hell were you thinking?”

I turn before he has a chance to respond, and leave him standing there to wallow in his own pain.

CHAPTER NINE

WEIRD HAPPENINGS

Melissa—

The next few weeks go by in a blur. The rest of campus has arrived, filling the quad with Frisbee games, friends sprawled on picnic blankets, and footballs tossed through the air.

A small group of friends from my psychology class walk with me on the pathway that winds around the quad. One by one, they break away to go to their different classes, leaving me and my sorority sister, Taylor.

“I’m done for the day. My car is parked in the garage.” I point toward the direction I need to head. “See you this weekend.”

“Bye, girl.” She waves back as she heads in the direction of her English class.

The sun beats down, the afternoon rays warming my skin as I make the long walk to the garage where those of us who live off campus park.

Even though the sun is shining outside, the garage is dim. It takes a minute for my eyes to adjust to the sudden change from the bright light to darkness. It’s eerily quiet. Usually it’s bustling with students, but with it being Friday, many have opted to stay on campus to hit up the bars.

I get the weird sense I’m being watched, and the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I don’t see anyone, but I can’t shake the feeling. My pace quickens as I debate between taking the rickety elevator or climbing the dark stairwell to the second floor.

I opt for the stairwell, figuring at least that way I'm not a sitting duck. I take the steps two at a time, trying to get to the second floor as quickly as possible. The door at the bottom opens, and my heart pounds faster until I hear the trickle of girls' laughter carry up to me. The sound of them below me calms my mind. It's all in my head.

The chatter of the friends dies out as I push through the doorway, and the heavy door slams behind me. I rush toward my car. It's halfway down the third aisle. As I approach, I notice my back tire is deflated.

"What the hell?" I mutter under my breath.

Bending to examine it, I notice a box cutter blade sticking halfway out.

I'm still pondering the logistics of how that could have happened when the elevator dings. I stand to look, but can't see the doors from here. The rim might bend if I try to drive my car on a flat, but I also don't like standing here with that sick feeling. I walk to the stairwell, when I hear footsteps. Turning back, there's no one. My pace quickens, and the footsteps seem to speed up as well. I'm practically running when I wrench open the door and flee down the stairs. As I reach the landing, the door I just came through opens.

The exit on the first floor is in sight, and I bolt toward it. It leads out to one of the soccer fields, but no one is on them. I turn and move around the outside of the garage. As I walk past a somewhat busy road, I pull out my phone and dial Harley.

"Hey, you headed home?" she asks as she picks up.

"I was, but my car has a flat. Hey, can you stay on the phone with me for a minute?"

"Sure. Are you okay?" The worry in her voice is evident.

"I feel like someone's following me. I'm probably being paranoid, but I want to be safe."

“Did you see anyone?”

“No, just heard steps behind me.” I’m almost to the end of the garage where I can cross the road to an ice-skating rink. At least I can wait there until someone can pick me up or change my tire. I know how to change a tire. My dad made sure of that, but the last thing I want to do is go back into the garage by myself.

“Keep checking around you. God, you’re making me nervous.”

“Oh, my God!” I practically scream as I round the corner and plow into Jason.

“Melissa, are you okay?” Harley’s panic intensifies on the other end of the phone.

“Yes, yes. I’m fine,” I assure her. “I ran into Jason.”

“Jason?”

I continue to hold the phone to my ear, and I snap at him. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“I go to school here too, you know.” He glares. “You think you’re the only one who uses off-campus parking?” He shakes his head, scoffing. “You may be a ‘club princess,’ but you’re not all that special.”

“I didn’t say I was,” I bark back, then push past him to cross the road.

“You okay?” Harley whispers.

“Yeah, I’m good now.”

“You don’t think Jason...” she trails off.

“No, I was probably overreacting. Watched too many murder mysteries, let my imagination get the best of me.” The words are meant to reassure her—and maybe myself a little too. “I’m at the ice rink. I’m safe now.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. I’ll call you in a bit once I know what to do with my car.”

“Okay, but if I don’t hear from you in thirty minutes, I’m calling in the cavalry.”

“Hell, I’m probably going to call them in myself to fix my tire.”

We disconnect, and regardless of what I told Harley, I don’t actually feel safe until I’m sitting at a table, sipping on a soda. I called my brother for help, but he couldn’t make it here for another two hours. Not wanting to sit here stressing for that long, I called a couple of sorority sisters who had boyfriends who could help. Forty-five minutes later, and I’m pulling into my apartment complex on a spare. TJ said he’d be by this week to fix it and to ride with Harley until he made it out.

Harley pulls her car into the appropriately named Corner Coffee Shop.

“I’ll buy. After all, you’ve been chauffeuring my ass everywhere. It’s the least I can do.”

“If you insist.” She cracks a smile. “But you know you are my big sister. I’m probably supposed to be doing this stuff for you, anyway.” She unbuckles.

“Well, initiation week is in two weeks, so that’s almost done with and at this rate, my brother will never come put on a new tire.”

“It’s only been two days.” Harley giggles.

“Fine,” I grumble, pushing out of the car.

“Ooh, pumpkin spice season is here!” She eyes the A-frame chalkboard sign announcing the Fall specials. Her excitement makes me smile.

“I guess it is September.”

The smell of coffee beans engulfs us as we enter the small shop, making my mouth water. They make the best frilly coffee drinks, and their croissants are to die for. They have just the right crunch, and the inside practically melts in your mouth.

Two pumpkin spice frappes and two croissants later, and we sit in a couple of cushy chairs nestled close to a large fireplace. We’re in California, so definitely no need for the warmth, but I love the ambience.

“Are you excited to officially become a sister?” I ask, licking the whipped cream from my lips.

“So ready. Is initiation crazy?” she asks, stirring her straw around.

“It’s not bad at all. A couple of secret ceremony style things, really.”

“They don’t like blindfold us or anything, do they?” She tears a piece of croissant off, trying to look nonchalant, but I can tell she’s nervous about my answer.

“No, no. Nothing like that.”

Relief seems to spread across her face. “Good. I was a little worried they’d try to, and it would send me into a panic.”

I didn’t even think about the fact that she might be worried. Of course it makes sense. A rival motorcycle club took her and Brandy about a year and a half ago. Thankfully, they weren’t hurt, just banged up a little. Brandy took most of the brunt, but I know Harley still harbors some demons from that experience.

“I wouldn’t let them do anything to upset you.” I rest my hand on top of hers, giving it a squeeze.

My phone vibrates, and I glance at the screen.

TJ: New tire on car. Be careful where you drive.

I shake my head at the message, but quickly type a response.

Melissa: Thank you.

“TJ seems to think I intentionally drove over the razor blade.” I roll my eyes. “But don’t worry, he’s warned me”—I throw air quotes up—“to be careful where I drive, so I won’t be joy riding over piles of box cutters anymore.”

Harley shakes her head, snickering. “He’s just being a brother.”

“Well, hey at least I have my car back, and you don’t have to lug my ass everywhere.”

“Hooray.” She tips her plastic cup to tap mine in cheers.

Harley rolls into the spot next to where my car sits with a shiny new tire.

I climb out and pat the hood. “Good to have you back, girl.”

Harley moves next to me. Her eyes narrow. “Hey did you hit something when you picked up that razor?”

“No, why?” I tilt my head and glance toward my car, concerned.

A deep scratch is carved into the side of my car just above the back tire.

“What the hell?” I rub my hand against it, hoping it will buff out, but of course it doesn’t. “Dammit.”

“You piss someone off?” Harley asks, worry lines creasing her brow.

“I don’t think so.”

“Maybe you cut someone off or something and didn’t realize it,” she suggests.

“Yeah, maybe.”

“I mean, I have seen you drive.” She nudges me with her shoulder, the worry now gone from her face.

“Ha, ha, very funny. Let’s go up. Nothing I can do about it right now.”

The next day, I leave extra early to find a spot in one of the open-air parking lots. I can’t shake the nerves, so I have decided it’s best to not park in the garage.

Throughout the week, I continue to get that feeling of not being alone. Someone in the shadows watching, following, waiting... It keeps me on edge, but it makes me feel like I’m going crazy.

I sling my bag over my shoulder and move down the steps of the English building.

“Melissa.”

I turn to see Jason jogging down the steps. “Hey, did you just come from English?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, me too. Can I walk with you?”

“Uh. I’m headed to my car.”

“That’s okay, me too.”

“All right,” I concede.

“So, you still with douchebag?”

I stop and stare at him with an eyebrow raised.

“Okay, okay.” He holds his hands up in surrender. “Billy.” He says the name like it pains him.

“Sure am.” I grin wide, but my heart breaks a little knowing it’s not true.

“Well, that’s a shame. You deserve better.”

“Like you?”

“Hell yeah, like me. You gonna try to tell me I’m not a fucking catch. I have money. I work out.” He flexes his arm, trying to show off.

“Oh yes, and those are the only two things that matter.” I scoff.

“Look, love and romance—those things are a joke. But the way you look—the way we look together—that’s no joke. And I know what women want.”

“Oh, you do?”

“Yeah, women don’t go to college to get their PHD; they go to college to get their MRS.”

“And you think being Mrs. Jason Biggs is the big prize? Oh, Jason. You really know what to say to make me want to”—I pause for effect—“slap you in the face. I think I can handle walking the rest of the way to my car on my own.”

“Fine. But you’ll regret passing all this up.” He motions to his body, and I stalk off.

“Harley, did you borrow my burnt orange dress? You know, the one with long sleeves I wore the other day?” I call from my closet.

“No. It’s probably in the laundry.”

I shake my head, staring at my racks of clothing. I know I washed and hung it yesterday, but now it’s gone. I seem to be having trouble finding a lot of things lately. The lotion I use that smells delicious is not in the bathroom. My favorite scrunchie is gone. A necklace my parents bought me isn’t in my jewelry box. I feel like I’m going insane. Harley says she hasn’t borrowed any of my stuff, but I don’t know where else it could have gone.

Being frustrated over not finding anything and feeling on edge anytime I’m alone has affected my sleep. I’m late right now for my favorite class.

I throw on a crocheted cropped long sleeve in sandy hues with matching shorts, slip on some sandals and dash for the door.

“I thought you had class this morning,” Harley calls from where she’s pouring a glass of orange juice.

“I do.” I grab my bag. “See you after?”

“I have class in an hour, but I’ll be home around lunch.”

“Sounds good. Bye.” I push through the door before she has a chance to reply.

I cannot believe I’m so late. I couldn’t sleep at all last night. I swear I saw someone following me from my class yesterday afternoon, but they were too far to tell what they looked like and they wore a baseball cap pulled down low.

Then when I was driving home from my night class, I swore there was a car following me. I even took a bunch of unnecessary turns to see if it stayed behind me, and it did. When I made a full circle, it sped off.

I went around the entire apartment, making sure every window was locked. Harley must think I’m losing it, and maybe I am.

I push into my lecture hall twenty minutes late. Professor Ling glances at me as he continues his discussion, but says nothing.

I’m sliding my notebook into my bag when he calls from the podium. “Miss. Austin, please stay for a moment after class.”

“Great,” I whisper. I guess I am going to get a tongue-lashing for being late. A couple of my friends give me sympathetic smiles as they brush past to their next classes.

“Yes, Professor Ling?” I ask, moving down the sloping aisle to the standing desk he now shuffles papers on.

He glances up at me. “I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

His concern takes me aback. “Yeah, I mean, I’m fine.”

“Are you sure? I noticed the paper you turned in on Monday isn’t your best work, and you’ve seemed distracted in class. Now you’re showing up late.”

I guess I haven't been handling the stress as well as I thought. Taking a deep breath, I decide to tell him about all the stuff happening. After all, if anyone can understand the worries and stress of the brain, it's a psychology professor.

"Maybe you're having anxiety. You know it's very normal to develop with all the pressures of college. I'd get it checked out. And hey, if you're still concerned, it never hurts to carry a can of mace or a taser."

I nod. "You're probably right. It's probably just anxiety. Thank you, Professor Ling."

"No problem. Now gets some rest. I expect to see you on time for class on Tuesday."

"Yes, sir." I grin sheepishly.

"Go on." He smiles back, proving he's not that upset.

CHAPTER TEN

KARMA'S A FICKLE BITCH

Billy—

Marcus and I roll up to the clubhouse and park. I dismount and lift my chin toward where TJ stands smoking a cigarette.

“Check that out,” I say to Marcus.

He looks beyond me to TJ and shakes his head, grinning.

We both stroll over to him, and I follow his eyes to where one of the club girls is bent over in a pair of short shorts, dunking a sponge in a bucket of suds then washing down a motorcycle. It's usually a service extended to only the patched members, but this time that doesn't hold true. I cock a brow. “So now they do your bike, too?”

TJ shrugs, but gives me a slow smile.

Marcus chuckles and punches him in the shoulder. “She's not stupid. Bet she's got her eyes to the future, and you are, after all, the President's son. The heir apparent.”

TJ's face hardens. “It doesn't work that way, and you know it. Nothing is given. It has to be earned.

“Sure. Sure. I know that.” Marcus folds his arms and lifts his chin toward the girl. “Maybe you should fill her in on that part.”

“I will. When she finishes.”

The door opens, and my father pokes his head out.

“A customer is hassling one of the girls at Sonny's. Go take care of it, prospects.”

Marcus and I straighten at the order, and TJ tosses his cigarette. He moves to his bike, grabs the towel the girl had handy, and dries off his seat.

“Thanks, darlin’. Gotta run.”

She retreats a few steps, the sponge in her hand. “Anytime, TJ. I can finish the job when you get back.”

He winks and fires his bike up.

Marcus and I climb on our own bikes, and we all roll off the property. It’s a beautiful day, perfect for a ride into the mountains. I wish we had the time.

When we arrive at Sonny’s, the lot is half full. About average for a Thursday afternoon.

I see Tiny standing at the door. As I roll to a stop and drop my kickstand, he’s motioning us inside in a hurry. My eyes shift to Marcus and TJ, and the non-verbal communication between us is to be ready for anything when we move through that door. I pull a small club from my saddlebag, and Marcus does the same, and we all follow Tiny inside.

He pauses and motions toward a group of young guys sitting along the stage. They look like frat boys, barely old enough to be in the club.

Tiny dips his head. “They’re celebrating the guy in the blue shirt’s birthday. Just turned twenty-one. They’ve been grabbing at the dancers. I’ve warned them more than once, but it’s just me and Bobby here. I tried to call in another guy, but can’t get ahold of anyone. I’m afraid if I start something, it’ll get out of hand.”

I nod and take in the room. There’s a girl up there dancing, and besides this group of eight, there are about ten other customers.

Bobby stands off to the side, his arms folded, watching us for a sign. I give it to him with a lift of my chin, and all five of us move in.

The men look up when we form a circle behind them.

“So,” I say, pinning the blue shirt guy with my eyes. “I hear it’s your birthday, huh?”

His eyes get wide as he takes us in.

“You want to see your next one? You’ll take your party somewhere else.”

He looks ready to concede, but one of his braver buddies shoves his chair back and stands to face me. “We like it here. You got a problem with that, asshole?”

“Yeah.” I huff a laugh. “I got a big problem with that. Your tabs been closed. Get out.”

“We’re not going anywhere, are we, guys?” He turns to look at his buddies, but they don’t look near as ready to fight as he does. Especially when I see a couple of them drop their gaze to the club in my hand.

“Let’s go, Will,” the birthday boy says.

“Yeah, let’s get out of here. This place blows,” another buddy adds.

A braver friend stands, but he’s swaying on his feet, clearly drunk. “We’ll leave when we decide to leave.”

The birthday boy grabs the bills on the table.

“Leave it,” I snap.

He complies, lifting his palms in the air.

Tiny grabs collar by a fist and yanks him out of his chair. Then twists him toward the door. “Move it, birthday boy.”

That’s when Will shoves me with two hands on my chest. I slam him backward onto the table, and it crashes to the

ground, drinks flying.

The dancer on stage screams and retreats. Not one other customer makes a sound as the music plays on.

TJ and Marcus double up on the drunk dude and manhandle him out the door. Bobby grabs one of Will's arms while I get the other and drag him out, tossing him into the parking lot. I turn and find the rest of the group standing, not sure what to do.

"Get the fuck out," I bark and lift the club.

They scramble after their buddies.

I turn to the crowd. "Sorry about this, folks. Just takin' out the trash." I hear applause break out.

One older man stands and shuffles over, then extends his hand to me. I shake it, and he leans forward.

"Thanks for doing that, young man. Those boys were very disrespectful to the ladies. In my day, that's not how you acted. Good to know there are still men willing to stand up to that nonsense."

"You're welcome. Enjoy the rest of the show." I turn to the crowd as waitresses hurry to clean up the mess. "Next round's on the house."

A cheer goes up.

Joining TJ at the door, I stride outside. "They leave?"

TJ nods. "They're long gone."

"Good." I turn to Tiny and shake his hand. "Sorry about the mess."

"No problem. We've got a dozen extra tables in the back. Thanks for your help."

"Call if you need us. That's what we're here for."

He nods. "Appreciate that."

We mount up, and I'm just about to pull out when my phone goes off. Seeing it's my father again, I put it to my ear. My eyes hit the horizon. "Yeah?"

"How's it goin'? You take care of everything?"

"It's all good. We took out the trash."

"Good. Your mom called. Her car's got a flat. I need you to take care of it."

"Why me? She called you."

"'Cause you're closer. You got a problem helpin' out your ma, prospect?"

I drag a hand down my face at the reminder of what I am. "No, sir."

"Good. She's near Mayfield and Third."

I disconnect and look over at Marcus and TJ. "Mary has a flat. I gotta go take care of it. See you at the clubhouse."

TJ shrugs. "We'll ride with you. We go to the clubhouse, they'll put us to work."

"You'd rather change a tire?" I ask.

"Nope. I'd rather watch you do it." TJ grins.

I give him a glare and pull out, Marcus's laughter following after me.

Ten minutes later, I roll up behind Mary's car, the boys right behind me. She's leaning against the door tapping on her phone, but drops her arm when she sees me.

"You mean to tell me your father sent *you*?"

I splay my hands. "Of course he did. Any time the old man can get out of doing something, he's gonna do it. You know that, Ma."

She sighs. “Well, I don’t have time to wait while you change this. I’m late for an appointment.”

I lift a brow. “You want me to take you on the bike?”

She breezes past me toward it. “I guess so. This is urgent, and I’m not missing this appointment again. I already had to reschedule once before. Come on.”

My eyes hit TJ and Marcus, and I shrug. “Go on to the clubhouse. I’ll come back and take care of this.”

Marcus is already rolling his sleeves and squatting by the tire. “You go on. TJ and I will take care of this. Won’t we, TJ?”

TJ gives me a look of death. “Sure. Be happy to do your job for you, Billy.”

I chuckle at the karma of it all and return to my bike, passing my spare helmet to my mother. She climbs on the back, and we roar off.

“Where to?” I ask over my shoulder.

“Gloss and Glam.”

“Say what?”

“It’s on Ryder Avenue, just past Dorset.”

We ride across town, and I pull into the small strip mall, stopping in front of the nail salon. Climbing from the bike, I yank my helmet off and glare at her. “This was the big emergency?”

She flings her hand up in front of my face. “Have you seen these nails?”

I roll my eyes. “So how long’s this gonna take? You want me to come back in an hour?”

“Let me check. Come on.”

Reluctantly, I follow her inside, sliding my hands in my hip pockets and trying not to look as uncomfortable as I feel. The place has pink and cream striped wallpaper and crystal chandeliers, for Christ's sake.

Mary approaches the counter while I turn and stare out at the parking lot, wishing I was changing the damn tire. A minute later, Mary's voice rises, and I twist to look.

"I didn't call and cancel," she insists.

"Well, someone called and canceled it for you then," the employee states.

"You gave my spot away? To *her*?" Mary shrieks, flinging her arm out.

My gaze follows and there, sitting in a chair, is Rosalie. *Oh, shit.* I take a step forward, sure my mother is about to start a cat fight, and I'm not wrong. When she lunges, I'm just in time to hook an arm around her waist and drag her back.

"Ma. Quit."

"Let me go." She struggles to shove my arm off, but as petite as she is, I'm twice her size, and she doesn't stand a chance of getting free. She doesn't let that stop her from giving me a good fight, though. It doesn't help that Rosalie eggs her on.

"What's the matter, *Mary*? Did you miss your appointment time? You know what they say. You snooze, you lose, sweetie."

"You bitch. You did this on purpose, didn't you? I bet you even sabotaged my car."

Rosalie puts a hand to her chest and makes a faked surprised expression. "Did something happen to your car? How awful."

She practically admitted the sabotage. Fury surges through me, and my body tightens. “Go wait by the bike, Ma.”

Mary hears the no-nonsense tone in my voice and stops struggling long enough to check the stern expression on my face.

I jerk my chin toward the door. “Go. I got this.”

She nods and walks outside.

I move slowly toward Rosalie. The employee at the counter backs away, and the one doing Rosalie’s nails freezes, staring at me with wide eyes. Rosalie, on the other hand, merely lifts her chin.

“What do you think you’re going to do about it?”

I stand a foot from her chair, making her have to tip her head way back to meet my eyes. She tries to cover it, but there’s trepidation in her face. I see it in the way she licks her lips and looks away.

“Karma’s a fickle bitch, Rosalie. She’ll get you when you least expect it.”

“Are you threatening me, Billy? You in your little prospect vest. What are you going to do? Nothing. That’s what.”

“Try me.” I cock my head. “You know, I didn’t know about your deal with Red Dog. Nope, I didn’t know any of that shitshow between you and my family. But I do now.”

“And?”

“I didn’t know Trina was your daughter, and I wouldn’t have held that against her if I had. But you crossed a line. So, I’m telling you right now, I will protect my mother, in whatever form that takes, in whatever way I need to. I will not hesitate.”

“Big man, aren’t you?”

“I’ll be as big as I need to be. Do not mess with my family. Only warning you’re gonna get, lady.”

“Or what?”

“Or you’ll find out.” I tip over the open nail polish remover. It splashes across the table and spills down onto Rosalie’s jeans and shirt. “Whoops.”

She jumps to her feet. “These cost a fortune!”

“Maybe you should spend less on your jeans and more on fixing that piece-of-shit out in the parking lot. I’m surprised you can afford to get your nails done, but maybe you’re a selfish bitch, always money for you, isn’t there? Not for your kid, though, I bet. I felt kind of sorry for you before, but now I know you’re rotten from the inside out.”

The employee tries to mop up the spill, but Rosalie shoves out of her chair.

I nod to the door. “You should probably go home and change.”

“You’ll pay for this, you bastard.”

I smile and watch her stalk outside and to her car, following to make sure she doesn’t try to mess with Mary again. We both stand and watch Rosalie tear out of the lot.

“Well?” Ma crosses her arms. “Do I get my appointment?”

I grin. “Yeah, Ma. Seems a chair just freed up for you.”

She pats my cheek. “Thank you, son.”

She strolls inside, and my eyes follow her. Sucking in a deep breath, I sigh. Just another day in this crazy Evil Dead family. My phone goes off, and I dig it out of my hip pocket. “Yeah?”

“Tire’s changed. You comin’ back?” TJ asks.

“Gonna hang out here for a bit. Make sure Mary’s okay.”

“What the hell does that mean?” he asks.

“Means Rosalie was here. She practically admitted she was responsible for the flat tire, so she could make Mary late and take her appointment time.”

“Are you shitting me?”

“Nope. Women, huh?”

“Right. So, what about the car?”

I check the horizon, thinking. “I really hate to leave it sitting there. That bitch might come back around again. Who knows what damage she might try.”

“Fine. I guess I’ll hang out here until you’re done.”

“Thanks, TJ.”

“You gonna tell Red Dog?”

“Guess I’m gonna have to if he asks.”

“If he doesn’t?”

“Then I’ll let Mary tell him, I guess.”

“Sucks being in the middle, huh?” TJ asks.

“It really does.”

“So, how are we handling payback for the tire?”

I shake a cigarette out and dip my head to light it. “I already took care of that. Hopefully, she’ll drop this vendetta and let it go.”

“And if she doesn’t?”

“Then I’ll deal with her.” I feel the certainty of my words down to my bones.

“Well, that time comes, and I’m sure it will, don’t cut us out of the fun.”

I smile and watch the cars moving down the street.
“Wouldn’t think of it, brother.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

STALKED

Melissa—

“I’m so happy I get to call you sister now.” I hug Harley.

“Me too.” Harley squeezes back.

The sorority initiation just wrapped up, and we’re about to head to the Sig frat house for the celebration party. We’re all wearing varying shades of pink as that’s the Kappa Kappa Delta color.

My pale pink chiffon dress blows in the wind like a goddess as we troop down the sidewalk arm-in-arm like a scene out of Madeline singing *Count on Me* by Bruno Mars. We get some crazy looks from the people we pass, but none of us mind. It’s fun being a part of this wild sisterhood.

This party is a little rowdier than any of the earlier ones, with the pledges feeling like they can cut loose without being under the scrutiny of a sister. Not that many of us would have cared.

By the end of the night, a few are puking in the backyard of the fraternity house. Thankfully, Harley and I both know our limits.

We dance and drink late into the night. A few brothers dance with us, but we never give them much thought. There’s only one man who holds my interest. I’m not sure why Harley doesn’t give them the time of day. Maybe they’re just not her type.

I grab another beer. One thing I've learned is not to drink the open punch at a frat house. The cooler is against the wall. I see Jason not too far from it, and I roll my eyes. I refuse to let his presence dampen my mood. Harley is officially my sorority sister.

I bend and grab two.

“Double fisting?” He smirks. “Or were you bringing one of those to me?”

“Leave her alone, Jason,” Drake, one of the seniors, advises. “She’s made it pretty clear she’s not interested, and Sigs don’t beg.”

“Thanks,” I mouth to him as I close the lid.

Drake winks and moves off to his girlfriend.

Harley and I make our way to our apartment a few hours later. I feel better than I have in a while.

“I’m going to bed.” Harley kicks her heels off.

“Did you see Amanda dancing with Tyler?” I ask, pulling my own shoes off.

“Yeah. And I’m pretty sure that Jason guy was dancing with Jess.”

I scrunch up my nose. “Gross.” I already see him enough. I don’t want a sister dating him.

Harley laughs.

“What about you? I saw you grooving with a few brothers.”

“So many choices.” Harley’s tinkling laughter follows behind her as she moves into her room. She comes out wearing a big t-shirt and pajama shorts.

“All right, I’m going to collapse on my bed.” I yawn.

Not even an hour later, I'm awoken. Thunder rumbles and rain pounds the roof. In my groggy state, I start to roll over when I hear a tap-tap-tap on my window. I bolt upright and look at my closed blinds. I turn on the side lamp, not wanting to trip over the shoes I cast aside last night in my haste to don pajamas.

I move toward the window, and my heart pounds. I lift one shade, peering out, but I don't see anything in the rain and darkness. A tree branch scrapes across the glass, but it's not the sound I heard. A chill crawls up my skin.

I creep into the kitchen and put a kettle of water on the burner to heat. Hopefully hot tea will calm the anxiety I feel. When the kettle starts to whistle, I pour it over my tea bag and carry the steaming cup to the couch. Sipping on the soothing beverage, I scroll on my phone, knowing I won't be able to go back to sleep. Fear keeps me awake long after my tea has gone cold. As the storm rolls past and the sun rises, casting pinks, yellows, and oranges into the sky, I finally succumb to sleep.

Harley's door creaks open, making me jump.

"Did you sleep out here?" she asks, confused.

"Sorta," I confess. Sitting up, I tell her about the tapping on my window last night.

She immediately moves to my room and yanks up the blinds. The tree branches sway in the gentle breeze.

"There was a storm last night. Maybe the branches were being blown against your window," she reasons, always the pragmatic one.

"Yeah, maybe," I agree, even though I know the sound I heard was a rhythmic tap like knuckles knocking against my glass, not windblown branches.

"Well, at least it's the weekend. So, you can sleep the day away. Of course, if you sleep, we won't be able to try that new

donut shop that opened. They have mini donuts with all kinds of unique flavors.” She waggles her eyebrows.

“You know I can’t turn down donuts.” I stretch, laughing. “But they better have coffee.”

“What kind of donut place wouldn’t?” She looks appalled at the idea.

“Okay, but you drive, because I might fall asleep and drive right off the road.

We quickly dress in some comfy yoga pants and baggy t-shirts with our Greek letters emblazoned across them in pink.

Walking past my car, I notice a folded piece of paper tucked under my windshield wiper, and make a detour to grab the soggy wet paper. Climbing in to the passenger seat, I carefully unfold it, trying not to tear it.

“What’s that?” Harley asks, barely paying attention as she straps on her seatbelt and starts the car.

The pit of my stomach drops when I read the words scrawled in blue. The ink bleeds from the rainwater, making them look even more sinister.

You’re beautiful when you sleep. Sorry I woke you.

Harley leans over the armrest to read the note sprawled across my legs. “Jesus Christ. Melissa, who wrote that?”

I meet her eyes, the color draining from my face. “I don’t know.”

She locks her doors and glances around the parking lot, feeling—I’m sure—the way I’ve been feeling for weeks.

“Let’s get donuts, and I’ll tell you everything,” I say.

“What do you mean, *everything*?” She shifts the car in reverse.

“Yeah, a lot of little things have been happening, but I thought I was crazy. They were all explainable until now. I can’t make some excuse for a creepy note.”

Twenty minutes later, we sit with a box of mixed donuts and two mocha lattes, poring over every detail I can remember from the past two weeks.

“I feel bad I didn’t notice you weren’t sleeping.” She picks at her donut.

“It’s okay. It’s not like we share a bedroom, and you’ve been busy with all your initiation stuff.”

“You have to tell your dad,” she deadpans.

“He’ll pull me right out of school. I don’t want to leave.”

“Melissa, this could be dangerous.”

“I know, but we can think of some other way to handle this. Some way without involving my dad.”

“What about TJ?” she asks around a bite of her Boston Cream.

“He’ll tell my dad.”

“I bet you could convince him not to do that.”

“I’m not telling my brother,” I say, a little more forcefully than I intend. “I’ll figure something out. You don’t have to worry.”

“Don’t have to worry?” she snaps, exasperated. “Someone climbed a tree to watch you through a window.”

“We don’t know that.”

“The hell we don’t. That note says as much. This is like some scary stalker shit. You and I both watch those crime

shows. We know how this shit ends. It's not like we can go to the cops. We have to go to the club."

"Just drop it. It's probably some infatuated frat brother or something. I'm sorry I even said anything." I'm not really. I'm glad she knows, but I can't let her tell my dad.

Harley shuts her mouth, and I know she wants to say a lot more, but she stays quiet, feigning way too much interest in her donut.

She doesn't talk much on the way home, either.

When I walk into my bedroom, the blinds are still raised, which makes me uneasy. I dash over to them and yank them down, feeling some semblance of privacy.

Harley is in the living room, probably still fuming over my refusal to call for help. I know she's worried about me, but I don't want to give up my college experience. It's not fair. It means whoever is messing with me wins.

I walk out there to tell her just that when I realize she's on the phone.

She looks at me as she says, "I think Melissa might be in danger. She doesn't want to call you for help, but I know you're the best option second to your dad."

Dammit. I tilt my head back, breaking eye contact, and release a big breath.

CHAPTER TWELVE

TORMENT

Billy—

The members have club business in Temecula, so we've been washing, tuning, and fueling all the bikes for the last three days.

"Damn, I'm glad we're almost done," Marcus groans, standing from where he's been bent shining the chrome pipes of Wolf's bike.

"And Jake's is done." TJ slings his rag at the wall.

"Shane's, too." I stand, stretching, my back popping.

"How long are they going to be gone?" Marcus asks.

I pull out a cigarette and shrug. "Not sure. I think it's a short trip. Maybe only three days."

"Bikes ready?" Green asks from the doorway.

"Yes, sir." I straighten.

"Good. We're about to head out."

Usually, we wouldn't see any brothers at the club until mid-afternoon, but they want to get a head start on the ride south.

Twenty minutes later, the pack rolls out of the gate.

"Let's grab a beer," TJ suggests as the rumble fades into the distance.

We walk inside to the quiet clubhouse. It's always weird when none of the brothers are here. I grab three beers, and we move to the pool tables.

TJ chalks a pool stick while Marcus racks.

“I’ll take the winner.” I lean against the other pool table, taking a swig of my beer.

The boys play until TJ squeaks out a win.

I re-rack the balls, and TJ breaks, knocking a solid into one of the side pockets. He misses his second shot, leaving me to make my move. I line up my shot and manage to get two stripes into the corner pocket.

TJ’s phone goes off, and he stares at the screen, frowning. “Why’s Harley calling me?”

I straighten. Harley and Melissa live together, and it’s a Sunday morning. Whatever this call is, I don’t think it can be good.

“What the hell kind of trouble?” TJ barks into the phone, his eyes connecting with mine. He pulls the phone down and pushes the speaker so Marcus and I can hear.

Harley’s voice carries in the quiet room. “Melissa’s been having some weird things happen, and I think it’s time you guys get involved.”

My hand tightens on the cue stick. What the hell kind of cryptic shit is this? Is she trying to make us guess what’s going on?

“Okay, start at the beginning.” TJ handles the runaround much better than I would.

“Melissa, do you want to—?” she whispers to the side.

“Wait. Is Melissa there?” TJ barks into the phone. “Put her on.”

I hear her huff from the other side of the line and imagine her eye roll.

“Hello, dear brother.”

That gets a snort out of me.

“Melissa, what the hell is going on?” TJ grinds out.

“I think someone may be following me.”

My jaw tightens.

“Why do you think that?” TJ asks.

“Well, it started with the flat tire. I’m pretty sure someone was following me. I heard footsteps. My flat tire, the scratch, things have gone missing.”

“What things?” TJ furrows his brows.

“Lotion, a necklace, a dress, my hair ties.”

“Like from your apartment?” TJ questions.

“Yeah, I guess.”

TJ looks at me. We’re both trying to figure out how serious this is. Did she misplace some stuff, or is someone going into their place? I don’t think Melissa would call for help unless she thought it was serious, but then again, she’s not the one who called.

“Tell them about the note.” Harley’s voice reverberates through the phone.

I quirk a brow.

“What note?” TJ runs a hand through his hair.

“I thought I heard tapping on my window last night, and this morning there was a note left on my car.”

“What did it say?” The steeliness in TJ’s voice makes Melissa pause. “Melissa, what did the note say?”

She sighs as if preparing herself for the onslaught of questions. “Okay. Fine. *You’re beautiful when you sleep. Sorry I woke you.*”

Ice floods through my veins at the idea of some creeper peering through the window at my Melissa. I suddenly want to rip someone's head off. I release a slow breath to calm myself.

“What the fuck? We have to tell Dad,” TJ snaps.

“No,” she pleads. “He'll make me come home.”

Good, is my first reaction. Then I can keep her safe.

“I don't want to give up my college experience.” Her voice is practically whining.

“She's right,” I whisper to TJ. “Your dad will force her home. It's what I'd do.”

TJ runs his hand through his hair again. “Fine, but then someone is staying with you.”

“Okay,” she quickly agrees.

“We're coming to you. Don't leave your apartment, and make sure the doors and windows are locked. Do you have any idea who this could be?” TJ starts moving toward the clubhouse door, and both Marcus and I follow him out.

“I don't know,” she admits.

“What about Jason?” Harley suggests.

My eyes narrow, and the question leaves my mouth before I can stop it. “Jason?”

“I've seen him a lot around campus.”

“Yeah, you ran into him that night you got the flat. Remember when you were on the phone with me?” God love Harley; she gives all the details.

“Yeah, I did.”

This would be exactly the kind of shit that asshole would pull—scaring the girl he can't have. He may even be trying to make himself out to be the hero when she needs help.

TJ's eyes hit the horizon. "Okay, we'll figure this out when we get there."

Thirty minutes later, the sound of our engines bouncing off the brick walls of their apartment announces our arrival.

Harley opens the door for us and we step inside.

Glancing around, I find the apartment suits them. They've definitely decorated the place to their style. Photos hang from the wall, pillows and throw blankets are strategically placed on the couches, house plants and a soft rug scream bohemian chic.

My eyes hit Melissa. It's the first time I've seen her since she came to my apartment, then stormed off in a huff. I let my gaze sweep over her, relishing in the pleasure of just looking at her, just being in the same room as her. It settles something deep inside me—something that's been off kilter since she drove away.

She tucks her hair behind her ear, and the action makes me want to reach out and touch her silky strands. I swallow and drop my eyes to her mouth. Her tongue slips out to wet her lips, and I feel my gut tighten.

"You okay?" I catch her eyes again.

She nods, and I swear I almost see a sheen fill her eyes before she quickly looks away, motioning us to the living area. "You want something to drink?"

"No, thanks," TJ responds for all of us.

We take a seat, and the girls pour over every detail. When they finish, the three of us exchange looks.

TJ rises from the couch. "Give us a minute, girls. Me and the boys need to talk."

Marcus and I head to the door. We walk all the way to the parking lot. I pull out a cigarette and light it before any of us

speak.

Marcus jams his hands in his hip pockets. “What do you think?”

“I think we need to figure out who the fuck is doing this.” TJ pulls out his own pack of smokes, dipping his head to light one up.

“And beat their asses,” I mutter around the filter of mine, sucking in a long drag.

Marcus rocks on his heels. “Until we can do that, how do you want to handle this?”

“They need protection,” I state the obvious, exhaling a stream of smoke.

“I know, Billy. I get that.” TJ paces the length of his bike and back. “I don’t want them unguarded at night.”

“That’s a given,” I mutter.

“So, I guess we take shifts staying here,” TJ says.

“Agreed. I’ll take tonight.” I drop my cigarette and grind it out with my bootheel.

“The hell you will.” TJ whirls on me.

“The hell I won’t,” I snap back just as quickly.

He drags a frustrated hand through his hair. “Billy, we all know you have feelings for Melissa, but you know that’s not possible. Besides, staying here will be torture for you. I’m her brother. Brother trumps wannabe lover.”

I flex my jaw, wanting to punch him in the face for the jab, but he’s right, and I know it. I need to stay as far away from her as possible, but goddamn it, the thought of her in danger makes me insane.

“It’s decided, then. You two stay here while I run home and grab some things. Then Marcus, you and I can take shifts.

We good?"

I'm not good with this, but I know I have to go along with TJ's decision.

"Of course." Marcus doesn't even hesitate.

TJ looks at me, pointedly, waiting for my answer.

"Fine."

Marcus and I walk to the apartment, and TJ roars out.

"Where's my brother going?" Melissa asks from the doorway, worry creasing her face when she sees his taillight retreating.

"To get some things to stay the night," I reply as I slip past her through the door. Our eyes connect as my body brushes against hers.

"Oh." And just as quickly, relief replaces the worry.

We sit and drink sodas while we wait for his return. Melissa flicks the tab on her aluminum can back and forth until it pops off the top. She keeps her eyes downcast as Harley chit chats about her first semester at college.

I barely listen. My attention is all on Melissa. I notice the dark circles under her eyes. This whole experience must be taking a toll on her. As if she can feel my scrutiny, her eyes snap up to meet mine. As much as I'd like to take her in my arms and hold her and tell her everything will be okay, I can't. Instead, I quickly look away, deciding it's best to keep the wall up.

TJ returns in about an hour. Marcus stands, and I do the same, no longer having an excuse to stay behind.

"Call if you need reinforcements." I give TJ a stern look.

"I will."

We troop down the stairs, and I can't help but feel I'm going in the wrong direction. I should be the one in there. If something were to happen to that girl, I couldn't go on, but my feet continue to carry me away from the one I want. The one I've always wanted.

"Headed to the clubhouse?" I ask Marcus, swinging my leg over my bike.

"Nah, I'm going home to Brandy."

"Okay, brother. I'll see you tomorrow." I give him a two-finger salute and watched him roll out.

I take my time putting on my helmet, scanning the parking lot, the windows of her building and the apartment across the street, but I don't see anything that catches my eye or seems suspicious.

With a twist of my throttle, I roll out of the apartment complex. I should head to the clubhouse, but I find my bike taking me toward campus. I turn down fraternity row. The large houses loom like mansions.

I don't know what I hope to find.

No, that's a lie. I hope to find Jason walking down the street so I can run him over with my bike. The thought makes me smile. We don't really even know if it's him, but it'd make me feel better. Feel productive. If it is him, he needs a lesson I'm only too happy to teach. I hate seeing Melissa like this, and I want to hurt the person who did this to her. And right now, my best bet is Jason Biggs.

Luckily for him, I never spot him. Eventually, I turn my bike toward the clubhouse and ride. The guilt eats at me more with every mile. My girl should feel safe, and I'm not doing anything to see to that. I'm just on the sidelines.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CALLED AWAY

Billy—

“What’s going on?” TJ walks up to the bar where Marcus and I are restocking the ice and beer.

“No clue,” I reply. “But I think it’s something big.” I lift my chin to him. It’s been two weeks since Harley’s call, and it’s now mid-October. “How’s everything at the girl’s place?”

“Fine. Quiet. They’re both in class.” He yawns. “Getting tired of this back and forth, though.”

The door opens, and the men troop out of church. Green points at me. “Billy. Come with me.”

He keeps walking toward the front door, so I wipe my hands on a rag and fall in behind him. When we get out into the sun, he pauses by his bike and lights a cigarette, then squats down and digs through his saddlebag.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

He tugs a pair of chaps halfway out, then stuffs them back in. Then does the same with a long sleeve Evil Dead shirt, like he’s checking his supplies. He moves to the other side, not answering me. He digs out a handful of spare ammo clips and counts them up.

“Four should do it.”

He shoves them back in. “Go grab me a bottle of Jack and wrap it in a dishtowel and a plastic bag.”

I pull my chin to the side and point to his saddlebag. “You’re putting it in there?”

“Yep.”

“It’s not gonna break?”

He straightens, his bum knee cracking. “Nope. Done it lots of times.”

“You guys pulling out?”

“Get me the whiskey and go to my room. There’s a bedroll on the top shelf of the closet. Bring it to me.” He tosses me a set of keys, and I catch them in midair.

“Anything else?”

He grins. “I’m sure I’ll think of something if you stand here long enough.”

I take the hint and head into the clubhouse to do my sponsor’s bidding, noticing several of the patched men are also preparing to ride. Jogging up the steps, I find his room and key the door. The bedroll is where he said it was. I grab it and head to the bar for the bottle.

“What’s up?” TJ asks when I approach.

“Not sure yet.” I lift a chin at Marcus. “Pass me a rag, a trash bag, and a bottle of Jack.”

Marcus doesn’t ask, just passes me the items.

Wrapping the bottle in the rag, I stuff it inside the plastic and wrap it around tight.

“Where’s that goin’?” TJ asks.

“Green’s saddlebag. They’re rolling out.”

“Where to?”

“Don’t know.” I turn to leave, and TJ shouts after me.

“Find out.”

I lift an arm in acknowledgement and slip out the door.

Green is now standing in a circle with Crash, Cole, Wolf, and my father. He turns when I step out and motions me over.

I pass him the bedroll and wrapped bottle.

“You’re coming with,” he says matter-of-factly.

“Where?”

“Nevada. Reno, to be exact.” He lifts his chin to the clubhouse. “Get Marcus and TJ. They’re coming, too.”

I head inside. When the guys see the look on my face, they both straighten.

“What is it?” TJ asks.

“We’re all going.”

“Where?”

“Reno. Now.”

“Now?” TJ asks, and we connect eyes. “What about Melissa?”

I shrug. “We don’t have a choice, TJ. Unless you want to tell your dad about what’s been happening with her.” I hesitate. “Do you?”

He slips his hands in his hip pockets and stares at the floor, then shakes his head. “No. Let me check in with the girls. Maybe they can stay at the sorority house tonight.”

“Okay. Meet us outside.” I lift a chin to Marcus, and he follows me to our bikes. We don’t have bedrolls or anything to pack, but then we probably won’t get much chance to sleep, anyway. Prospects usually get the job of standing guard while the patches sleep.

“Where’s TJ?” Green asks, strolling over.

“Inside. Had a call to make. He’s coming.”

“We’re stopping at the end of the street and gassing up. Have him meet us there. Let’s roll,” Green orders and heads to his bike.

Shooting a quick text to TJ, I sling my leg over my seat and fall in line at the end of the pack with Marcus.

Ten minutes later, I’m hanging the nozzle on the pump and screwing my cap on my tank when TJ rolls up to Marcus and me.

“Everything good?” I ask.

He nods. “They said it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“You tell them to stay inside tonight? Not go anywhere?” I can tell by the look he gives me, my worry is showing.

“Yeah, Billy. They promised they would.”

I clench my teeth and look at the horizon. It’s sunset and about a four-and-a-half-hour ride to Reno. I figure it’ll be around 11:00 pm when we get wherever it is we’re going. Only one place in Reno I know the club’s had trouble with, and that’s the damn cathouse that the Devil Kings tried to start up. The place they took Brandy and Harley Jean to when they kidnapped them out of Marcus’s apartment.

“You thinking what I’m thinking?” I ask him.

His jaw clenches. “Can’t think of another reason, can you?”

I shake my head.

Green’s whistle pierces the air, our sign to mount up and pull out.

The trip over the mountains is cold this time of year, but there’s only one reason the MC won’t ride, and that’s when it’s so cold there’s a threat of unseen ice on the road. Other than

that, we ride. So, when we get to a higher elevation, the club stops on the side of the road and the chaps and leather jackets come out.

Riding at sixty miles-per-hour in forty-degree temperature feels like twenty-five very cold degrees on exposed skin. And we'll feel it somewhere. Between gloves, boots, chaps, and leathers we ride in temperatures near freezing.

How bad it can get is really a matter of the length of our trip and our own endurance.

Tonight, it's not quite that bad, but the temperatures are dropping quickly.

The cold, crisp air also gives us a clear and starry night sky. It's beautiful to see as we ride through the tall trees.

We make a stop at the Dead Souls clubhouse, our support club. We're barely there long enough to take a piss and have a quick smoke before we're back on the road with them joining us.

With that, the three of us prospects are no longer the low men on the totem pole. In this world, even a lowly Evil Dead prospect demands more respect than the president of our support club.

It's a couple more hours of winding highway before we reach our destination.

Unbeknownst to us prospects, of course, we meet up with the Nevada Chapter at a bar on the Truckee River just west of Reno.

Now our group has grown to about thirty. It's quite a show of force. The officers huddle together, talking while the rest of us wait, our bike engines ticking in the cold night air.

I glance at TJ. "Maybe this is a good time to check in with Melissa."

He pulls out his phone, putting it to his ear and keeping his eyes on our patches.

I adjust in my seat, my leather creaking, and see a Dead Souls' prospect approach.

"Hey. Name's Goat." He extends his hand, and I clasp it. "Can I bum a smoke?"

Digging in my vest, I pull out a pack and shake one out for him.

"Thanks, man." He dips his head to light up and blows smoke toward the sky. "You guys know where we're goin'?"

I shake my head. "Just speculation."

He glances behind him to the patches. "Yeah, me too. Heard it might have something to do with that cathouse."

"That's our thought as well," Marcus replies.

There's a sharp whistle, and Crash makes a circular motion with his hand, indicating we're pulling out.

Goat wanders off, and I look over at TJ. "They good?"

"Yeah. Everything's fine. They're at the sorority house with a bunch of other girls."

Relief settles the troubled feeling churning in my gut, and that's good because it's time to focus on the business at hand.

Twenty minutes later, we pull into the parking lot of the cathouse, which is up and running from the looks of it. There are a dozen cars, but only one bike parked suspiciously up front. I'm betting it belongs to a Death Head, and I'm sure I'm not the only one coming to that deduction.

If so, I'm guessing we're about to shut this place down and send him packing.

We all dismount and troop through the door in mass. It's quite the show of force.

The lone Death Head is waiting near the door. He backs up and is smart enough to know he's outnumbered and pulling his weapon would be suicide.

Marcus, TJ, and I stand near the back, keeping our mouths shut, ready to jump at any signal given.

Cole and Daytona, the president of the Las Vegas Chapter, move forward, taking the lead.

"What's your name, Death Head?" Cole asks.

"Flick."

Daytona approaches him and grabs him by his cut. "Well, Flick. I guess your president didn't get the message that this place stays shut down." He looks around at the repairs they've made. "But tell him thanks for fixing it up for us. It's Evil Dead property, and we're gonna run this place."

Flick is stoic, saying nothing. He's trying hard to maintain a tough stance, but we can all see it's just for show. I know he's got to be shaking in his boots. The only clue that he's going to be allowed to leave with his skin intact is the fact Daytona just gave him a message to deliver.

"Next Death Head I see in my state, I will kill." He takes a blade out and cuts a slice down Flick's cheek. The man barely flinches, though that's got to hurt like a bitch. With a jerk of Daytona's head, a couple of his crew come forward and yank Flick's cut off. Then Daytona shoves him toward the door. "Tell him if he wants a war, we're ready. Now go deliver that message, peon."

Flick stumbles out.

Daytona holds up the cut and looks at his enforcer. "Won't this look nice nailed to our clubhouse wall, Lobo?"

"Damn right," the man replies.

Cole lifts his chin to the three of us. “Make sure that asshole leaves.”

We follow him out.

He pauses to spit on the ground at our feet, but climbs on his bike and hightails it out.

The patches emerge a few minutes later, and I overhear some of the officers’ conversation.

“I’m thinking we offer it to the Dead Souls to manage. They’re the closest,” Daytona murmurs.

Cole nods. “You thinking a patch-over is in order?”

Daytona grins. “Bout time, don’t ya think? We wait too much longer, Wyatt’s gonna be in an old folk’s home.”

The corner of Cole’s mouth pulls up. “Guess so.”

“You think the Death Heads want to start a war?” Daytona asks.

“Snake let us kill two of his men to avoid a war. I don’t think he wants to start one now.” Cole slaps a hand on Daytona’s shoulder. “Still, I’d watch your back, brother.”

With that, we head to the Dead Souls clubhouse for a surprise patch-over party. It’s wild, the men of that club ecstatic to soon be wearing the Evil Dead skulls on their backs. Patches will have to be ordered and brought in, since this seems to have been an impromptu decision.

We party into the wee hours of the morning.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

FORCED TOGETHER

Billy—

The brothers sleep off the party until deep into the afternoon, so we get a late start back to San Jose. The boys and I were lucky to grab a few hours of sleep, but we're all still pretty tired by the time the line of bikes rolls onto our clubhouse lot.

Everyone climbs from their bikes to stand and stretch. I feel a tightness in my back and twist and roll my neck, then glance at the time. 8:00 pm.

Green points over toward the three of us. "Grab up all these bedrolls and take them to the laundry to wash, boys."

"Yes, sir," I reply. Great. More work.

The three of us move from bike to bike. I unhook a bungee cord and pull another bedroll free, adding it to the pile in my arms.

We carry them in and start a load.

"I need coffee." I yawn and head behind the bar where we keep a coffee pot. I make some fresh and soon pour a steaming mug.

The patches have all headed home by now, and it's just the three of us again.

TJ and Marcus sit on barstools, and I pass them both a mug. Marcus makes a call to Brandy, and I can tell he's itching to go home to her. When he gets off, I jerk my head toward the door.

"Go see your ol' lady. We got this covered."

He looks at me hopefully. “You sure?”

“Yeah. Go on.”

He leaves in a flash, and I chuckle, taking a sip from my steaming mug.

TJ leans his elbow on the bar with his head in his hand and yawns.

“Some party last night, huh?” I ask.

He grins. “Pretty wild. I always wondered what a patch-over party would be like. They don’t happen often. Might be the only one we ever attend.”

I lift my mug. “Well, then, we’ve been baptized well and good.”

He grins, but his eyes are closed.

“Dude, go stretch out on that couch. I’ll wake you if I need you.”

“Sounds great,” he replies, but he’s so exhausted he doesn’t move, and I’m afraid he’s going to fall asleep right where he is.

I grin and start wiping down the bar and then wash the shot glasses piled in the sink. A few minutes later, two of the club girls come through the door, their eyes hitting me.

“Hey, Billy. We heard there was laundry to do.” It’s Ginger, a cute little redhead with big blue eyes.

“We already started one load, but we’ve got a couple more to do. You takin’ that over?”

“Sure. You must be exhausted.” She stops at the bar, taking in the sleeping TJ. “Is he awake?”

“Not sure.” I slap the dish towel over my shoulder.

“I’m awake. Just resting my eyes,” he says, not opening them.

“Well, Nikki and I will handle the laundry. You boys should go home and get some sleep.”

I take another sip of coffee, knowing I can't leave unless Green tells me I can. “Thanks for the help.”

They strut on back, and I take another sip of coffee.

“That couch is sounding really good,” TJ murmurs, but still doesn't move.

I chuckle. “You're about to fall off that barstool and hit the floor, bro.”

His phone sounds, and his eyes crack open. He straightens slowly, pulling it from his pocket. “God dammit.”

“What's wrong?”

“Fucking Brayden.”

“What about him?” I lean my elbows on the bar.

“His buddy texted he's drunk and starting fights at the football game.”

His statement makes me realize it's Friday. I've been so tired; I barely can keep my days straight. “You goin'?”

He sighs and pushes to his feet. “I better go get his ass before he ends up in handcuffs.” He pauses, turning to me. “Shit. One of us has to take care of the girls.”

“Have them stay at the sorority house.”

“They can't. There was a water leak. All the girls had to get out for the night.”

“So, they can stay with a friend, then.”

“I told them I'd be there tonight.” He stares at me.

“TJ, you told me to stay away, remember? And you were right.”

“I’ve got to take care of Brayden. You want to call Marcus?”

I blow out a breath, knowing the man has barely seen his ol’ lady in weeks. “No. I’ll fucking go.”

TJ lifts a brow. “Keep your hands off my sister, Billy.”

My head drops to the side, and I give him a look. Right now, I’d like to drive my fist into his face.

He gets the message and heads to the door without another word.

“Fucking hell,” I mutter, tossing the dishcloth on the bar and following him out.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

LEATHER AND LACE

Melissa—

Leaning to the mirror, I apply my lipstick, then straighten.
“You ready?”

Harley Jean runs the brush through her long hair again, then tosses it on the vanity. “Yep. You?”

“Yep. Come on.”

“When’s TJ coming?”

“No clue. I texted him, but he didn’t respond. He’ll call when he gets here, and we’re not home.” I grab up my little bag and keys, then swing the door open and come face to face with Billy.

My eyes widen. “What are you doing here?”

His gaze roams down my body, taking in the little black stretch lace tank dress, my tanned legs, past the strappy leather high heels, down to my pink polished toes.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going dressed like that?”

My hand hits my hip. “Frat party. Where’s TJ?”

He steps inside the door, walking me backward inside the apartment, his leather-clad chest inches from my face. I breathe in the scent of leather and motorcycle and whatever intoxicating soap he uses.

Licking my suddenly dry lips, my hands tighten on my bag.

“TJ had to drag your drunk brother from the football game before he gets arrested for brawling. Sound familiar?”

I roll my eyes. “Brayden’s at it again?”

“Apparently. Seems flying off the handle runs in the family.”

My brows hit my hairline. “What the hell’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. You got anything to drink?”

“Help yourself.” Harley motions to the kitchen. “We were just leaving.”

“You two aren’t going anywhere. If I’m stuck here, so are you.”

“Billy, we have to go. It’s required attendance.”

“At a party?”

“Yes.”

“She’s right. It is.” Harley backs me up.

Billy rests a hand on the wall near the kitchen breakfast bar. “Well, then, I guess I’m going with you.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Serious as a heart attack, babe.”

I cross my arms and throw out a hip. “We’ll be fine. I promise. Why don’t you relax and watch some TV until we get back?”

His head drops to the side. “Melissa, I didn’t just ride over here to sit in an empty apartment while you roam the town dressed like that.”

“There’s nothing wrong with the way I’m dressed, Billy.” I fiddle with the thick leather bracelets at my wrists.

He cocks a brow, then huffs out a laugh. “Babe, where do I start?”

“It’s a themed party.”

He laughs again. “And what’s the theme? Sex slave? Bondage?”

“It’s leather and lace. Get your mind out of the gutter.”

Harley tugs on my arm. “Come on. We’re going to be late. Just let him come.”

“Fine. I suppose with his leather cut, he’ll fit in.”

“I’ll never fit in to this fucking party,” he snaps.

I take a step toward him, my finger in his face. “I swear, Billy, if you start any trouble tonight, I’ll never forgive you.”

He captures my finger in his much bigger hand. I feel the warmth of his palm close around my hand, and one touch from him sets off all kinds of reactions in my body. I try to yank my hand free, not ready to deal with those emotions, but he tightens his hold.

“Behave yourself tonight, and let’s hope I don’t have to, all right?”

“She promises,” Harley answers, pulling me around and aiming me at the door. “Let go.”

She and I get in her car, and I watch in the side mirror as Billy climbs on his bike and fires it up. God, there’s something about it that does it for me every damn time. I take in a deep breath and stare straight ahead, wondering how this night is going to end.

We head across campus to the frat house and Harley parks. Billy pulls in behind us.

Exiting the car, I glance over at Billy, who looks like he wishes he was anywhere else. He stares up at the building.

“How long do we have to stay?”

“Considering all the parties the MC throws, I think you can suffer through this.”

“This is a long way from an Evil Dead party, and you know it, Melissa.”

“Come on. You’ll live.”

“You do realize every minute we’re in there, I’m one step closer to decking some frat boy.”

I whirl on him. “Well, control yourself. I’m serious, Billy. I don’t want to get kicked out of the sorority for your actions.”

He glowers, and his jaw tightens, but he doesn’t reply.

We go up the walk and inside. I greet some of our sorority sisters, and then we make our way to the kitchen where the keg sits. There’s a cooler full of punch, and Billy grabs my arm.

“You and Harley are not to drink that stuff, understand?”

“We know. I don’t trust what’s in it either.”

“Glad to hear it.”

I draw a beer and pass it to him. “Here. Relax.”

“I’m not here to party. I’m here to keep you safe.”

“Well, one won’t kill you.” I hold it up, and he takes it grudgingly. He takes a sip and makes a face.

“This is crap beer.”

I roll my eyes and head to another section of the house.

Billy—

A couple hours into the party, Melissa wanders into a dark hallway, and I follow.

“What are you doing?”

She turns to me. “I needed some space. It’s so crowded in there; I was feeling claustrophobic.”

“I know what you mean. You ready to cut out?”

She looks at the time. “Soon. We’re required to stay until 11: 00 pm.”

I run my gaze over her in that sexy outfit that clings to every curve and do what I’ve wanted to do all night. Holding her eyes, I press a hand to her bare thigh. Backing her to the wall, I tower over her.

She drags in a breath of surprise, and my eyes drop to her mouth.

My fingers curl around her leg, and I stroke a couple inches higher, taking the hem of her lace dress with me.

“Billy,” she whispers, her chest rising and falling. “Kiss me.”

Her head drops, exposing her long neck. I’m more intoxicated by the look in her half-lidded eyes than anything I’ve drunk tonight. Leaning closer, I breathe in her scent. A seductive combination of some exotic perfume and her.

“Put your arms around me,” I order, and she wraps them around my neck. My hand on her leg tightens, and I lift her knee to the side of my hip, pressing against her. Goddamn, all I can think about is getting this woman naked and under me, but even as those thoughts burn through me, I know it’s not possible. Not now.

Doesn’t mean I’m not going to take advantage of this one stolen moment. We’ve denied ourselves so much. I won’t deny

us this.

My mouth closes over her soft, eager lips, and my tongue sweeps inside, exploring, remembering how good her kisses are.

Her hands tighten around my neck, keeping my mouth on hers like she's afraid I'm going to pull free. *Not a chance, sweetheart.*

She presses her gorgeous body against me, and I let my hands stroke over every curve and hollow, committing every inch to memory. I want to drag every second of this out.

Finally, I break off, and my mouth trails down her throat. I thread my fingers into her silky hair and tug her head to give me better access.

“I want you to fuck me, Billy. I want it so bad.”

Her words urge me on, driving my desire higher. I cup her ass and haul her against me until I know she feels my hardon, throbbing with need for her.

I can't resist touching her and slip my hand up her thigh and under her panties. I find her wet pussy lips and stroke them. “You wet for me, baby?”

“Always for you.”

I thrust two fingers inside her, and she goes up on her toes, her head falling back and her mouth dropping open. I lean over her, watching her expression. Her eyes are pure liquid, and her breath is panting.

Her hot pussy squeezes my fingers while I fuck her with them. God, I want to be inside there. I hold her eyes, and with my thumb, I seek her clit and find it, stroking her wetness around in circles.

She bucks against me, moaning.

I keep at her until I know she's teetering on the edge of coming. I suck on her neck hard, and she flies over into ecstasy, clutching me tight.

Her body melts, but I catch her, holding her upright. "I've got you, baby."

Her expression is serene, and I press kisses over her face.

I bring my coated fingers to my mouth, sucking on her flavor. She watches, and that makes it even hotter. "Someday, I want my mouth there."

She searches my eyes. "Someday?"

I tug her dress in place and drop a last kiss to her lips. "You're a temptress in this dress, and it's making it hard, knowing there are some lines we can't cross. Yet."

Melissa rubs her palms over my cut. "When you get your patch, I'm the first thing you do."

I grin. That's not a hard promise to make. "Yes, ma'am."

"Well, I guess you really are biker trash, Melissa."

Every muscle in my body tightens, and I jerk my head around.

Motherfucking Jason.

He stands there with a smirk, and I want to knock it off. I move toward him, but Melissa clutches me, pulling me back.

"He's not worth it, Billy."

"You don't insult this woman and think you're going to stand there without backlash. Let's go outside, big man."

His eyes widen, and his face pales. "I've got a dozen fraternity brothers in the next room who aren't going to let that happen, asshole."

"This is between you and me. Or aren't you man enough?"

“Fine. Let’s go.” He turns to leave.

Melissa tugs on my arm. “Billy, please don’t do this.”

I cup her chin and drop a kiss on her mouth. “Stay inside.”

I follow Jason out the back door and barely give him a chance to turn before I’m on him. I throw him against the wall, and his head cracks against the brick. He’s got to be having flashbacks of the last time he messed with Melissa.

“That was for Melissa.”

He pushes off the wall and lunges at me with a head butt to my solar plexus. I lock arms around his ribs and body slam him to the ground.

“Get up, motherfucker,” I shout, standing over him, my fists clenching. I give him time to stagger to his feet before I hit him with a right hook with enough power behind it to spin his head to the side.

He staggers, then lunges with a hit I easily block with my forearm and deliver a sharp jab to his gut.

The back door opens and half a dozen guys pile out.

“Get off him!” one shouts.

I whirl with my fists in the air. “Come on, motherfucker. I’ll do you the same.”

Apparently, that makes them all think twice, and none are eager to be the first to meet my fist.

Melissa and Harley Jean shove their way out.

“Stop it, all of you, before the cops come,” Melissa snaps.

I stare at Jason. “If you’re smart, you’ll stay on the ground.”

“Get out of here, asshole,” another frat boy shouts.

I huff out a laugh and point a finger at Jason. “You won’t always have a crew behind you. So, watch yourself.”

I grab Melissa by the arm and tug her toward the street. “Harley, come on.”

When we arrive at the apartment, no one says a word, and Melissa goes straight to the fridge and grabs a bottle of water. Then she turns on me.

“I can’t believe you did that.”

“Did what? Defend you against the shit he was calling you?”

“Why does everything have to devolve into violence any time the club’s involved?”

“You grew up in it, same as me. You know how things work. And whether you like it or not, you are the club princess. No one talks to you like that. No one.”

“Guys,” Harley says in a voice that sounds like something is wrong.

I turn and see her standing by the door, holding a piece of paper. “What is it?”

“This was on the carpet. Someone must have shoved it under the door.”

I take it from her hand and read it, Melissa reading over my shoulder.

You looked good tonight, Melissa.

I especially love the leather bracelets.

Gives me all kinds of ideas.

I twist and meet her eyes. She looks sick to her stomach.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

WARNING

Billy—

“I’m going to go beat his ass.”

“You can’t. Please, Billy.” Melissa rests her hand against my chest, and it almost sends me to distraction. “I don’t want you to start anything, and I don’t want you to leave me alone.”

My chest rises with the deep breath I pull into my lungs.

“Please,” she repeats.

“Okay,” I concede.

“Thank you,” she whispers in almost a sultry way.

Harley retreats to her room and closes the door. Once she’s gone, Melissa sashays down the hall.

My eyes drop to her ass. She turns, catching me in the trap she’s set and crooks her finger, walking backward.

I lick my lips, thinking about them tracing her body. My mind says to head to the couch, but my feet follow her.

We get around the corner, and before she crosses the threshold, she turns and kisses me, her arms going around my neck. I know I led her on at the party earlier tonight, but there wasn’t a bed within sight. Now there is. If I cross that threshold, I know I won’t have the willpower to stop. I grab her arms and pull them away, breaking the kiss.

“Melissa, I can’t do this. You know I can’t.”

“Oh, right. That damn patch.” She spins on her heel and slams the door in my face.

It's for the best, I tell myself, but even I don't believe that.

Stalking to the couch, I punch the throw pillow and stretch out. Stacking my hands under my head, I stare at the ceiling, turning my anger toward Jason. I've got plans for him.

An hour later, when I'm sure the girls are asleep, I grab Melissa's key and sneak out, locking them safely inside, promising myself I'll only be gone a short time.

I race across town to the frat house, and stalk across the lawn littered with empty red cups. I slip inside the front door when a couple exits. The party is still going, though it's in its last throws.

Several frat brothers turn my way. One steps forward. "I thought we told you to get out of here."

I ignore him and scan the remaining crowd of drunk partygoers, spotting Jason against the wall. Crossing the room, I push a brother out of my way like he's nothing.

Jason glances up and straightens.

I don't give him a chance to say anything. My hand encloses around his throat, and I pin him to the wall. "What I did before was for talking shit to Melissa. But this"—my grip tightens around his throat, causing him to gasp for air—"is to remind you that you don't fuck with her. Your fucking games stop right now. If I ever hear about you going near her again, they'll never find your body."

He claws at my hand, and I loosen the grip enough for him to sputter, "Okay, okay. I'll leave her alone. I'll never hit on her again."

"You're a sick fuck. It won't bother me at all to end you."

With that, I release him and stalk out. I hear them talking behind me.

"What did you do? Why did he call you sick?" one asks.

“No fucking clue. All I did was hit on her.”

I shake my head and keep walking, not surprised the motherfucker would lie. No man's going to admit to the shit he's done.

Crossing the lawn, I hear the door slam behind me, but no one followed me out. Walking to my bike, I notice the same metallic green Chevy Nova SS I remembered sitting in Jason's driveway the night of that high school party years ago. The license plate reads J-MAN, confirming it for me.

Without thinking twice, I walk over, pull the switch blade from my pocket, flick it open and jam it in the front tire. Yanking it out, I flip it closed, slide it in my pocket, and retreat to my bike.

When I get to the apartment, I quietly slip inside. The apartment is quiet, but I still feel the need to check in on Melissa. Cracking her bedroom door open, I see her sleeping peacefully. She looks sexy as hell, and I want nothing more than to slip into the bed with her.

Someday, I promise myself.

Someday.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

PRIORITIES

Billy—

The muffled sounds of Melissa talking on the phone in the kitchen carry to me. Rolling over, I squint my eyes open. My back is stiff, and my muscles are tight from the night spent on this crappy couch that's too short for my frame.

Melissa is pacing between the kitchen and the small dining area across the room. Her face looks pale, and when she disconnects the call, she starts crying. Her hand goes to her mouth to cover her sobs.

I bolt to my feet and am across the room in a flash. "Babe, who was that? Was it Jason?"

She shakes her head.

"Then who? What's got you so upset?" Her expression is almost shell-shocked, and I want to ring the neck of the person responsible. I'm shocked when she turns into me and buries her face in my shirt. Gathering her close, I dip my head. "Baby, what's wrong?"

She doesn't answer right away, so I hold her, my palm cradling her head and my lips at her temple. Finally, she pulls back and wipes her tears from her cheeks.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have broken down like that. It's silly of me."

"It's not silly. Who was on the phone? Tell me." The last two words come out sharper than I intend.

She runs a hand through her hair and retreats to the kitchen.

I follow, and she turns, her arms folded. “It was the university clinic. I went in for a checkup. They did a pap smear. Usually when they call with results, they just tell you everything is fine. This time they want me to come in.”

My stomach drops at her words, and I swallow. It feels like the rug was just pulled out from under me, but I know I need to reassure her. “Honey, I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“They must have found something.”

“You don’t know that. Don’t let your thoughts run wild. Not until you know.”

Her eyes get glassy again. “You know my history, Billy. Everything I’ve been through...”

“The leukemia was cured with the bone marrow transplant years ago.” I take a step closer.

“Yes, but the average life expectancy for people who have survived childhood cancer is thirty percent lower.”

I didn’t know that. I didn’t think beyond the fact that she was sick as a child and then got better. I was just a kid at the time, and I’m not sure I ever even knew all the details. Now I feel like an idiot for not asking her, for not learning all about it. I lick my lips, not sure what to say. I sure as hell don’t want to say the wrong thing or make this worse, so I decide to opt for the truth.

“Look, Melissa, I don’t know enough about your illness, and I’m sorry I never asked more. But I want to be with you when you go to talk to them.”

She moves to the counter and fidgets with a loaf of bread, tying the twist tie tighter.

Without thinking, I step to her back and lay my hands on her shoulders, squeezing. “Please. Let me go with you.”

“They want to see me at 1:00 pm.”

I glance at the clock on the microwave. It’s less than forty-five minutes. “Okay. Go take a hot shower and get dressed. I’ll run out and grab one of those smoothies you love. I saw a place at the end of the block. How about that?”

She turns and meets my eyes, and I’m lost in their emerald green depths, just like every damn time.

“You don’t have to stay. I’m sure you’re needed at the club. Seems they always need you.”

I hear the tinge of resentment.

“Anything comes up, TJ or Marcus will cover—” Before I can finish the sentence, my phone goes off. I glance at the text on the screen. It’s Green, saying I need to get to the clubhouse asap, but I ignore it. “It’s nothing.”

“I don’t want you to get in trouble because of me.”

“I’m going with you. Get your butt in the shower.”

Her lips break into a broad grin. She can lie and say she doesn’t need me to go with her, but the relief on her face says otherwise.

I tap her nose. “Move it, girl.”

“Yes, sir.” She slips past me and heads down the hall.

I watch her retreat, then grab her key and my wallet and slip out.

It’s a nice morning, and the walk down the block is short. Since it’s Sunday, there’s not a lot of students out, even at noon. Yawning, I can’t say I blame them for sleeping in late.

I get her favorite strawberry and banana smoothie and am back with it when she walks into the living room fully dressed

and her hair in a braid over one shoulder. She looks sexy as hell like that, especially with the soft sweater.

“You ready?” I hand her the drink.

“Yes, thank you for this.” She takes a sip from the straw, and I smile.

“Want to take the bike?”

She cocks her head, and her face lights up. The girl loves to ride, and I remember the last time she was on the back of my bike. It was the day Marcus, TJ, and I brought the girls from Donner Mountain when the Death Heads were seen in the area. It had been cold as hell that day, and she'd clung to me the entire trip.

I'd loved every minute of it.

“Drink up.” I nod to her cup.

She drinks a good portion, then stashes the rest in the fridge. I grab my cut off the back of one of her dining chairs and shrug into it, then hold the door for her, and we head out.

When we reach the curb, I dig my spare helmet out of my saddlebag. She takes it, and I swing my leg over my seat and lift the six-hundred-pound bike off its kickstand. The engine rumbles to life beneath me, and Melissa climbs on.

When her arms wrap around me, everything inside me settles into place. Everything about her on my bike feels right. It's where she belongs. It's where she's always belonged.

I turn my head. “Where to?”

“At the end of the street, make a right. It's on the corner of Dothan and First.”

Dropping the bike into gear, we roar off.

After the appointment, she heads toward the stairs, but I tug her hand to the elevator instead. A woman exits, and we step on. It's a short ride, since the building is only three stories, but I want at least a minute alone.

The doors slide closed, and I pull her into my arms. "He said it's an easy procedure, and it should take care of it completely. I want to be here with you for it."

"I'd rather have my mom, I think, if you don't mind."

"Sure. I understand." I tip her chin up to mine with a finger. "Hey, he said the cells were pre-cancerous. You caught it early. Don't worry, okay?"

She nods and attempts a smile.

The doors open, and we step apart. I take her hand, and we walk out to the curb where my bike is parked. It's a short ride back. Once we're at her building, I can't put off checking my phone any longer and glance at the numerous texts and missed calls I've received.

Melissa's eyes drop to my phone. "Are you in trouble?"

"I need to return a call." I ignore it for the moment, and close my hands over her hips, pulling her to me. "Get some rest, okay?"

"I will. Thank you for staying and going with me. I admit I was scared to death."

The corner of my mouth pulls up. "I think I got that from how hard you were squeezing my hand in that office."

That gets me a smile.

"Hey." I hold her eyes, needing to be serious for a minute. "I will always be here for you, sweetheart. Always. Understand?"

Her eyes glaze again, and she nods.

I cup her face and kiss her forehead. “Call me later?”

It’s the first time I’ve indicated we should remain in contact when we both know how her father feels.

“I will.”

I watch her until she’s inside the building. Then I turn and return the call to my sponsor, trying to prepare myself for the blowback that’s sure to come.

Green’s voice barks in my ear. “Get your ass to Sonny’s, now, prospect.”

I close my eyes and repeat a mantra in my head. *Please don’t ask me where I am.*

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

TRUTH

Billy—

The MC is already gathered in the parking lot when I pull up at Sonny's Gentleman's Club. I park, and Green immediately stalks my way, tossing a cigarette into the distance. I climb from my bike, preparing for him to shove me to my ass.

"Where the hell have you been?" He gets right in my face.

I lift my hands. "All right, I'm going to tell you. I know I'm in trouble, but Melissa is being stalked."

His brows lift. "What the hell did you just say?"

Glancing toward Cole and the rest of the crew, I run a hand through my hair, turning to face away from them. "She doesn't want her father to know. She's afraid he'll force her home."

Green breathes in a lungful. "Tell me everything."

"She had a couple of instances when she thought she heard someone following her. She never saw them, but she was pretty sure. Things started to go missing, and she's getting creepy notes."

"When did this start?" he asks, looking toward the men.

"A couple of weeks ago. Marcus and TJ have been taking turns going up and staying with the girls. Making sure they're safe at night, then hauling ass back here. I've been trying to stay away for obvious reasons, but last night Brayden got drunk and started a fight. TJ was busy with that. Marcus had just gone home to see Brandy, and they haven't had much time together. I hated to call him." I shrug. "So, I went."

“And why the fuck didn’t you come when you got the call today?”

“Last night, I went with them to a frat party. Remember the guy hassling her at the high school party a few years ago? He was there. He’s been hitting on her. Apparently, he doesn’t like rejection because he insulted her.”

“What’d he say?”

“Called her a biker whore.”

Green’s face tightens. “And what did you do?”

“Taught him a lesson and took them home.”

“Is that everything?”

“When we got to the apartment, there was a note that said, *you looked good tonight, Melissa. I especially love the leather bracelets. Gives me all kinds of ideas.* It had to be him.”

“What kind of a sick fuck...?”

“I know. So, after the girls went to bed. I slipped out and finished the job.”

“Meaning?”

“I dragged his ass outside and beat the fuck out of him. Of course, his frat brothers tried to get involved, but none had the balls to take me on. As I was leaving, I slashed his tire.”

Green slaps my shoulder. “That’s my boy.”

“So, are you going to tell Cole?”

“Not sure yet. For now, I’ll keep her secret, but if this escalates, or if Cole straight out asks me something, I’m not gonna lie.”

“Understood.”

“Are you sure it’s this guy?”

“He all but admitted it to me.”

Green nods. “But that doesn’t explain why you were late this morning.”

“Melissa got a phone call from her doctor. They found something and wanted her to come in. She was terrified, so I went with her.”

“She okay?”

“She’ll be fine.”

“Next time you don’t keep me in the dark, understand?”

“Yes, sir. So what’s going on with Sonny’s?”

“Someone shot it up.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope.”

“Any clue who it was?”

“We’re thinking it may be the Death Heads. Retaliation for Nevada.”

I nod. “Makes sense. The Dead close up their cathouse, and they come shoot up our strip club.”

“That’s the consensus.”

“What are we going to do about it?”

“Nothing until we’re sure. The security tapes are grainy as fuck, and it’s hard to make out the person.”

“Person? Just one?”

“Yep.”

“Was he on a bike?”

“Nope. That’s the thing. We want to make sure who we’re dealing with.” He lifts his chin. “Go on. Let me talk to the guys.”

I turn to walk over to TJ and Marcus, but Green calls me back.

“And Billy?”

“Yes, sir?”

“No more secrets.”

I nod, but all I can think about is Melissa, our kiss, and how far I went with her in that hallway last night. Maybe my face pales, because his jaw tightens, and I’m sure he knows there’s more, but thank God he doesn’t ask.

Green—

I approach Jake, knowing what I just found out could have implications for Crash’s daughter, too. I have to trust Billy has the situation in hand. If I can’t trust him with this, he has no business becoming my brother.

“What’s up?” Jake asks.

I shake my head and look toward our three prospects, who are smoking cigarettes about twenty yards away. “You know, I really wish we’d patched them in, because I don’t think I could have been on my best behavior as long as these boys have had to be.”

“Agreed. I feel bad about Billy. He’s been doing this the longest, and he’s done everything we could want from a loyal brother. It’s too bad Melissa has become a complication.”

“You and I both know where this train’s headed, and I don’t want it to go off the rails before he gets his patch.”

“I thought that warning he was given in the ring last year taught him his lesson.”

“It did, but how long is he supposed to wait on pins and needles, thinking any small thing he does wrong could cause him his patch?”

“Like being late today?”

“He had a good reason.”

“You gonna share?”

“Nope. Not this time.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

TEARING DOWN WALLS

Billy—

A few days later, I sneak off to check in on Melissa, this time giving Green a head's up. He says he understands and lets me go.

When I pull up at her apartment, I dial her number.

“Billy?”

“Hey, sweetheart. You home?”

“Yes, why?”

“Look out the window.” I'm leaning on my bike. A moment later, I see her drapes part.

“You're here.” There's excitement in her voice, and it makes me grin.

“Had to check on you, baby. Is Harley Jean there?”

“No, she's in class.”

“Let me in.” I click off and walk to her door. She flings it open and gives me a big hug. She's dressed in a cute little sundress, and my hands run up and down her back. “So, how did it go?”

Pulling back, she looks in my face, hers filled with happiness. “It's all fine. They said I shouldn't worry about it anymore.”

“Aw, Melissa, that's great news. I've been thinking about you. I know we've texted and talked, but I needed to lay eyes on you.”

That gets me another big smile. “I’ve got a bottle of wine. You want to celebrate?”

“Absolutely.” I follow her into the kitchen. She gets two glasses, and I pop the cork on the bottle, then fill them. Holding up mine, I make a toast. “Here’s to a long, healthy life, pretty girl.”

She clinks her glass to mine, and we both drink.

Nodding toward the sofa, I turn and walk that way. “How’d it go with your mother? Was she upset?”

“Of course.” She follows me and curls a leg under her, taking the corner of the sofa. “My mother has been worried about my health my entire life. She’s terrified I’ll develop another type of cancer. She tries to hide the fear from me, because I know she wants me to have a worry-free life, but that’s a part of me, isn’t it? I’ll always have some degree of worry.”

I close my hand over her jean-clad knee. “I hate that for you. I really do.”

“Please don’t feel sorry for me. I can’t take that. I’ve tried to live my life chasing happiness and not worrying all the time about getting sick again. I hate that it hangs over my head. I refuse to let it steal another day.”

God, this woman. “You came into my life as a frail little girl, recovering from a terrible illness. But you’ve never let that stop you or even slow you down. Melissa, you’ve always been one of the strongest people I’ve ever known.”

Her eyes fill and she huffs out a laugh. “Don’t you dare make me cry, Billy. I’m so sick of tears.”

“Okay.” I brush one off her cheek with my thumb. “No more tears, then. Hey, do you remember when we first met?”

“Sort of.”

“I do. I thought you were the prettiest girl I’d ever seen.”

“You barely gave me the time of day.”

I chuckle. “That’s because I didn’t know how to act around you. Hell, some days I still don’t.”

She leans one elbow on the back of the couch and rests her head on her hand. “What was it like for you growing up in the club?”

I shrug. “Probably the same as for you and TJ.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t think so. You’ve always seemed so sure you were going to patch in. You’ve never had any doubts?”

“Nope. Not until lately, anyway.”

Her face sobers. “What do you mean? Have you changed your mind?”

“I’ve had second thoughts, yeah. After Sturgis, when we didn’t get patched, I was pissed. I wasn’t sure I even wanted to go on with it anymore. I mean, what more do we have to do to prove ourselves?” I shake my head. “I’m sorry. I probably shouldn’t be telling you any of this.”

“Don’t.”

I stare at her.

“Don’t, Billy. I mean it. Don’t shut me out again. I can’t take it.”

“It’s not that I’m trying to shut you out—”

“Yes, you are. Just stop.”

“What do you want, Melissa?”

“What do you mean?”

“If it were up to you, do you want me to give this up? Quit the club?”

Her eyes drop to my cut, and she shakes her head. “I’ve thought about it, but that cut is a part of who you are. To me, you’re already a part of the club. And I know you’d probably give it up if I asked you, but I can’t ask you to do that. I want you to get your patch, because I know how badly you want it. I’m just not sure where I fit in.”

“Don’t say that.”

“With my father, the club always seemed to take precedence. Oh, I know he loves my mother and us kids, but that club is his first love, and it’ll always be in his life.”

“Don’t you think he can love both the club and his family?”

“Some days... I wonder.”

“And is that what you wonder about me? Is that what you’re afraid of? That I can’t love the club and still have room for you?”

She won’t meet my eyes, and I know it’s exactly what she’s afraid of. She starts to get up. “You want more wine?”

I grab her hand and tug her back down. “No way. You’re not getting out of answering me.”

“Of course I’m worried about it. Look at all the problems your parents have had.”

“Stop right there. You are not my mother, and I am not my father. We’re different people, and I refuse to make those same mistakes. Besides, they love each other very much.”

“I know that. I’m just saying, life in this club is not easy on the women.”

“That is not going to be us.” I run my fingers through her hair. “Tell me you believe in us, because if you don’t, what the hell are we doing here?”

“I want to believe.”

“You’re just afraid?”

She nods.

I cup her face and tilt her head up, covering her mouth with mine, needing to show her we are worth fighting for. I break it off and stare into her eyes. “I know it’s hard, but I know it’ll be worth it.”

She stands again, but this time she turns to face me and holds her hand out to me without a word.

I take it and stand.

“Harley won’t be back for three hours. So, if you want me to believe in us, show me you do.” With that, she leads me down the hall to her bedroom.

CHAPTER TWENTY

RELEASE

Billy—

Melissa pulls me toward the bedroom, and I can't help but feel she's an angel leading me to heaven or maybe a temptress taking me to my demise. Either way, I go willingly.

It takes only a split second for me to decide I've given her up for too long, and I won't do it anymore. Not for the club, not for anybody. I won't refuse the sweet nectar she's offering me.

The door slams behind us with my forceful kick.

She drops my hand and turns toward me, dragging her dress down. Her matching bra and panties are a sheer black material with little blossoming flowers embroidered all over it. My eyes lock on her own little buds, barely visible beneath the fabric. They're perky and begging for my mouth.

I stalk toward her, watching her eyes flare with desire. "Take it off."

She unhooks the bra. Her breasts pop free and her nipples tighten under my gaze.

I lick my lips and raise an eyebrow at the panties still blocking view of what I really want.

"Slide them down," I murmur. "Slowly."

She obeys, hooking her fingers in the edges and slowly revealing an inch at a time until she's bent all the way to the ground, stepping out of her panties. She rises, looking like Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, naked in all her glory.

My eyes travel down her body, pausing at all the best parts. When I make it to her eyes, she purrs, “Your turn.”

I shrug my cut off and hook it on the doorknob of her closet door. Then I peel my gray t-shirt over my head. Her eyes travel over my muscles and land where my hands undo my jeans. I slowly unzip and slide them down my legs, taking my boxers with them.

She takes her fill of my body before I move towards her, backing her up until the back of her knees hits her bed.

I cup her face and pull it to me, my lips pressing against hers, parting her mouth. My hands roam her body, first moving down to cup her breasts in my hand. I rub a calloused thumb across one perky nipple, causing a sharp intake of breath. I kiss her neck, trailing down. I lift a breast to meet my waiting tongue, licking one nipple and then sucking it into my warm mouth. Her head tilts back.

My other hand roams down her body until I feel the soft curls at my fingertips. I brush them through until I make it far enough to feel her wetness. I swipe one finger along her, and then pop her nipple out of my mouth like a cherry so I can lick her wetness from my finger, remembering how sweet she tasted the other night. I take her other nipple into my mouth, giving it the same attention, but my hand wanders lower again, unable to resist her sweet honey.

“Lay down,” I breathe as I lick my fingers again. This time, I want to taste her right on my tongue.

She lowers to the bed, and I spread her legs so I can crawl between them.

“You’re so sexy, all splayed out for me. I’m going to go down on you until you scream my name. Got it, babe?”

She nods vigorously, and it makes the side of my lips curl.

I kiss up her thigh, drawing this out until we're both throbbing with need. I give one long lick, and she bucks at the sensation.

Continuing my ministrations, I lick and suck at her clit until her hips move in rhythm and she moans at the sensation.

"Oh God, Billy," she cries out as her hips frantically meet my motions. "Yes, yes."

"That's my girl."

She screams out my name as her orgasm floods over her in waves.

I lick my lips and move up her body, stopping to give her nipples some attention. Her chest still rises and falls with her panting breath. Dropping the weight of my heated body against hers, I make my way to her earlobe to nip and tease.

She sighs.

"Ready for round two?" I growl in her ear.

She nods, pushing me to my back. She straddles me and her loose curls lay atop her breasts, the tips reaching to just the tops of her nipples.

Sweet heaven, she's gorgeous.

She slides down my body until she has easy access to my length. It's throbbing and standing at attention, awaiting her touch.

She doesn't disappoint. Taking it into her grip, she slides her hand up and down. A pearl of seed glistens at the tip. She leans down and licks it off, tasting me, and it's the sexiest thing I've ever seen.

"Goddamn, you drive me wild, girl."

Her lashes flutter up, and she meets my eyes. Then she lowers again, but this time she takes my entire length into her

sexy, warm mouth. My eyes slide shut with a moan, and I thrust as she sucks until I feel it building in me. Then I flip her over and rise from the bed.

“Where are you going?” She looks crestfallen.

“Just grabbing a condom, baby.”

“Oh.” She blushes.

I dig one out of my jean pocket and tear it open, rolling it on quickly.

She bats her lashes as I crawl up the bed.

“I’ve wanted this for so long,” I whisper.

“Me, too.”

Taking my hard cock in my hand, I position myself at her opening and slide into her silky wetness.

She gasps.

“Damn, you’re tight.” I see the furrow in her brows, and it dawns on me. “Baby, are you a virgin?”

“Well, not anymore,” she teases. At least, I think she’s teasing. I pull my chin to the side.

“Are you being serious?”

“Um, yes.”

My eyes widen. “Oh shit, I’m sorry. I should have asked. I ___”

“Shhh.” She presses a fingertip to my mouth. “I’ve wanted this for so long. I wasn’t about to stop you.”

“Yeah, but I could have gone in more gently. I thought with being away at college maybe you had...” I leave the words hanging.

“I’ve always wanted you to be my first. To be my *only*.” Her cheeks tinge with pink from our workout, but I think they

just flushed even more. Her admission has my chest swelling. I'm ecstatic and feeling very possessive. She's mine now, and no one can ever take this away from us.

"Good. I always wanted to be your first and only, too." I slowly pull out and push back in. "Damn, you feel like you were made to fit me."

"Maybe I was."

I grin and continue to move unhurriedly until she lifts her hips from the bed, trying to encourage me to move faster.

I huff a laugh. "Ready for me to move harder?"

"Yes." Her breathlessness makes the word come out sultry.

"Well, all you got to do is ask, princess," I tease.

"Fuck me harder." She moans.

"Fuck. It's damn sexy when a woman commands." I pick up the pace, and soon I'm pounding into her as she meets my thrusts.

"I'm going to come," she moans.

I grunt, pumping into her until she screams my name, and we both fly over the edge into ecstasy.

I collapse, tossing the used condom to the side and pulling her into my arms.

"This feels so right." I stroke her back.

"Mm-hmm." She nods against my chest. "So, are we doing this?"

I chuckle. "Yeah, I guess we are. It has to be on the down-low, though. Your father can't know."

"I get that." She lifts her head and presses a kiss to my chest. "How much longer before they patch you in? I thought for sure you guys would be in by now."

“Me, too. Way I overheard it, your father thinks we’re too young, therefore not ready.”

“That’s bullshit.”

I shrug. “TJ’s his kid. Maybe he’s trying to protect him.”

“I don’t think that’s it. Maybe my mother is pressuring him to wait.”

“Well, they can’t wait forever. I don’t know how much more of this I can take. Always being on call at the drop of a hat. They say jump. I say how high. With no end in sight. It’s getting to all of us.”

She moves on top of me. “But now we have each other. That’ll help you get through, right?”

I chuckle again, and her tits jiggle. “That or it’ll get me kicked out and murdered.”

“Don’t tease about that, Billy.”

I brush a strand of hair from her eyes. “I ever tell you how beautiful you are?”

A smile lights her face. “I could hear those words for the rest of my life and be content.”

“I want you content. Content and happy. Always.”

“That’s what you make me feel.”

I kiss her lips and shift her to my side, cuddling her close. “Get some sleep, sweetheart.”

It’s not long before she falls into a peaceful slumber. It feels good to have her here in my arms. Finally.

My mind wanders through the potential fallout from this decision. But there’s one thing I know for sure. After that sex, we can never go back to the way things were. She’s mine now, and I’m not giving her up for anything or anybody.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

SURPRISE

Melissa—

The door slams, startling Billy and I awake.

I glance at the clock on my phone. “Oh, shit. Harley’s home.”

Billy stretches but doesn’t seem as on edge as me.

“You go take a shower, and I’ll make sure Harley isn’t suspicious.” I push to sit up, but Billy pulls my waist to his chest.

“Or we can take a shower together,” he purrs in my ear.

“Melissa? Are you home?” Harley calls from the other room.

I swat at his hand and swing my legs over the edge of the bed. “Yeah, I’ll be right out.”

“Boo,” he complains, sitting up.

I grab a towel, clean myself, and then quickly slide on a pair of yoga pants, bra, and tank top.

“Are you trying to tempt me?” Billy’s eyes linger on my ass as he rises from the bed. “I’m going to be thinking about what lies beneath that skintight fabric every time I look at you.”

I shoot him a flirty look as I push him into the bathroom.

Gathering the sheets, I move out the door and down the hall to the small laundry closet.

Harley pops her head around the folding door just as I'm about to shove them into the washer.

“Oh my god. Melissa, are you okay?”

My brow furrows in question. “Yeah?”

“Are you bleeding? Did you cut yourself?” She nods to the sheets in my hand, a small blood stain visible.

“Um...” I stare at the pile in my hands, my mind going blank. Before I can come up with an excuse, the answer seems to dawn on her. Her eyes widen, and a smile breaks across her face.

“Did you?” She sucks in a gasp. “With *Billy*?” She’s practically jumping up and down.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I try to pull off nonchalance and fail horribly.

On cue, we hear a door shut from inside my bedroom.

Her smile widens more, if that’s even possible. “Is he still here?” She darts toward my room.

“What are you doing?” I shriek, slamming the washer closed and following.

She passes the kitchen, grabs her coffee cup off the counter, and drags our cushy armchair across the living room floor. She faces it toward my bedroom door only feet away. Then she curls up crisscross-applesauce.

“Really?” I ask, exasperated.

“I can’t believe I didn’t see his bike.” A horrible thought seems to flicker across her face. “Wait. It *is* Billy, right?”

“Don’t you have somewhere else to be? Class? Lunch?”

“Oh, absolutely not. I wouldn’t miss this if the apartment was on fire.” She grins, sipping her coffee and staring at the

door, refusing to break eye contact with it as if she might miss Billy trying to escape.

“Oh, for God’s sake, Harley. You’re being ridiculous.”

A few minutes later, the door opens, and Billy struts out. He stops short, quirking an eyebrow. “Harley.”

“Hi, Billy,” she practically squeals.

He walks past her and toward me. Harley cranes her neck to peer around the back of the chair. Her eyes connect with mine, and she mouths, “Oh my God.”

Billy takes my face in his hands and kisses me. I guess there’s no point hiding it from her now. When he pulls away, I feel breathless and have to avoid laughing out loud at Harley who is hanging over the edge of the chair, the back of her hand to her forehead pretending to swoon.

“I’m not sure how we handle this, but I want to see you as much as I can. I’ll call you tonight.” He presses another quick kiss to my lips.

“I want to see you, too.”

His mouth twitches at the corner in a sexy half grin. “Good. See you later, babe.” He glances over his shoulder at Harley, who is quickly righting herself. “Bye, Harley.”

“Bye, Billy.”

I walk him to the door, and the moment it closes, Harley is all over me.

“Tell me everything. Was he good? How’d this happen? Have you two been doing this for long? Did he initiate it or you?”

Before I have a chance to wrap my head around all the questions, she jumps to her feet.

“I have to call Brandy!” She scrambles for her phone on the table.

“Wait,” I snap in a panic. “Nobody knows. She can’t tell Marcus.”

Harley turns to me. I’ll make sure she doesn’t.”

An hour later, Brandy and Harley drag me through the mall to a sexy lingerie store.

“Why are we here?” I complain, a little embarrassed by all the attention my loss of virginity is getting.

“You are in your first ever sexual relationship with the man you’ve been pining over for God knows how long. You guys wanted each other so bad you couldn’t make it to him being patched. That’s hot as hell. So we’re going to find an eye-popping outfit so you can give him a reward for his good behavior.” Brandy laughs as she shoves me past a scantily clad mannequin and into the store.

The lights are dim, and the room is designed to look like a boudoir. The walls are lined with bra and pantie sets, while the floor space is filled with lingerie and racy underwear displays.

Harley and Brandy immediately fan out.

“What’s your size?” Harley calls as she thumbs through a rack of hot pink polka dot baby doll lingerie sets.

Covering my face with my hand, I call out my sizes.

After a few minutes of pillaging the store, they carry armfuls to the fitting room. There are so many garments, the saleslady brings over a clothing rack to hang them on, since I can only take six items into the room.

Both girls plop on armchairs. “You better come out and show us,” Harley warns.

“I am not coming out there in lingerie.”

“I can pull the curtain to make it more private,” the saleslady suggests.

“That would be wonderful,” Brandy chimes in.

“Lovely.” The woman pulls the curtain closed. “Yell if you need anything.”

“Thank you,” I call from inside the room.

I slip on a black lace teddy and open the door.

Brandy holds her hand at her chin, inspecting. “Looks good, but we can do better.”

“I agree. Back in there.” Harley waves her hand at me, dismissing it.

The next one I try on is more strings than fabric. “I am not coming out there in this,” I screech, appalled at the idea of other people seeing me so exposed.

“Well, then I’m coming in.” I hear the cushion shift and assume Harley just stood up.

“Okay, okay, but look quick.” I open the door and do a two second twirl before slamming the door shut again. Their laughter sounds on the other side of the door.

“That was sexy.”

“Very,” Harley agrees with Brandy. “But not enough mystery. You don’t want to show him everything. Then you might as well show up naked.”

“He would probably like that.” Brandy giggles.

I make my way through piles of teddies, corset and pantie sets, and baby dolls, including one complete with a devil’s tail, trying them all.

We settle on an olive-green corset and garter set that goes well with my long blonde curls and makes my green eyes pop.

We stop for lunch at a bougie pizza shop. I slide across the bench, setting my little black bag on the edge of the table near the wall.

“I still can’t believe the two of you have come to fruition.” Harley smiles, sliding our order number into the silver stand on our table.

“So, I haven’t gotten a lot of the details yet,” Brandy muses and sips her raspberry lemonade.

I can’t keep the smile off my face. “Well, it was amazing.”

“Was it ‘push you against the wall’ or ‘make sweet, sweet love’ good?” She stirs her drink with her straw.

“A little of both. He is so good. He’s commanding, which is sexy as hell, but also sensual and makes sure I’m well taken care of.”

“Dayum. That sounds nice.” Harley rests her chin in her hand.

“Large five cheese?” a bubbly brunette asks, carrying a pizza to the table.

“That’s us,” Brandy confirms, moving out of her way to let the girl slide our pizza onto the metal stand and sets three white plates down.

“Can I get you anything else?”

“We’re all good.” Harley slides a slice onto her plate.

“So, how are you guys going to keep it on the down-low?” Brandy asks around a bite.

“We talked last night. I think he’s going to tell Marcus and then on nights when Marcus is supposed to be protecting us, Billy will come instead.”

“Oh, so this is a win for me, too?” Brandy jokes.

“What about TJ?” Harley asks.

“We feel like maybe it’s best to keep him in the dark for now.” I chew my own delicious slice. I know TJ will have to be told eventually, but he can be quick-tempered, like my dad. I think it’s best to avoid it for now, at least until we see how this is going. Just because we’ve both wanted this for so long doesn’t mean it will work out the way we expect it to.

My face must show some of my concerns, because Brandy immediately leans forward. “What is it?”

“I’m a little worried we’ve both wanted this for so long, fantasized about it, that maybe—” I break off, searching for the words.

“Maybe you made it into more than it actually is?” she offers.

“What if I’m not what Billy imagines? What if reality doesn’t live up to what he’s built up in his head?”

“That’s a valid concern, but I think it’s unlikely to be a reality for the two of you. There’s not much you don’t know about each other, and the chemistry is definitely there.”

I smile at Brandy. “You’re right. Of course, you are.”

We finish discussing all the details of the most amazing night of my life, while simultaneously polishing off a mind-blowingly delicious pizza.

Billy arrives at our apartment later that night. Harley lets him in and then heads to bed, giving us time alone.

He looks exhausted.

“Are you tired?” I ask, a little crestfallen. I have my new lingerie hidden beneath my baggy sweatshirt and leggings.

“Yeah.” He rubs his hand on his neck. “Club’s been keeping me busy.”

I climb behind him to sit on the back of the couch, positioning him between my legs.

“What are you doing?” He chuckles, twisting to look at me.

“Helping you relax.” I massage his shoulders and neck, working the knots out.

He drops his chin, giving me better access to his sore muscles. “Mmm, damn, that feels good, baby.”

After a while of easing the tension out of his body, I brush feather-light kisses along his neck. He shifts, and I see his bulge. Time for my other surprise.

I climb off the couch and tug his hand. “Come on, I have one more thing for you.”

He quirks a brow but follows me dutifully.

When the door shuts behind us, he’s immediately on me, kissing his way down my neck while his hands roam.

I waggle my finger at him. “No, sir. You’ll ruin my surprise. Now be a good boy and sit on my bed.”

His eyes flare with desire. “Yes, ma’am. But tell me... Are you a good girl or a bad girl?”

“Guess you’re about to find out.”

I close the door to my ensuite bathroom and quickly take off my sweatshirt and leggings. I check myself in the mirror and run some fingers through my hair before opening the door.

He sucks in his breath sharply, his eyes roaming over my body.

“Fuck,” he murmurs.

“That is the plan.” I strut toward him.

His hands cup my thighs and slowly rub my body until he pulls me on top of him. He quickly rolls me to my back and kisses along the swell of my breasts. He flicks one hook eye open at the top of my corset as he continues to trail kisses lower. Then another and another until the corset is spread open and my tits are awaiting his warm mouth.

He nips and suckles them, making a pool of heat flood between my legs.

His kisses trail down my belly, over the garter belt, to the top of my lace thong. Hooking his thumbs under the sides, he pulls the barely-there scrap of lace down my legs to reveal my blonde curls. The garter prevents him from pulling the thong all the way off. He sits up on his knees, pulling a pocketknife out of his back pocket.

“Don’t you dare cut these off. I just bought them.”

“I’ll buy you more.”

When I see the heated look in his eyes, I nod, sucking in a breath.

He slides the tiny strap at my hip along the knife, popping it open. Doing the same to the other side, he pulls them from my body.

It’s hot as hell and sends a sizzle through my body.

“Damn, this?” He gestures to the garter. “Is fucking hot. Especially since I can leave it on while I fuck you.”

He swipes his fingers between my legs, feeling how wet I already am. “Somebody is soaking.” He licks the glisten from his fingers. “I need a better taste. Spread your legs wide for me.” He slides down my body, dipping his head to lap at me.

My hips rock back and forth. It’s not long before he yanks his pants and slips a condom on.

“Are you sore?” His concern is etched across his face.

“No. Climb on top of me and fuck me so hard the neighbors hear the bed banging against the wall.”

His white teeth flash. “Yes, ma’am.”

He climbs on top, thrusting into me, filling me completely. His pace starts out steady but quickens until I’m moaning in pleasure and the rhythmic thumping of the bed is announcing our lovemaking to the world.

When he pinches my nipple, it sends me over the edge. I clamp down on him as wave after wave of orgasm wash over me. Seconds later, he explodes, pumping into me, and then collapses on top of me.

“*Now* I’m fucking exhausted.” He laughs.

Over the next couple of weeks, we create our own little routine: sex, eat, talk. Usually, we can’t keep our hands off each other the moment he walks through the door.

We tried to go on a real date to a restaurant one night, but we never made it past the bedroom. So instead, we order lots of delivery and cuddle naked, eating and telling each other about our days, our dreams, our troubles.

And I’m the happiest I’ve ever been.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

OASIS

Billy—

“Hey, I can stay with the girls tonight. You go home to Brandy,” TJ offers to Marcus as we all stand by the club gate.

TJ still doesn't know about me and Melissa, so he's unaware Marcus goes home to Brandy every night... or at least the nights when he's not doing club business.

“Uh, no man. I got it. It's my day.”

“No, no. I got tonight. Nothing's going on and besides, I owe you for those couple nights last week when Brayden was pulling his shit again.”

I'm internally pleading for Marcus to come up with something. Melissa wants me to go to some mixer, and honestly, I want to be around her. She's like my oasis. Going home to her makes me feel calm, lighthearted, happy.

“Umm, I mean...” Marcus glances my way.

TJ follows his gaze, and his brows furrow.

“Why's he looking at you, Billy?” TJ asks, but judging by the bite to his voice, he already knows the answer.

“Look,” I huff, deciding to come clean. “Melissa and I are seeing each other.”

TJ's fists clench, and his face reddens. Then he points a finger at Marcus. “You knew about this shit?”

Marcus shuffles his feet, his hands shoved in his pockets.

“This isn't on him,” I defend.

“Yeah, it’s on you.” TJ charges into me, knocking me to the ground.

We roll in the gravel, and I shove him off, scrambling to my feet. TJ does the same, and we go at it again, both landing several punches before Marcus pulls us apart.

“What the fuck, Billy? Are you trying to throw this all away?” TJ gestures to the clubhouse. “You’re fucking around with *my sister*?” He lunges forward, taking another swing at me, but Marcus shoves him back.

“Yeah, I’m with Melissa,” I snap. “But don’t you ever describe what she and I have as ‘fucking around’. You should know that. She means something to me.” I pound a hand into my chest to emphasize my point.

“Come on, TJ, who else would you want your sister with?” Marcus reasons. “Can you think of any better man than Billy?”

TJ seems to deflate, and Marcus loosens his hold but doesn’t release him yet.

“Man, you’re going to throw your patch away, and you’re so goddamn close.” TJ slumps.

“Then we’ll just have to help him cover until he gets his patch,” Marcus advises, still holding TJ’s shoulders.

The door opens, snapping our eyes to the clubhouse.

Green walks out, holding a beer, and takes in the scene. He groans, shaking his head. “Nope, nope, not even going to ask. Denia-fucking-bility,” he mutters, retreating inside.

With TJ in the loop, seeing Melissa comes more frequently, and we both soak it up. We’ve even started staying a few

nights at my place, usually on the weekends or if she has a day off. But tonight, we're at her place.

"The Chinese food will be here in twenty minutes," Melissa says, hopping onto the edge of her bed, making me bounce.

"Good, I'm starving after that workout you just gave me."

"Fitness is very important." She smirks.

"Oh, really?" I grab one of her ankles and pull her across the bed to me. "Then maybe I need to have you do a couple reps."

"The food is coming, remember?"

"Yeah, but you said twenty minutes. I can make twenty minutes work." I slip my hand under her shirt to rub it along her bare skin.

"Absolutely not. We're not having a repeat of the Greek place."

I roar out a laugh. "Come on, it wasn't that bad."

"I answered the door wrapped in nothing but my comforter."

"I still had a hardon," I defend, laughing at the memory.

"He looked shellshocked."

"Come on. It was the best tip he ever got. I'm sure he still talks about the time a hot babe answered the door naked."

She swings a pillow at my head. "Not happening."

"Fine. Then tell me about your week," I grumble. "How'd your test go? I know you were worried."

"It went great; scored a 94."

"That's fantastic, babe." I brush a lock of her golden hair behind her ear. "What are you thinking of doing with your

degree?”

She tilts her head. “Do you really want to know, or are you just small talking because you can’t have my ass?”

“Baby, I’m all in on us. While I love that ass”—I smack it for good measure—“I’m genuinely interested in everything you do and want to do. I want the moon and the stars for you.”

Her face lights up. “I want that for you, too.”

I cup her cheek in my hand. “You *are* those things for me. So tell me, what you want to do with your degree?”

“Well, it’s a bachelor’s of science in psychology, so I was thinking with my personal experiences—” She stops, her eyes darting to my now vibrating phone.

Shit. Not again.

I glance down, and see my dad’s name light up across the screen. It’s the third time I’ve been called away when we’ve been together, and I know it’s eating at her.

“What’s up?” I hold the phone to my ear and watch Melissa push herself from the bed, moving as far away from me as she can. She’s building walls as I listen to the clipped order to get my ass to my house to handle something.

When I disconnect, Melissa fumbles with something on her dresser.

“I have to go,” I say to her back.

She nods.

“I’m sorry. You know how it is when the club calls.”

“I know.” Her response is sharp.

“I really want to continue our conversation next time we see each other.” I climb from the bed, slipping my cut on.

“Okay.” She walks with me to the door.

“You okay?” I ask, cupping her face.

She nods, stepping back, and my hand falls. “Yup. I’ll sit here and eat Chinese by myself.”

Her words sting, but we both knew I was a prospect when we started this.

“I’ll call you tonight.” Then I slip through the door and listen for the deadbolt to slide into place before heading toward my bike.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

GOOGLY EYES AND BOSS BURGERS

Billy—

When I pull up at my parents' house, Red Dog is standing in the drive, smoking. Green stands next to him.

"What's going on?" I ask, climbing from my bike.

My father pulls the cigarette from his mouth and points at my grandmother's car. My eyes follow. "That's the third flat in two weeks. First your mother's car, then my bike, now Mama Wu's car."

I get a sinking feeling. "Rosalie?"

He nods, sucking more nicotine into his lungs. "Gotta be. This is no goddamn coincidence."

I lift a brow at Green. "That what you think?"

He grins. "I think your ol' man's chickens have come home to roost."

I make a face. "What the fuck does that mean?"

Green points his cigarette at me. "Means his past mistakes are coming around to bite him in the ass."

"You can say that again," I mutter.

"What was that?" my father snaps.

"Nothing. So, why'd you call me?"

Green chuckles. "To change the tire before Mary comes home and flips out."

"How is this my problem?"

Red Dog's glare tells me he doesn't like the jokes. "Both of you shut up and help me figure out what to do. I've got to make this shit stop."

"Go talk to her," I suggest.

"Mary would flip out." Red Dog pauses, staring at the house. It's been a long time since I've seen my father this rattled. "Besides," he mutters, "I can't find her."

"Rosalie?" I ask, my eyes shifting from Dad to Green. "What do you mean you can't find her?"

My father shrugs. "She doesn't live in the place she used to when I was seeing her."

"That was years ago."

"I know how long it was, son."

"Do you know where she works? Have you tried there?"

"Of course, I have. She doesn't work at the same place."

"So, what do you want me to do?" I ask, folding my arms.

"Where'd you meet her daughter?" my father asks.

I pull my chin back. "Mugshots. Why?"

"We want you to track her down. She'll lead us to Rosalie."

Green shoves my father's shoulder. "We? What *we*? This is all you, bro."

I hold up my hands. "Wait. Wait. Wait. What exactly are you going to do to her mother?"

"That's club business," my father says.

"Bullshit. That's a cop out, and you know it. And besides, last I checked, I was supposed to stay the fuck away from Trina. Now here you are throwing me right in the middle of your past mistakes."

“This is different.” He points to my grandmother’s tire. “This shit has to stop.”

I drag a hand down my jaw. “*If* I can find her—and that’s a big if—why don’t I just talk to her? See if I can get her to have her mother reconsider pulling any more of these stunts before you do something stupid.

“Stupid?”

“Okay, poor choice of words... Before she ends up with the wrath of the MC coming down on her head. Something it has nothing to do with, by the way.”

Red Dog gets right in my face. “You better get this straight. If it affects one member of the club, it affects everyone.”

“One for all, and all for one.” Green chuckles. “We’re the fucking musketeers.”

“Gee, I wish I had the patch to go with all this ‘one for all’ shit you’re shoveling,” I mutter, moving to pop the trunk and get out the jack and spare. In my peripheral vision, I see my father take a step toward me, but Green puts a hand on his arm.

“Let him change the tire. Let’s get a beer.” As they walk toward the door, Green throws his arm around my father’s shoulders. “He’s got a fucking point, you know.”

I go to manhandle the spare out, and that’s when something on the other side of the car catches my eye. I lean to the side to get a better look. “Uh, Dad?”

Red Dog turns just before going inside. “What?”

“I think she did more than flatten the tire this time.”

The two of them move around to the other side of the car as I give a long, low whistle.

There are hundreds—maybe thousands—of little googly eyes stuck all over the side of the car.

Green immediately starts laughing his head off, while Red Dog's face flames red, and the vein in his neck bulges.

“That fucking bitch,” he roars.

Green bends over, slapping his knees, laughing so hard he can hardly speak. He ends up pointing at my father, tears streaming down his face.

I know better than to laugh, but I'm fighting hard not to crack a smile when Red Dog points at me.

“Scrape those fucking things off. Every last one of 'em. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

Red Dog stalks inside, and Green wipes his face. “Now that's fucking funny.”

Finally, I crack a grin and chuckle. “Yeah, it is.”

Green follows my father, and I make quick work of changing the tire, then pull my phone out and snap a picture, texting it to TJ.

He immediately calls me.

“What the fuck is that?”

“Googly eyes on Mama Wu's car.”

He starts laughing, and I give him a minute to pull his shit together.

“Someone, and I think we both know who, flattened her tire and did this shit. Seems Rosalie's been busy. Hit Mary's car, Red Dog's bike, and now Mama Wu's car.”

“You are shitting me?”

“Nope. Hey, you still got that chick from the bar’s number?”

“Jenna? Yeah, why?”

“I need to get a hold of Trina.”

“Thought she gave you her number.”

“She did, but I fucking deleted it.”

“So, what do you want to call her for now?”

“Because her mother did this shit, and no one can find her. Can you get it for me?”

“Probably, but it’s going to cost you.”

I roll my eyes. “What do you want?”

“Those drag pipes you swapped off your bike last spring.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yep.”

“Those things cost me seven-hundred bucks.”

“How bad you want those digits?”

“You’re an asshole. You know that?”

“I prefer to call myself a good negotiator.”

“Get me the number, and we’ll talk.” I drop the tire iron with a clatter.

“So, what are they going to do to Rosalie?”

“I don’t know, but I’m hoping I can derail this train before it plows into the station.”

TJ chuckles. “Let me know if you need my help with that.”

“Thanks.” I disconnect and roll the flat to the garage and lean it against the wall. A few minutes later, TJ texts me the number, and I make the call.

Trina doesn't pick up right away, but that doesn't surprise me. Lots of chicks screen their calls, so I leave a message. "Hey, babe. It's Billy. Give me a call."

I don't have to wait two minutes before my phone rings.

"Well, this is a surprise," her voice purrs through my ear. "I never thought I'd hear from you again."

"I need to talk to you. Can you meet me, doll?"

"Sure. When?"

"In about an hour. Do you know the Mr. Freeze on Fourth and Taylor? How about there?"

"You like ice cream, do you?"

"Doesn't everyone?" I don't want to drag this out, so I cut it short. "I'll see you in an hour." After I disconnect, I call TJ back.

"Yeah?"

"Where are you at?"

"The clubhouse."

"Think you can slip away?"

"Yeah, I think so. Why?"

"I'm meeting Trina in an hour. Wanna tag along?"

"I wouldn't miss it."

I give him the location, then stroll inside. Green and my father are sitting in the living room, watching football. Red Dog cranes his neck to look at me.

"All done?"

"Yeah. Gonna go try to track down Trina, unless you've got another job for me."

Green grins, but my dad doesn't appreciate my smartass mouth.

"You want another job, I'll come up with something," he says.

"No, sir." I straighten.

Green lifts his chin. "Go on, prospect. Check in, and let me know if you get a lead on Rosalie."

I nod and walk out.

An hour later, TJ and I sit at an outside table at Mr. Freeze.

The place is one of those stands where you walk up to the window to place your order.

TJ reads a poster in the window displaying a big hamburger. "Meet the Western Boss Burger."

I spot a car pulling in the lot, and the driver looks like Trina.

"That looks really good. It's even got big ol' fried onion rings on it. Look at that thing."

I glance over to appease him. "Yeah. Great."

"I'm hungry. You hungry?" TJ asks.

"Would you quit about the damn food?" I sip on the straw of my cola. "If you're hungry, get something. I'm fine."

He stands and approaches the window while my eyes return to the two-door sedan that just parked. Sure enough, Trina climbs out. She's dressed in a miniskirt and a leather jacket. She's sexy for a red-haired girl, but she's no Melissa.

She waits for a car to pass, then jogs across to my table and slides on TJ's vacant seat.

“Hey, Billy.” Her teeth flash in a bright smile. “I’m glad you called. I was beginning to wonder if you lost my number.”

I disregard the chit-chat and cut to the chase. “You need to get your mom to stop her shenanigans.”

“What shenanigans?”

My head drops to the side. “Really?”

“I swear. I don’t know what you’re talking about. What is it you think she’s been doing?”

“She flattened my mother’s tire, then the tire on my dad’s bike. Now she’s done the same to my grandmother’s car, only worse.”

“Worse? How?”

“She covered one side of it with googly eyes.”

Trina snorts a laugh. “She did not!”

“Somebody fucking did. Sound like your crazy-ass mother?”

“Do not call her that.”

“Hey, I’ve got one, too. We’re both in the same boat.”

“Hardly.”

“So...? Is that something Rosalie would do?”

“Actually, she did that very thing—minus the flat tire—to my Uncle Pauly on his fortieth birthday. So, yeah, she’s entirely capable of it.”

“Well, this shit’s gotta stop. My father’s pissed enough. I don’t know what he’s gonna do to her.”

“If he lays one finger on my mother, I’ll have him arrested.”

I drag a frustrated hand through my hair. “Look, Trina. That’s why I’m fucking here. I’m trying to prevent this from

going any further. You've got to stop her."

Trina huffs a laugh. "Like I've ever been able to stop my mother from doing anything. Sure. Easy-peasy."

"Well, the two of us have to figure out something, or the club's going to get involved."

TJ strolls over and stands at the end of the table, looking at Trina. "What's shakin', girlie?"

Her eyes drop to the colossal burger in his hand, and he takes a huge bite, chewing slowly and moaning around the mouthful.

"Mm mmm. So good."

I roll my eyes and get back to business. "Does your mother carry?"

"Carry? Carry what?"

"A gun. Does your mother have one?"

"Yes, she has one. Why?"

"Because I don't know what she's capable of, and I'd like to know what I'm dealing with if she comes around again."

"My mother would never shoot anyone, not unless she was protecting herself."

TJ finishes chewing. "What kind of gun does she carry? Do you know?"

"It's one of those with the big barrel that spins around."

"You mean a revolver?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

TJ looks at me. "We didn't find any shell casings at Sonny's. That was probably a revolver."

"Sonny's?" Trina questions.

“It’s a strip club the MC owns. Someone did a drive by a couple of nights ago and shot the place up.”

“And you think that was my mother?” Her voice gets louder at the end. “Do you hear yourself? That’s insane.”

“Is it?” I ask. “A bunch of stuff’s been happening directly tied to my father. And I know for a fact she flattened Mary’s tire. She admitted as much to my face.”

Trina frowns. “I can’t believe she’d take it this far.”

“So, how are we going to stop her?” I ask.

Trina shrugs. “Hell, if I know.”

“The club is attempting to track her down, so you better think of something.”

“I can attempt to take her gun from her, but you have to promise no one will hurt her.”

I bounce my knee a mile a minute, trying to think.

“You don’t know for sure that was my mother at Sonny’s, right?”

“Not for sure, but it makes sense.”

“Okay, how about I see if I can get my aunt to invite her to visit? She lives in Vegas. Mom’s always up for some gambling. At least that buys us some time. Maybe she’ll cool off and stop her pursuit of vengeance.”

“I guess it’s worth a try. Think you can swing it?”

“I’ll call her tonight.”

“And I’m gonna need that gun. Can you get it tonight, too?”

“Maybe.”

“How about if we follow you home? You go in and get it and bring it out to us.”

She suddenly looks at me suspiciously. “Wait a minute. Is this all a ploy to get me to lead you right to her? Forget it.”

She starts to stand up to leave, but I grab her arm. “Sit down.”

My voice came out harsher than I’d intended, and she slowly lowers to her seat, staring at where my fist is clamped on her wrist. I let her go.

“I’m trying to avoid any more trouble. That’s the truth, Trina. I think all this bullshit over something that happened when you and I were kids is stupid as hell. They all need to grow the fuck up.”

“That’s how I feel. I don’t want to be dragged into this bullshit, either. I don’t want to have to pay for our parents’ mistakes. Do you?”

“Nope. So, we’re on the same page, then.”

“I guess so.”

“I’ve got to trust you, and you’ve got to trust me, Trina.”

“All right.”

“So, let’s go disarm your mother and get her the fuck out of town.”

“Can I finish my burger first?” TJ asks around a mouthful.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

NOT AGAIN

Melissa—

It's one of those rare weekends when I'm able to get away and spend it at Billy's apartment. This is fast becoming our favorite place; no one bothers us here.

"That ref's call was bullshit. That was not holding. How was that holding?" he shouts at the TV, and I laugh. We're snuggled on his bed, watching football.

Standing, I head for the door. "You want another beer?"

"Yeah. Thanks, babe."

I walk to his kitchen and grab a couple more, then move to the window overlooking the street. It's been overcast, threatening rain all day, and I see lightning in the distance. The perfect weather to stay inside.

Returning to the bedroom, I pass him a longneck and scoot in next to him, our jean-clad hips touching. I twirl a lock of his hair and lean to his ear. "Want to order a pizza?"

He grins at me. "That wasn't exactly the suggestion I was expecting you to whisper in my ear, but okay. Pizza is good, too."

I giggle and reach for my phone to place an order when Billy's phone goes off. Green's name lights the screen before he puts it to his ear, straightening to full attention.

"Yes, sir?" After a minute of listening, his eyes slide closed. "Yes, sir. I'll be right there."

My body deflates. Not again. I toss my phone to the bed.

Billy turns and takes in my expression. “Melissa, I’m sorry. I know you hate this. But you know how it is.”

“Yeah, I know how it is.” I surge to my feet, and he stands, too, grabbing my arm.

“Don’t be pissed. Please.”

“I’m tired of being second, Billy.”

“You’re not second.” He strokes my cheek with his finger, then walks into the kitchen and grabs his cut off the back of the dining chair.

I follow, arching a brow and folding my arms as he slips it on. “No? Then pick me. Choose me.” I slam my hand on my chest and lift my chin to his cut. “I want to know I’m more important than some stupid piece of cloth on your back.”

He pulls his boots on and grabs his keys off the counter. “You were raised in this world, just like me. You know how important that patch is. You know it holds more meaning than just being a member of the club.”

“Your experience and mine are two very different things, Billy. I know I will never have that patch or what it means. Because what it means for me is I’m second class. Second to the club. Second to my father. And second to you.”

“That’s not true. I’ve got to go, Melissa. I’ll be back as soon as I can. Save me some pizza.” He presses a kiss to my forehead and goes out the door like my words mean nothing. I follow him down the stairs and out to the curb. He turns, surprised.

“Get back inside, babe. It’s about to storm.”

“And yet, you’re riding in it?”

“I’ll be fine. It’s not far.”

The rain pelts my blouse, chilling me. “If you get on that bike, Billy, we’re through.”

“I have to go. I’ll be back, and we can talk then. Okay?”

When I say nothing, he takes it as agreement. I stand on the curb and watch him drive away, knowing one thing for sure. There won’t be any discussion when he gets back; I’ll be gone before he returns.

After his taillight fades into the distance, I trudge upstairs and grab my overnight bag, throwing in everything I brought and leaving nothing behind. I’m not sure I’ll *ever* be back here. I look around, taking it in, and thinking of the happy times we’ve spent together.

Am I being unfair?

I remind myself to stop thinking that way. My feelings *have* to matter, and if they don’t, what’s the point?

Hiking my bag over my shoulder, I head down the stairs, dash through the drizzle and jump in my car to make the short drive to campus.

Harley is on the couch, eating popcorn and watching a show when I open the door. She puts her hand to her chest, jumping.

“God, you scared the crap out of me. I wasn’t expecting to see you until tomorrow night.”

“Yeah, well, here I am.” I drop my bag on the floor and plop next to her, reaching for a handful of popcorn. She studies my red eyes.

“What’s wrong?”

When I try to smile, it’s shaky, and then I burst into tears.

Harley sets down the bowl and wraps me in her arms. “Oh, honey. What happened? Did you have a fight?”

“I’m sick of the club always coming first, so I told him to pick me.”

Her eyes grow big. “You really said that?”

“Yes.” I wipe my tears. “And I meant it. I’m sick of being second.”

“What did Billy do?”

“He told me he wasn’t picking the club over me, and I’ve been in the club life long enough to know he has to go when he’s called.”

“What’d you do?”

“I told him if he got on that bike, we were through.”

She gasps in a breath. “You did not.”

“I sure did.”

“What happened?”

“He said we’d talk when he got back, and he rode away. So, I marched upstairs and packed my shit.”

“You aren’t really through, are you?”

I shrug, feeling so wretched I want to die. “Maybe.”

Harley stands. “You need a drink. I’m making us chocolate martinis, and we’re going to watch a sappy chick flick together. Tomorrow, Billy will apologize and all will be right with the world.”

“He probably will, but I don’t think that’s going to fix what’s wrong with us. I’m always going to wonder if he loves that patch more than me. No apology is going to make that fear go away.”

“Well, then we’ll think of something.”

A couple of hours later, we’re on our third martini and second chick flick when we hear the rumble of a motorcycle. I dash to the window and look through the blinds. The rain stopped, but the streets are wet and gleaming in the

streetlights. There at the curb is Billy, climbing from his bike and pulling off his helmet.

“Is it him?” Harley asks from where she sits cross-legged on the couch.

I snap the blinds closed and turn to her, wide-eyed. “Tell him I’m not here.”

She climbs to her feet and heads to the door. “I’ll do no such thing. What I will do is open the door for him and then make myself scarce, so you two can work this out.”

“Harley, do not open that door,” I warn from across the room, rubbing my suddenly damp palms on my pants.

There’s a knock, and Harley swings it open. “Why, Billy! What a surprise. Come in.”

The little traitor steps back and lets him in.

His eyes connect with mine across the room, and Harley makes her excuses and heads to her room.

“Coward!” I call after her.

Billy strolls toward me. “Only coward here is you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

CALLING MY BLUFF

Melissa—

“Why’d you leave, Melissa?” Billy asks, prowling closer to me.

“Why do you think?” I lift my chin, giving off a bravado I don’t feel.

“I meant what I said before I left. You are not second choice for me.”

I stare at the wall, refusing to give a response.

“Babe, look at me.”

I glance his way, then back to the wall.

“Do I need to prove it to you?”

Still, I say nothing.

“Guess so.” He moves to the chair and grabs my leather jacket and purse. Then his free hand closes over my hand. “Come on. Guess I’ll have to show you.”

I try to tug against him. “Show me what?”

He pulls me out of the apartment and to the curb. Then he climbs on his motorcycle and fires it up, passing me the spare helmet. “Get on the bike, Melissa.”

I roll my eyes, but strap on the helmet and climb on the back.

We ride for about twenty minutes before I realize by the streets he turning down, exactly where he’s going. Leaning my head to his shoulder, I shout in his ear.

“What are you doing?”

He doesn't answer, and five minutes later, he's pulling into my parents' driveway.

As soon as he comes to a stop, I scramble off the back of the bike and pull off my helmet. “What the hell are you doing?”

My father—I'm sure having heard the rumble of Billy's bike pull up—comes out of the house. His frowning gaze takes in both of us. “What's going on?”

And suddenly, I realize what Billy is about to do. He's about to throw it all away... for me.

Billy takes a step forward, but I put a hand to his chest, stopping him. My mind scrambles to come up with some excuse about why we're here, and why I'd be on the back of Billy's bike.

“Before you fly off the handle, Daddy, my car broke down, and Billy gave me a ride home. He just happened to pass by and saw me.”

“Why didn't you call me?” Daddy folds his arms, studying me.

“I had my phone out to call you when Billy pulled up. I swear.”

My father's expression tells me he's not sure whether or not to buy that. “Okay. Let's go fix your car.”

“Um, TJ is fixing it now. I didn't want to stand in the cold waiting.” I look at Billy, and I know he can't lie to his president, so he can't help me with this tall tale.

I pull my phone from my pocket and make it light up, pretending I just got a text. “Oh, TJ says it's fixed.” I look up at my father. “Mind if we go inside? I'm a little chilled.”

He eyes us both, then nods and leads the way.

Mom meets us in the entryway and gives me a hug. “I’ve got to pee,” I say, making an excuse to slip away. I can hear Dad relaying my story to her, and thankfully, Mom invites Billy into the kitchen for a piece of pie and a cup of coffee.

I close the bathroom door and frantically text TJ.

ME: I NEED YOU TO MEET HARLEY AT THE BURGER PLACE AT CAPITAL AND TULLY. YOU KNOW THE ONE?

TJ: WHY DO I NEED TO DO THAT? SHE OKAY?

ME: SHE’LL BE IN MY CAR. I NEED YOU TO LEAVE YOUR BIKE THERE AND DRIVE MY CAR TO MOM AND DAD’S. I TOLD THEM I BROKE DOWN AND BILLY HAPPENED BY AND HE DROVE ME HERE AND YOU WERE FIXING MY CAR.

TJ: LIKE HELL. I’M NOT GETTING DRAWN INTO THIS LIE.

ME: PLEASE TJ. I’M DESPERATE.

TJ: IS BILLY THERE

ME: YES. MOM’S IN THE KITCHEN FEEDING HIM PIE. PLEASE TJ. I THINK DAD BOUGHT IT, BUT IF YOU DON’T SHOW UP WITH MY CAR THE JIG IS UP. AND HE’S PROBABLY GOING TO WANT TO DRIVE YOU TO YOUR BIKE.

TJ: OH MY GOD. YOU OWE ME.

ME: YES! THANK YOU. THANK YOU.

I hit up Harley and whisper into the phone. “Hey, it’s me.”

“Hey, bitch. Did you two make up?”

“Not exactly. But I need you to do something for me. It’s literally life and death for Billy.”

“What is it?” Her concern comes through the phone.

“I need you to drive my car to the burger place you love so much and meet TJ. He’s going to leave his bike and drive my car to my dad’s house.”

“What?”

“I’ll explain everything. Please?”

“Okay, but what am I supposed to do?”

“Wait in the burger place until I circle back to get you.”

“Fine, but you’re gonna owe me a pizza.”

“Yeah, yeah. Seems I’m going to owe a lot of favors for this one.”

I hang up, flush the toilet for good measure, then stare at myself in the mirror. “Do not fuck this up.”

When I walk into the kitchen, Billy is eating pie, trying to look relaxed, but I know he has to be a nervous wreck on the inside. It’s all up to me. I take a seat between my dad and Billy, and my mom slides a piece of pie in front of me.

I smile at her. “Thanks.”

Dad slumps in his chair, his fingers curled around the handle of a mug of coffee.

My eyes shift between him and Billy, and I decide to enlist my mother’s help as I stab my fork into the pie. “Mom, so where are we doing Thanksgiving this year? Here or Lake Mary?”

I know it’s an argument between my father and her, and it works as a perfect diversion.

“Here,” my mother says at the same time my father responds, “The lake.”

They both glare at each other, and the argument begins.

“I like having holidays at home, Cole. You know that.”

“Angel, the colors are so beautiful at the lake in November. You promised last year we’d do the lake this year.”

“I never promised that. I said we’d see.”

“Same difference.”

They continue squabbling about it, and I glance over at Billy, but he won’t look at me. I nudge his boot with my foot, and he finally gives me a quick glance. I can only wink at him to try to let him know it’s going to be okay, but I get no response.

I take a bite of pie, knowing if my father looks like he’s going to ask more questions, I can always start another discussion. I’ve got a list of things that have worked all through high school.

About thirty long minutes later, TJ comes through the front door. “Hey, Ma.”

Mom gets up and hugs my brother when he enters the kitchen. TJ pauses, his eyes taking in the scene of me, Dad, and Billy all sitting at our kitchen table eating pie.

“So, here you go, sis.” He tosses my keys through the air to me, and I catch them. “I’ve got a girl to meet, so you want to give me a ride to my bike, Melissa?”

“Sure.” I stand, but my father grabs my hand. “Finish your pie, sweetheart, and have a visit with your mom. I’ll drive your brother to his bike.”

I see the look in his eyes and know he’s going to cross-examine TJ the minute he gets him in his truck.

“Oh, but it’s right on the way to campus, Dad. I can do it.” When my father turns his back to grab his keys, I give my mother a pleading look, mouthing, “*help me.*”

She catches on immediately, her eyes moving between me, Billy, and TJ. “Cole, let Melissa give him a ride. You and I need to talk to Brayden about his grades.”

“Now?” my father asks.

“Yes, now. I’ve got a meeting with his counselor tomorrow, and I have no idea what to tell her. That boy of yours is running wild, and we need to get him in hand or he’s going to be expelled.”

“Expelled?”

My mother jerks her head toward the door. “Why don’t you kids head out so your father and I can talk?”

She doesn’t need to tell us twice. Billy stands so fast, his chair scrapes across the floor.

“Thank you for the pie, Mrs. Austin.”

“Anytime, honey.”

I kiss her on the cheek. “Thanks, Mom.”

When we pull apart, she drills her eyes into mine. “Be careful, dear.”

I know she’s not just talking about my driving. “I will.”

I kiss my father, then hurry outside.

TJ beats me to the driver’s side, and I toss him my keys. I’m barely buckled before he’s reversing out of the driveway. We roar off, Billy right on our heels.

TJ looks over at me. “That was fucking close.”

My heart is racing. “I know.”

When we pull in at the burger place to pick up Harley, she walks out to my car with a sundae in her hand and dips her head to look inside. “Everyone in one piece? No stabbings or gunshots?”

I roll my eyes. “Everyone’s fine. Thank you for helping me.”

“Sure.”

TJ climbs out of the car to go to his bike, and I switch places with him, giving him a hug.

“Thank you, brother.”

He pats my back. “Don’t fucking do this again.”

I watch him walk off, and Billy comes to stand in front of me. “You and I need to talk.”

I swallow and look at Harley. “Mind waiting in the car for a minute?”

She takes a scoop of her ice cream and grins. “Looks like you’re gonna need more than a minute.”

Nodding, I watch her slip in the passenger seat of my car, then I turn to find Billy pacing to where he parked his bike across the lot, and I follow.

He leans on his seat and folds his arms. “What the fuck was all that?”

Even though I knew it was coming, I still don’t like hearing the anger in his voice or the displeasure in my actions.

“I was saving your ass, you fool.” Great. We’re off to a good start.

“Fool? You were the one who wanted me to prove to you I put you above the club.”

“And so, you were going to what? Tell my father about us? Have you lost your mind?”

“Goddamn, you make me crazy. What the fuck do you want, Melissa?”

I step closer to him and wrap my arms around his neck. “I needed to know you give a damn, that I’m important to you.”

His hands cup my waist and pull me closer. “I thought you knew you were. I never want you to doubt that again. You’re the most important thing in the world to me.”

“I need to hear it once in a while.”

He presses his lips to my forehead. “Okay. Then I’ll do better.”

“I love you, Billy.” The words slip out before I realize. I hadn’t planned for the first time I said them to him to be in the parking lot of Buck’s Burgers, leaning against his bike with Harley sitting in my car forty feet away. I swallow, waiting for his reaction. If he blows it off as nothing, I’m going to shrivel up and die right here on the spot.

Instead, he cups my face and pulls me close. “I’ve been waiting a long time to hear you say those three words.”

“You could say them back.”

“I love you, Melissa. I think I always have. Right from the beginning. You’ve always been it for me. You were always meant to be mine.”

I throw my arms around him and hug him tight. “I can’t believe this is happening. I’ve waited so long.”

“And tonight, we almost blew it all to hell.”

I smack his shoulder. “You nearly gave me a heart attack when you were about to tell my father everything.”

“Me? I almost stroked out when you began making shit up I couldn’t back you up on. You knew that, right?”

“Yes. I knew that.”

He pulls me in for another hug and whispers in my ear. “I do love you, Melissa. Don’t ever doubt that, no matter what happens. Promise me?”

“I promise.”

He takes a deep breath. “I feel like I can breathe for the first time in hours. Days, maybe.”

“I know what you mean. Sneaking around is fun, but it’s also nerve wrecking.”

He strokes his fingers through my hair. “I don’t know how the hell you pulled that off tonight, and I’m afraid there are going to be questions tomorrow.”

I look at the traffic out on the road, the headlights flashing past. “Maybe I can help out with that.”

“How exactly?”

I meet his eyes. “Crash.”

“Crash? What about him?”

“He loves me. I’m his little sweet pea. He’s always looked out for me since I was three years old. He might do me a favor and keep my father away from you for a day or two.”

“If you can pull that off, it would be a godsend.”

“But you’re gonna owe me one.” I grin.

Billy chuckles. “Oh, Lord. Seems there’s a lot of that going around, huh?”

“Don’t worry. I’m easy to please.” I waggle my brows, and he pulls me to him, kissing me long and hard until Harley lays on the horn.

“Hey, you two lovebirds, let’s roll. Somebody owes me a pizza.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

SWEET PEA

Melissa—

I'm more nervous than I've ever been as I ascend in the shaky cage of an elevator that takes me up to Crash and Shannon's industrial loft. Memories of coming here as a child fill my head. I'd always thought it was so cool, like a castle with a drawbridge; once that elevator was locked on the upper floor, no one could get up to the tower where the princess lived.

I know now how silly that was, but it's a nice memory. My other favorite memory was when I made Uncle Crash strands of paperclips to hang where his bedroom door should have been, like a beaded curtain. He'd been so proud of them; he'd actually hung them up.

Now I see how much love that took. I'm counting on that love right now.

The elevator jerks to a stop, and I throw the gate open, stepping out.

Shannon is in the kitchen, mixing something in a bowl.

"Hey, sweetheart. He's up on the rooftop deck."

"Thanks."

She frowns, taking in my face. "Everything okay?"

"We'll see." I duck my head and move toward the short flight of steps that leads out the metal door and onto the roof of the brick warehouse building. The sun is bright, and Crash is sitting in one of the Adirondack chairs.

He turns and rises, giving me a hug. “How’s my sweet pea?”

Pulling back, I stare into his eyes. “The answer to that may depend on you.”

That gets me a frown. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. Everything’s great. That’s just it. I’m happier than I’ve ever been in my life. But I feel like one wrong move, and it could all blow up in my face. I’m hoping you can help me avoid that from happening.”

“Sit down.”

I take a chair next to him.

“I’m gonna need more than that, sweet pea. How can I help you? Are you in trouble?”

“No, nothing like that. But...”

“But, what?”

“What I’m going to tell you needs to stay between you and me. Can you promise me that?”

“Depends what it is.” He pulls his chin to the side. “You sure you’re not in trouble?”

“No, but Billy might be.”

“Billy?” His eyes slide closed. “Oh, shit, Melissa.”

“We love each other, Uncle Crash. We’ve waited and waited, and he’s been so good trying to stay away from me because of my father.”

“But? What’s happened?”

“He didn’t get his patch. It’s been so long. We can’t wait another year. It’s impossible.”

Crash drags a hand through his hair. “What are you telling me, honey?”

“Last night, I got into a fight with him. I told him I was tired of being second to the club. With him, with my father—”

Crash lifts a hand. “Whoa. Hold up a minute. Is that how you feel about your father?”

I stand and begin pacing. “The MC always comes first. My entire life, that’s been drilled into me. I don’t want to be second anymore. I don’t want to be second to the man I love. So, I gave Billy an ultimatum. I wanted him to pick me over his patch.

“I couldn’t believe it when he actually grabbed my arm and led me to his bike. I didn’t know where he was taking me. I didn’t know what he was planning to do until he pulled into Dad’s driveway. Then suddenly I knew. He was going to tell Dad about us. He was going to throw his patch away—the one thing he’d wanted his whole life, something he’d worked so hard all this time to attain.” I spin and hold my hands wide. “I knew I couldn’t let him do it. Dad walked out, and I made up a story about why we were standing in his driveway.”

“What’d you tell him?”

“That my car broke down, and Billy happened by and gave me a ride home. Billy didn’t know I was going to do that. Now I’ve dragged him into this lie, and I know if Dad gets a chance, he’s going to ask him about it today. You know if he asks, Billy won’t lie to him. He can’t. I need you to help keep my dad away from Billy.”

“So, then, I’m part of this lie? I’d be keeping this relationship from your dad, too. I can’t do that, honey.”

“Please, Uncle Crash. I’m not asking you to lie to him. I’m asking you to not volunteer the information if he doesn’t straight out ask you.”

“Doesn’t work that way.”

“Then the club’s going to lose a good man in Billy. A guy who’s done everything he’s been asked to do for this club for years with no end in sight. How is that fair? And for what? Because his father and my brother’s father don’t think their sons are ready?”

Crash stands and walks to the low wall that surrounds the rooftop. He leans his hands on it and sighs heavily. “You’re really putting me in a spot.”

“I know I’m asking a lot, but this isn’t fair to Billy.”

“I agree with that, but your ol’ man is a stubborn son-of-a-bitch.”

I grin for the first time. “True that.”

That gets me a chuckle, and he straightens and studies me. “Goddamn it, girl. This was not what I was thinking you were coming over here to talk about.”

“Do you think any of this is fair to Billy?”

“No. That’s one thing I agree on. I’ve tried talking to your father, but he won’t budge.”

“I shouldn’t say this, but all three of them have discussed giving up. They don’t want to, but they’re wondering if there’s ever going to be a light at the end of the tunnel.”

“I get that it’s hard, but—”

“Uncle Crash, they’ve put their lives on the line for this club. I was there. I saw with my own eyes what they did the day they were sent to bring us home from Donner Mountain, and we ran into the Death Heads. They were risking their lives for a patch they may never even get to wear. How is that fair?”

“I get all that. I do.”

“All us kids grew up in this club because our parents raised us in it. So, what? Now the boys aren’t good enough to be members?”

“Look, I don’t know what’s going to happen with the boys getting their patch. Vote’s gotta be unanimous, and Cole won’t budge. But I’ll do what I can to keep him away from Billy.”

“I love him, Uncle Crash, and he loves me. I want the kind of love you have with Shannon and my dad has with my mom. And I can’t think of a better man for me than Billy, can you?”

The corner of his mouth pulls up, and he takes me in his arms. “I guess not, sweet pea. I want that for you. And believe it or not, your father wants you to be happy, too. He’s just terrified of letting his little girl go, just like I am with Harley Jean. So go easy on us fathers.”

I pull back and look into his eyes. “Thank you.”

“Sure. Now let’s go see if Shannon burned the brownies she was baking.”

I giggle, and he holds the door for me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

THANKSGIVING

Melissa—

My father stands at the head of the long table, carving the turkey. It's really sort of symbolic, because for a crew this large, we've got several aluminum trays full of turkey that we've been cooking since yesterday.

We pushed all the furniture in the clubhouse out of the way to make room and put five long tables together to get everyone in the club to fit. When you add in family, we've got around thirty people.

Obviously, my mother won the argument, and we didn't go to the lake for Thanksgiving.

I'm home for the holiday, and it's a nice break from school, but I'm so worried about my father picking up on me and Billy; I'm afraid to even glance in Billy's direction.

The constant tension has my stomach in knots, and I'm barely picking at my food. I sit near my family with Brayden and my mother on one side and Harley Jean on my other side.

God bless her. She's been distracting me with jokes and conversation for most of the meal. Even so, I feel the pull and can't stop myself from glancing toward Billy. He sits across the table but down toward the other end. Anytime I look over there, I try to camouflage the glance by blocking my father's view of my eyes by tucking my hair behind my ear. I don't think he can see, but I've caught Green and Crash's eyes on me.

Brayden passes me a bowl of mashed potatoes.

“Thanks.” It’s the first time I’ve seen him since Mom said he was having trouble in school. “What are your plans for the weekend?”

He leans close, grinning. “There’s a big party tomorrow on Hackney Blvd. Kyle’s parents went to Hawaii for the weekend.”

I shake my head. “Brayden, don’t do anything stupid. Parties like those get out of hand quickly. Dad will have your ass.”

“You better not tell him, Melissa.”

I plop a spoonful of potatoes on my plate, glaring at my brother, then pass the bowl to Harley, glancing at Billy. He reaches for his glass, and under the cover of taking a sip, meets my eyes. It’s only for a moment, but it rejuvenates me and makes me wish dinner was over so we can get away somewhere together. It’s moments like these that keep me going.

“Billy,” my father calls out. My stomach drops and I crane my neck to look. “Get me a sharper knife.

Billy’s folding chair scrapes across the floor, and he leaves to do my father’s bidding.

Taking a bite of food, my gaze follows Billy as he walks out, then I turn and with my fork still in my mouth, I catch my father studying me. I immediately drop my eyes to my plate, sliding the tines along my teeth.

“How’s school going, Melissa?” my father asks, studying me closely.

I chew, swallow, and clear my throat. “Um, it’s fine.”

“You’re spending all your time studying, right?”

“Sure.”

“Because I’d hate to hear you were just partying and slacking off.”

I shake my head, thrusting my jaw out. “Is that what you think I’d do?”

There’s a little more bite in my words than I should use with my father, especially in front of his men, and my face immediately flushes. At that exact moment, Billy returns with another carving knife. His eyes shift between me and my father, picking up the vibe, I’m sure.

“Melissa,” my mother murmurs, chastising me, and I stab my fork in my food, my gaze hitting Billy. My father shifts to one hip and scowls at Billy, grabbing the knife out of his hands.

“You want me to do that?” Crash offers, nodding to the turkey. “I mean, we really don’t even need to cut it right now. We’ve got plenty, prez.”

My dad drops the carving knife and fork with a clatter and drops in his chair. “Fine.”

Red Dog’s expression doesn’t look that happy with my dad, either. I’m sure he’s a little ticked off at the way my father’s been treating his son. My mother says my father is just being protective of me, and Crash seemed to concur when I spoke with him, but it doesn’t make it any easier to live with.

The tension at the table is suddenly so thick, you could cut it with that carving knife.

I notice Green lean over and whisper in his ol’ lady’s ear. She listens, then they hold eyes for a moment, and she nods. Green kisses her and stands, clinking his knife to his wineglass.

“I’d like to make an announcement, so everyone, listen up. The table quiets and everyone stares at him. He suddenly looks

a bit nervous before he grins and blurts out the news. “Sara and I are having a baby.”

There’s a round of congratulations and applause around the table. Wolf, who’s sitting on his other side, stands and gives him a backslapping hug, then reaches across to give Sara a kiss on the cheek.

My father stands with his glass in the air. “To Green and Sara becoming parents.”

The rest of the club stands.

“Here, here,” they all call out.

“Green’s finally gonna be a father,” Red Dog mutters with a grin, slapping him on the shoulder. “Congratulations, brother!”

Everyone laughs and in all the excitement and distraction, Billy and I exchange a look, both smiling at the happy news. He takes a chance and winks at me, and it’s all I need in that moment.

Somehow, I make it through the meal and cleanup. I corner Harley near the sink in the clubhouse kitchen when everyone else walks out to get more dishes, and I take advantage of the moment.

“If anyone asks, I told my mom I’m staying at Jeanette’s house tonight to catch up with her and hear all about UCLA. I also told her the three of us are going Black Friday shopping tomorrow. Got it?”

Jeanette’s a good friend of mine from high school, but I haven’t talked to her in months.

“Got it. Are you really spending the night at Billy’s apartment?”

“Yep.”

Mary walks in carrying a tray of dishes and plops them down, and we get to work.

Half an hour later, I’m wiping down the tables and the guys are folding them up to put them back in storage.

Crash comes up to me and gives me a side hug, kissing my forehead. “You doin’ okay?”

“I’m trying. Dad’s not been in a very good mood today, huh?”

“Hang in there. I don’t think it’ll be too much longer.”

My eyes widen. “They won’t have to wait for Sturgis next year?”

“Maybe not. I’m workin’ on it. I’m pushing hard.”

I hug his waist. “Thank you.”

He kisses my head. “Love you, sweet pea.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

EVERYTHING

Billy—

Standing at the window, with my hands shoved in my pockets, I finally see Melissa's car pull to the curb and park half a block down and across the street like I told her to. We can't be too careful.

I had to sit through the San Francisco and Seattle football game with the guys at the clubhouse before I could cut out without being suspicious.

My blood heats just watching her climb from her car and walk across the street in her skin-tight jeans and sexy black suede high-heeled boots. She's got the sexiest strut that draws my attention to her luscious ass every damn time. My balls ache at the thought of getting her naked. I want to taste every inch of her and bury myself deep in her rocking body. An image of her sliding down my body, licking her way to my cock, flashes in my brain.

I meet her at the door, drag her inside, and back her against it. Her face lights with excitement at my aggressiveness. I think the girl likes when I go alpha on her. That suits me just fine because she brings it out in me in spades.

Covering her mouth with mine, I sink my tongue inside while my hands cup her hips and pull her against my body until I know by the moan that vibrates up from her throat she feels my erection pressed between us.

Her arms twine round my neck.

This girl is my weakness. She always will be. I kiss her hard, then soft, then hard again until she whimpers and wraps a leg around me.

I love kissing this girl, but I'm anxious for more. The bar is close, so I steer her to it and lift her onto a barstool. My hands run down her jeans, and I take one sexy boot, toying for a moment with the silver chain around the ankle.

"I ever tell you how much I love these boots?" I ask, playing with the star charm dangling from the chain.

She grins. "Every time I wear them."

"How long have you had them?"

"I got them for your eighteenth birthday party. I guess you had other things on your mind that night."

"Did I?"

"Yeah, like the stripper the boys hired to give you a lap dance."

"That was a good party."

"The night they made you a prospect."

I grin at the memory, but I'm done talking. I yank off the boot and drop it to the floor. I do the same with the other. Then I drag her jeans and panties off while she clings to the stool.

Her eyes heat when I drop to my knees and put my hands on her thighs, spreading them wide. Her breath hitches with the first brush of my thumb.

"Oh, God."

I lean close and breathe in the scent of her arousal as it floods over my thumb. She smells so good. I dip my head and find she tastes even better. I lick and tease her clit while I plunge two fingers inside her, finger fucking her until they're coated, proving how badly she wants this, needs this.

“Oh, Billy,” she whispers between gasps.

I continue to torment her with my tongue while I ramp up my finger work, finding that trigger spot that has her jerking and lifting her hips, begging for more.

She trembles, climbing closer and closer with every stroke of my fingers, and I keep at her and close my mouth around her clit, sucking hard.

My eyes flick up to watch her, loving the way her head is thrown back and her mouth drops opens, her breath panting in and out. I keep up the pace a little longer and stroke her to her first orgasm of the night.

Her release floods over my fingers, and I pull them out, licking her clean.

“That’s one,” I say.

She’s about to slip from the barstool, so I stand, scooping up her jeans and underwear, and lock my arms tight around her to carry her to the bedroom.

Setting her on her bare feet, I start to step back, but she grabs my belt buckle and pulls me against her. She cups my face and kisses me, and I know she tastes herself on my lips. Moaning, she breaks the kiss to meet my gaze and let me see the hunger there.

I take her in my arms, and we kiss again. I’m gentle, searching, seeking. “Lie back, baby girl.”

She does, and I stare at the heat in her green eyes.

I take her foot and massage it, then repeat the process with the other. When I’m through, my hands slide up her calves and massage them as well. Her eyes drift closed, and she melts into the soft mattress, moaning. I drop her foot and hold her heated gaze as I strip.

I shrug my cut off and hang it on a chair, then grab the hem of my shirt and drag it over my head, tossing it aside. My hands drop to my jeans, and my silver bracelet flashes in the dim moonlight coming in the window.

When I'm naked, she sits up and takes my hard dick in her hand. She looks up into my dark, hungry eyes and slides me over her lips, taking me into her mouth. I suck in a breath, threading my fingers into her hair. She knows what I like, what makes me moan, and what makes my hand in her hair tighten into a fist, demanding more. The girl has learned quickly, but I don't want to blow my load down her throat. I want to be buried deep inside her pussy when I do that.

I stop her and pull her shirt over her head, itching to see her glorious body. She reaches back and unhooks her bra, tossing it aside and letting her gorgeous tits free.

"Prettiest tits ever." I urge her to her back and move over her, my arms boxing her in. Supporting myself on my elbows, I lower my body on top of hers, and my hot skin presses to hers with a searing heat.

I drag in a breath at the exquisite feeling of her soft body beneath mine, and dip my head to kiss behind her ear, under her jaw, down her neck, and across the satiny skin of her breasts. Her taught nipples strain toward me with need, and I climb those mounds and latch onto one.

She moans at the first hard tug of my lips, and her fingers thread into my hair, her nails scratching my scalp. That just urges me on.

I suck hard, and she stutters in another breath, closing her eyes, her head going back and her mouth falling open. I give those perky nipples all the attention they demand. First one, then the other, settling between her legs.

Eventually, I'm drawn to that prize I long for and kiss my way down her body, until I'm almost there. My hot palm

smooths between her breasts and to her belly, pausing just short of what I want most.

“Billy.” My name escapes her lips in a breathy moan.

Spreading her wide with my shoulders, I let my mouth brush over her in a barely-there touch that drives her wild, and her hips lift, chasing my mouth for more.

“Tell me what you need, Melissa,” I order.

“You. I need you.”

“You’ve got me, baby. Any way you want me.”

“I need you inside me. Please.”

“Goddamn, baby. You’re so wet and ready for me.”

I play with her clit, rubbing and stroking until I don’t think she can take anymore. When she’s writhing, I lift my head and study her face, watching her as I bring her to climax.

She cries out, clutching my shoulders as she slides over that precipice, moaning loudly. I press a kiss to her thigh. She gasps for air as she floats back down to earth.

“That’s two,” I say.

“How many tonight?”

“How many can you take?” I ask.

“You make me breathless,” she whispers.

“You’re beautiful to watch,” I say and move over her. I take her hand and bring it to my pulsing cock, covering her hand with mine. I swirl the smooth head in her wetness, rubbing her sensitive clit.

“Oh, Billy,” she moans.

I lift my chin to the nightstand. “There’s a pack of condoms in the drawer. Grab one.”

She stretches and hands me one. I pull back, rip the package open, and roll one on, then position myself between her thighs, my knees spreading her wide.

I grab my dick and bring it to her entrance, swirling it around and around until I'm driven crazy with the need to be inside her.

“Fuck me, Billy. Hard.”

I'll always give my girl what she wants.

My eyes focus on her pussy as I take her in one hard, possessive thrust.

She wraps her arms around me, and my hips roll in a sensuous rhythm, until I build to that hard pounding she demanded. I love taking her in my bed, and the intimacy of this girl under me, giving herself to me, always ready to give me whatever I want, hits me in the chest. She splays her palms on the muscles of my back as the realization cements inside my soul.

I love this woman.

There will never be another one for me.

She's my everything.

Staring into her eyes, all my feelings are reflected at me. I pick up the pace until I'm slamming hard and fast, our skin slapping together loudly in the quiet room. My chest is heaving, and I'm close, so I pull up and rub her clit with my fingers.

I want her there with me, and I can't hold off much longer. I've waited all fucking day to be deep inside this pussy, and I'm about to explode.

“Come with me, Melissa. Come all over my dick.”

I shift and hit that magic spot inside her, rubbing it over and over with the head of my cock. She clenches down tight,

and I know she's barreling toward another orgasm. My thumb works her clit, and she screams, flinging her head back.

"That's my girl." With a couple more savage thrusts, I slam into her and hold her hips locked tight as I come long and hard.

I collapse on top of her. She wraps her arms around me, holding tight. When I try to pull back, she holds tighter.

"I love the feel of your weight pinning me to the bed. I don't want you to leave."

Turning my head, I kiss her cheek. "Gotta go take care of the condom, sweetheart."

She releases me, and I lift. When I return, I tuck her against my side, and she lays her head on my chest, her arm wrapped around my abs.

"Your heart is still pounding," she says.

"You do that to me." I trail my fingertips along her back and close my eyes.

"I think Crash is making headway talking my father into patching you guys in soon."

"What makes you think that?"

She shrugs against my side. "He said you won't have to wait until Sturgis next year. He sounded pretty positive. Said he was wearing my dad down."

"Well, if it's true, that'd be great news, but I'm not holding my breath. I've gotten my hopes up several times now, and it always seems to fall through."

She gives me a squeeze. "Not this time. I have a feeling. I knew talking to Crash wasn't a mistake."

I roll on top of her and kiss her. "Thanks, babe. I appreciate what you tried to do, and I understand why you did

it, but you should probably let it be. If it happens, it happens.”

“How can you say that? I know how bad you want that patch.”

“It’s just been a rollercoaster. Every time we think it’s gonna happen, we get fucked.”

She kisses me. “That’s not going to happen this time. I just know it.”

There’s a pounding on the front door, and I tense above her.

“Who is that?” she asks, turning her head toward the door.

“Maybe it’s Marcus or something. Stay here.” I didn’t hear any motorcycles pull up, but I was distracted. I lift off her and slip my jeans on, then go to the door shirtless to peer through the peephole. There stand my father and Cole. My eyes widen.

Holy fuck.

My pulse rate jumps, and I dash to the bedroom.

Seeing my panicked expression, Melissa frowns. “What’s wrong?”

I put my finger to my lips. “Stay quiet. It’s our dads.”

Her eyes get huge, and she squeaks out, “Don’t let them in.”

“I have to. My bike’s out on the street. They know I’m here.”

“Billy, this is a nightmare.”

“Just don’t make a sound. I’ll try to get rid of them,” I whisper. Dread is written all over her face. I dip and kiss her. “It’ll be fine. Just stay calm.”

She nods, totally putting her trust in me.

Returning to the door, I let them in, yawning. “What’s up?”

“Hey, we wake you?” my father asks.

They stalk past me, and I go to the fridge trying to distract them while I think of a way to get rid of them. Maybe I can tell them I have a problem with my bike and ask them to look at it. “You want something to drink?”

“Sure,” my dad replies.

I carry them two beers, passing one to my father and holding the other out to Cole. It’s then I follow his gaze to the floor under the barstools. There sit Melissa’s funky black suede boots with the chains around the ankle and the unmistakable star charms dangling.

Cole bends over and holds one up with a look of death on his face. “Where is she?”

Before I can answer, he stalks across the room and flings my bedroom door open. I take a step after him, but my father yanks me back.

I see over Cole’s shoulder to where Melissa sits in my bed with the sheet clutched to her chest, obviously naked underneath.

“Daddy, please don’t be upset.”

“Get dressed,” Cole growls. “Meet me outside.” Then he stalks toward the front door, pointing at me. “You’re done. Monday I’m voting you out.” With that, he slams out of the apartment.

“What the fuck were you thinking? You just kissed that patch goodbye because your president just found out you can’t be trusted.” Red Dog shoves my chest and follows him out.

My eyes slide closed, and I drop my head. I let the consequences sink in and roll through me. It doesn’t seem real,

and I wonder if there's any way out of this.

Melissa comes out of the room, tucking her shirt in her jeans, tears streaming down her face.

I move to her and cup her face, brushing the tears from her cheeks with my thumbs. "Don't cry, baby."

"I've ruined everything for you." Her voice trembles.

"That's not true. You didn't do anything. We're in this together, right?"

She nods. "I'll try to talk to him. I'll try to make him see."

I press a kiss to her lips. "Let's just see what happens. Don't panic. Maybe he'll cool off and reconsider."

"I love you."

"I love you, too." I give her a big hug. "You better go. He was pretty pissed. Call me later."

She tugs her boots on and slips out the door.

It tears me up watching her leave, knowing she's going to get an earful from her father, and it's all my fault.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

THE VOTE

Cole—

“Daddy, please. Just listen.”

I stalk across the parking lot toward the clubhouse door, Melissa trailing after me. I’ve already heard everything she could have to say all weekend. It’s Monday, and the vote is about to happen.

“I don’t want to hear it, Melissa. This isn’t about you. This is about an Evil Dead prospect who lied to his president. End of story.”

“That’s bullshit.”

I stop and whirl on her. In all her life, my girl has never spoken to me like that. “What did you just say to me?”

“You’ve never ridden another prospect like you have Billy. Don’t say this has nothing to do with me. If it wasn’t me, you wouldn’t have given a damn who he had in his bed. This is *only* about me. At least have the guts to be honest about that.”

Crash steps between us, trying to hold her back, his hands up. “Okay, sweet pea, calm down.”

“I will *not* calm down. This is bullshit, and you both know it. You couldn’t ask for a better man to be in your goddamn club.”

“That’s enough,” I snap. “Go home, Melissa. This is club business.”

“Of course. Your *precious club*. You know, Daddy, I used to love this club. Now I hate it.” With that, she stalks back to

her car. I stand flummoxed for a minute, shocked by the intensity of her emotions regarding the MC.

“Come on.” Crash taps my chest with the back of his hand. “Let’s get this over with.”

Melissa leans against the hood of her car, her arms folded, glaring at me. I suppose she’s going to wait for the vote to be over. Wait for Billy to come out. My jaw works. This is a shit day in a line of shit days, and I feel like everything is being torn apart. Rules are fucking rules for a reason. No matter what she thinks about my reasons, I can’t vote in a man who lies to me.

“Cole, come on.”

I turn and follow my VP inside, and the entire MC has assembled. Crash makes a sharp whistle, and everyone turns, conversations quieting.

“Church. Now,” I snap, and head down the hall into our meeting room. By the time I take my place at the head of the table with Crash beside me, the rest of the club files in. Officers take seats at the table; others stand against the wall.

Red Dog throws a pack of smokes down and sits; his anger radiates off his body, and one look at his tight jaw confirms it.

Once the last man is in and the door closed, I slam the gavel. “I’m dispensing with procedural bullshit. Let’s get to the matter at hand.” My eyes cut to Red Dog again. “Before we take a vote on patching Billy in, you got something you want to say?”

His chin lifts in the air, and he drills me with a cutting look. “He’s my son, and all he ever did was love your daughter.”

I huff out a sigh and dip my head to drag a hand through my hair. “You know, I’m getting sick of everyone making this

about Melissa. Billy lied to my damn face. Not to mention he missed a job the other day.”

“I never said he missed a job,” Green says, leaning forward in his chair.

I lift my brows. “Oh, really? You call showin’ up hours late not missing the job?”

“Billy’s always been dependable,” Green defends.

“Until he’s not,” I snap back. “Enough. Let’s vote. All in favor of giving Billy a patch, raise your hand.” My entire crew raise their hands. I clench my jaw. “Opposed?” With that I lift my own hand. “Vote needs to be unanimous. Vote fails.”

“You’re a son of a bitch. You know that, right?” Green mutters.

I understand his disappointment. He was Billy’s sponsor, in charge of guiding him through the process, but it’s not Green I’m worried about.

My eyes shift to Reg Dog. He and I go way back, and I’ve always been able to count on him to take my side in everything.

Until today.

It sucks that this is driving a wedge between us. I clear my throat. “Red Dog, do you want to—”

“Do I want to what?” he bites out. “Strip my son of his future? Take his cut from him? No fucker, that’s on you. I’m not going to rip my son’s heart from his chest so you don’t have to do it.”

I grind my teeth and drop my eyes to the scarred wooden table. “All right. I’ll do it.” I lift my chin to the door. “Wolf, go get him.”

Wolf doesn’t look too happy to be the one tasked, but he rises to his feet and goes to do my bidding.

No one speaks as we wait.

When Billy slips through the door, his gaze moves around the table, pausing momentarily on his father. I can tell by the look in his eyes he knows what's coming, but I'm sure the moment is also surreal for him. He moves to stand at the foot of the table.

I get the finality of this. I get that this is sad, but more than anything, I'm pissed. Pissed he would lie to me. Pissed he would put his personal life before that of the club.

I drag in a long breath and exhale. "Billy, I didn't want it to end this way. I really didn't. I've been sitting here thinking about how happy I was to present you with that vest on your eighteenth birthday. It was a joyous occasion. And believe it or not, I take no joy in this today."

He nods.

"You're out, son. Lay your vest on the table."

The muscles in his jaw clench, and for a moment, he doesn't move. I can imagine what I ask is incredibly hard to do. Especially after all the time he's put in here to earn his place. I can't think of a blacker day in this club. I feel it vibrating from every man around the table.

"Rules are rules, son."

He meets my eyes, then slips it off and lays it out, two fingers hooked in the shoulders of the leather, treating it gently, even now.

All eyes around the table fall to that cut laid out.

"You can go," I say.

Once he leaves, I slam the gavel down. "Meeting adjourned."

Melissa—

My foot is bouncing a mile a minute, revealing my inner distress. How did it come to this? Right this minute they're in there taking the one thing away from Billy he's wanted his entire life, probably longer than he's wanted me. I put my head in my hands, guilt washing over me. Why didn't I stay away? Why didn't I push him away? This is all my fault.

He's going to lose what he wanted most, and like a runaway train, there's nothing I can do to stop it. I'm helpless, and I hate this feeling.

The door slams open, and Billy strides out. He's alone, and the parking lot is quiet. My car is parked on the far side of the lot, and I'm easy to find in a sea of bikes parked up front.

He walks past them all toward me. And one glance at him, and everything inside me deflates. He looks broken. My proud, beautiful man who always seems so confident and in control, now walks slumped, his head down.

I push off the car and move toward him. We meet in the middle of the lot. He won't hold my eyes. Instead, he stares at the horizon.

I lift my hands and put my palms on his t-shirt. The cut is gone. It's hard to take in. Seeing him without it affects me more than I thought it would.

"Billy. I'm so sorry." I'm panicked he'll blame me for this. That somehow this means the end of us, too. Tears fill my eyes and slip down my cheeks. My throat closes, and I can't even speak. How can I fix this, fix him, fix us? I don't know if I can.

He takes me in his arms, pressing his lips to my temple. “Shh. It’s gonna be all right. I don’t regret it for a second.”

I sob and clutch at him, knowing he doesn’t mean that. He can’t possibly mean that. I stutter in a breath and try to speak. “Don’t say that.”

“It’s true, Melissa. Yeah, this sucks, but I know I made the better choice. I just wish I could have managed to have you *and* that patch.”

“Maybe I can still talk to him, make him see—”

“No.” The word leaves his mouth with a sharpness I hadn’t heard before. “It’s done. It’s over. I have to move on, get a new plan. There’s no going back.” He cups my face and stares into my eyes. “We’ve got a future to plan. It’s you and me now, right?”

“Absolutely.” I throw my arms around his neck and clutch him to me, thanking God for this man and relieved he doesn’t blame me. Still, even as I try to be happy for our future together, a niggling thought in the back of my mind has me terrified he’ll come to resent me.

CHAPTER THIRTY

DONE

Melissa—

“Please don’t do this,” my mother begs from the doorway.

I ignore her and toss the last of my clothes into my suitcase, along with a couple of important items: my diploma, the diaries I’ve kept since I was thirteen, the jewelry box my great Aunt Natalie gave me when I turned seven, and the teddy bear I had with me in the hospital when I was three.

“Melissa, this isn’t necessary. This is your home. You act like you’re never coming back.” I hear the catch in her voice. I’m not the baby of the family, but I’ve always been *her* baby, perhaps because I was so sickly as a child.

“I don’t know that I am.”

“Don’t say that.” She crosses the room and hugs me before I get my bag zipped.

I let her, but it’s hard to feel anything. “Billy’s my future, and he and dad...” I break off, not even sure how to classify it. “There’s no going back, Mom.”

She hugs me tighter. “We can get through this. I know we can.”

“Well, that makes one of us.”

“Melissa, give it some time. Maybe things will seem different in a week or two.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Promise me you won’t drop out of school,” she insists, squeezing my hands.

I shrug, because right now I can’t promise anything.

“What’s going on?” My father appears in the doorway.

I pull free of Mom and grab my bag off the bed.

“What are you doing?” His eyes hit my suitcase.

“Leaving,” I say.

“Going back to school?” he asks, like it’s no big deal.

“No, Cole. She’s packing up, and she’s not sure she’s ever coming back.” I’m sure he doesn’t miss the anger in my mother’s voice.

His eyes move from her to me. “This is because of Billy?”

“How observant,” I mutter.

“Don’t take that tone with me, Melissa.”

I huff a laugh. “I’m nineteen, and I’m not in your damn club. I don’t have to take orders from you.”

He lifts his finger. “You are still my daughter.”

“And what’s that get me? Second to the club. Well, I’m tired of taking a backseat. Not one more day.” Bag in hand, I move past him. “I’ll call you next week, Mom.”

I hate that she’s in the middle, but it can’t be avoided.

“What the fuck do you mean, *second to the club*?” My dad trails after me. They both do.

I reach the entryway and whirl on him. “The club comes first. It’s even in the Evil Dead motto. *First, last, and always*. So where does that leave me? Where does that leave Mom? Not first.”

“Everything I’ve ever done was for you, your mom, and your brothers. Don’t you dare stand here and tell me you

haven't had everything you ever wanted or needed. Don't you dare tell me I haven't been a good father or husband or provider for this family."

"It's not about things, Daddy. Don't you get that?" I stalk to my car, feeling like nothing I say gets through to him anymore. We used to be so close. I don't even know when that changed.

I open the back door and fling my bag on the seat, then slam it shut. Climbing behind the wheel, I see my mother holding my father by his arm. That usually doesn't work, but this time it does; this time he hesitates.

I start the car and put it in reverse, then back out of the driveway and head to Billy. Everything inside me relaxes at just the thought of him. I can't wait to get to him, have him take me in his arms, and tell me everything will be all right.

Cole—

I feel like I've had my legs knocked out from under me with a baseball bat. How is it possible that everything I thought about my life, about my wife, my daughter, our family, has all been wrong? Never would I ever have guessed the resentment Melissa felt over the club.

I shake my head. Never have I thought I was putting the club above her happiness. Knowing my sweet little girl feels this way—has felt this way for God knows how long—drives me crazy. I'm shocked and hurt, and I'm not sure how to deal with it.

Her taillights fade into the distance.

“I should go after her,” I whisper.

Angel takes my arm. “Let her go.”

“Did I fuck up?”

“No. She’s in love with Billy, and she feels like she has to choose.”

I spin and pin her with my eyes. “I need to know something, Angel. And I need you to be straight with me. I don’t need you to blow smoke up my ass. Understand?”

“Okay.”

“Are you sorry I’m in this life, in the club?”

She stares at me for a long time, and I feel my heart drop to the floor. Dear Lord, could it be true?

“Cole, I am not sorry. This club is who you are. If I took it from you, if I could wave a magic wand and make it disappear, the biggest part of you would disappear with it. You *are* this club. I won’t lie to you and say it’s been easy, because it hasn’t. And she’s not wrong that the club has repeatedly taken precedence over things in our lives, but that in no way means I think you don’t love me or the kids. I know you do. I know you’d lay your life down for any one of us. I know, because you have risked your life for me, for everything we have.

“She’s young, Cole. She’s young and in love. And a girl’s first love is a powerfully strong thing. It takes a lot to break. I’ve seen them together, honey. I’ve seen the way they look at each other when they think no one notices. Their love is strong.”

“Like ours?”

“*Exactly* like ours. He loves her, Cole. Don’t hold that against him.”

“She’s my little girl. No one will ever be good enough for her. Not even Billy.”

“Then in your scenario, she dies an old maid. Is that what you want?”

“Of course not.”

“Then let her grow up. Let her make her own choices. She’ll always be your little girl.”

“I remember the first time I laid eyes on her. She was in that hospital bed in Phoenix, looking so small and frail. It almost killed me.”

“You’ve been a good father to her, to all of them, and a good husband to me.”

“Have I? Sometimes I wonder.”

“Stop it. You need to deal with your issues with Billy, because they’re going to be together, whether you like it or not. If you don’t get right with this, we’ll lose her. And I’m not losing my little girl.”

With that, she marches into the house.

I stare up at the moon. We’re a few short weeks from Christmas, and I’m facing the prospect of not having my daughter in my life for the first time since she was three.

I can’t let that happen; I just don’t know how to navigate this.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

US

Melissa—

When I come through the door, the apartment smells like garlic shrimp from the Hawaiian BBQ place down the street.

“I’m back.”

Billy leans on the kitchen counter. “How was your final?”

“Long, hard, and deep.” I stroll toward him and grab a shrimp, popping it into my mouth. “Like you.”

He chuckles and grabs my hips, pulling me to him. “Any time you walk into the room, darlin’.”

He and I have been staying at my apartment while I finish up the semester. But today’s psyche exam was my last, and I’m free until the Wednesday after New Year’s when spring semester begin.

“The car’s packed. You ready to leave?”

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I give him a long kiss, before pulling back. “So ready. I can’t wait to get a Christmas tree and decorate your apartment.”

He kisses my nose. “Not to mention, have the place to ourselves. I mean, I love Harley, but three’s a crowd.”

“Not if you ask the MC members,” I tease.

His brows lift. “You aren’t supposed to know about that stuff, pretty girl. Besides, half of the stories you hear around there are bullshit. Guys just bragging.”

“Oh, really? Good to know.”

He nods to the food. “You want to eat here or take it with us?”

“Take it with us. Let me leave Harley a quick note. She should be through with her final in an hour.”

“Sure, babe.”

I scribble one out and drop the pen. “Oh, and can we stop on the way to your place and get a Christmas tree? Christmas is in less than two weeks, and I don’t want to wait another minute.”

“Anything my girl wants.”

I hug him tight. “This is going to be the best Christmas ever, Billy.”

He cups my face. “You sure about that? You sure you wouldn’t rather be with your family?”

“I’m sure. Besides, we can still spend it with your family, right?”

“Yeah, but they usually do the Christmas party at the clubhouse on Christmas Eve, then we all go to a Chinese restaurant on Christmas day.”

“So, you and I can spend Christmas Eve just the two of us. And Chinese food on Christmas Day with your family sounds amazing.”

He grins and gives me another peck on the lips. “That’s my girl. Always up for anything.” He takes my hand. “Come on. Your suitcase is already in your car. I’ll follow on my bike.”

“There’s usually a Christmas tree lot on Snell Avenue,” I say.

“I know the one. I’ll follow you there.”

By sunset, we've got the tree in a stand in the corner of Billy's apartment near the front window. It's not the biggest or fullest tree, but with all the twinkling lights, it looks beautiful. We also bought a couple of boxes of silver and white ornaments. I thought since we couldn't afford much, I'd keep the color scheme simple. It works... almost elegant.

Billy puts his arm around my waist. "Next year we'll get a better one. I promise."

I lean my head on his shoulder. "I like this one. It's perfect."

His hand rubs my back, trailing up to stroke my hair. "I've got a little money stashed, enough to tide us over until I can find a job. But I'm sure I could spare some if you want to go Christmas shopping this weekend with the girls."

I shake my head. "I'm not buying any gifts this year. It's all about the spirit of the season, right? Not the gifts."

"If you say so," he replies, and I can tell he's relieved. "Still, the girls are going to the mall tomorrow. Wouldn't you at least like to tag along? At least take enough to get a peppermint frappe or grab some lunch with them. I don't want you to give up your friendships in order to be with me."

"I *like* being with you. But I see your point. I'll go with the girls. What will you be doing?"

He shrugs. "I'll find something. You want a glass of wine?"

"Sure." I curl up near the window and watch the people come and go in the donut shop on the corner across the street. It's all decorated with lights for Christmas, and it looks quaint and cheery. My eyes stray down the street to take in all the lamp post decorations put up by the city.

The church bells down the block chime out 6:00 pm and a light patter of rain falls, giving the pavement a sheen and

reflecting the lights.

Billy appears at my side, holding out a glass.

“Thanks.” I take it and turn to the street as the raindrops hit the window. “I wish it would snow.”

Billy chuckles. “Fat chance in this town.”

“It’s snowed here before. It’s possible.”

“When’s the last time?”

“When I was seven. I remember it like it was yesterday.”

He presses a kiss to my forehead. “Keep dreaming, sweetheart. Maybe we’ll have another miracle, and you’ll get your wish.”

I clutch his sleeve. “Let’s have a Christmas party. One of those ugly sweater parties.”

“I’m all for a party, but I’m not buying an ugly sweater.”

“What if I find one at Goodwill?”

“You’re really set on this?”

“Please?” I stick out my lower lip.

He rolls his eyes. “You know I can’t say no to you, don’t you?”

I grin. “Does that mean we’re having our first party?”

“If you want to, but it’s gonna have to be BYOB.”

“What does that mean?”

“Bring your own booze. I’m not supplying the liquor. TJ and Marcus will drink us broke.”

“Fine. A BYOB Ugly Sweater Christmas party. I’m sure I can get the girls to bring some food. It’ll be fun.”

The following Saturday, all our friends come over. Harley and her brother, Wolf's four kids, and my brother Brayden. When TJ and Marcus and Brandy walk in, I notice Billy's smile slide from his face.

I follow his eyes as the guys carry in a couple of twelve packs and a bottle of wine. They're wearing their cuts. I'm sure it's like poking the bear for Billy, but if we're going to continue to see them, he's going to have to get used to it.

Brandy pulls off her leather riding jacket to reveal an ugly sweater with big ornaments on the front.

"I love your sweater," I say, taking her hands and pulling her in for a hug. "Thanks for coming."

"It was the ugliest one I could find." She pulls the hem out to glance at the obnoxious red and green sequins, then nods at mine. "Cute."

Mine is the rear end of a reindeer with lights on the tail. I cup my hand and lean in to whisper. "Did you see Billy's?"

She cranes her neck and scans the room, then bursts out laughing. On the front it says, *Stop staring at my package. It's not for you.*

"I found it at the thrift store."

"How the hell did you get him to wear it?"

I waggle my brows. "Sex, dear. It works for just about everything."

She snorts out a laugh. "I couldn't agree more. So, how are things with you two?"

"Wonderful. I'm happier than I've ever been."

"Have you seen your family?" she asks.

My smile fades, and I tuck a lock of hair behind my ear. "Not recently."

“I miss not seeing you around the club. Are you going to be at the Christmas party?”

“Nope.”

“It won’t be the same without you.”

I shrug, trying to blow it off, my eyes on Billy.

Brandy follows my gaze. “How’s he doing? Does he miss it?”

“I’m sure he does.”

“I absolutely hate this.”

“Well, that’s what alcohol is for. Let’s get drunk. Come on.” I lead her to the kitchen, and we both do a shot of Fireball.

“Mary asked about you the other day. Have you seen Billy’s family?”

“No, but Billy said we’ll see them on Christmas day.” I glance over to where the guys gathered around the dining table. They’re all laughing and cutting up with each other. It’s good to see a smile on Billy’s face. I know he misses them.

The party is fun and lasts until about eleven-thirty when the guys get called away by the club. After that, the place empties, and soon it’s just me and Billy cleaning up red plastic cups. Once they’re all in the trash, he wraps his arms around me from behind and leans his chin on my shoulder.

“Did you have fun?”

“I did, but I’m starved. We didn’t have enough food.”

“I can fix that.” He tugs on my arm and passes me a jacket. “Come on. I’ve got just the thing.” He leads me across the street to the donut shop. The bell tinkles over the door when we walk in. Christmas music is playing, and the place is decorated with garland and lights.

The owner looks up from behind the counter where she's sweeping. "Billy. I haven't seen you in a while. How are you?"

"Hungry. What's left?"

"Well, we close in about a half hour, but I've still got some good bear claws and Boston creams."

"One of each, please, and a couple of coffees."

"Take a seat. I'll bring them over."

We sit near a window that's decorated with one of those scenes made from fake snow. It's of a sleigh in a quaint little town. I touch my finger to the flaky stuff stuck to the glass. "This is pretty. I wonder who does these."

"Her son, probably. He's a pretty good artist, so she says."

"Did you have fun tonight?" I ask.

"I did. Did you?" he replies, looking away.

"Yes. It was great seeing everyone. They're all going to the club party," I muse.

"Yep." His answer is short, like he doesn't want to talk about it. But we can't avoid the elephant in the room.

"Will you miss it?"

"The party? Nope. Will you?"

The owner slides our coffee and donuts on the table.

"Enjoy."

"Thank you," Billy says, hooking two fingers around the mug's handle.

I cup my hands around mine, feeling the warmth. I meet his eyes over the brim, and blow on the steam. "I saw your face when TJ and Marcus got called away by the club. You wanted to go with them."

He looks down at his coffee, but doesn't reply.

“It’s okay to admit you miss it, Billy.”

“A part of me longed to go with them. I’ll admit it, but every time I ever walked out on you, a part of me wanted to stay.”

I huff out a laugh. “The MC is kind of a love/hate relationship, isn’t it?”

“I suppose.” He sips his coffee, then tilts his head, studying me. “What about you, Melissa? I know it’s got to be the same for you. I know you miss your family.”

I stare out the window. I haven’t spoken to any of them, even though I told my mother I’d call her. And every time she calls, I let it go to voicemail.

Not even Billy knows that.

I keep expecting my father to show up and chew me out for breaking my mother’s heart, but he hasn’t. Instead of a sense of relief, it makes me sad, like I’m not even worth that trouble anymore. I do miss them. All of them. But somehow, feeling that way seems like I’m being disloyal to Billy.

We both eat quietly, and some of my earlier joy disappears.

I love Billy. I want to be with him, but I don’t think either of us are as happy with this situation as we thought we’d be. And that kills me. I only hope it doesn’t kill what he and I have.

“Billy?”

“Yeah?”

“I know it’s killing you to leave the club, and I’m realizing how much a part of my life it really is. Especially when Marcus and TJ walked in tonight with their cuts on. Brandy was talking about the club party on Christmas Eve. I used to always love when Red Dog would play Santa and give out presents.”

“I can’t go there, Melissa.”

“I know. I’m just trying to envision our life without the club, and I can’t. I’ve ruined this for both of us. This is all my fault. All of it.”

“The club—that’s done. We have to plan our own future together. And none of this is your fault.” He sets his mug down and takes my hands. “Look at me. I need you to understand this. You were always it for me. You were always meant to be mine. Always. From the day I first laid eyes on you. Even Mary knew that. I don’t regret what happened. Not for a minute. I’m not letting you go, Melissa. Not for a patch. Not for anything.”

I stare into his eyes, mine welling. “I’m not sure I deserve you, Billy. But I’m glad you’re mine. And I’m not letting you go, either. Not for anything.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

CHRISTMAS

Melissa—

Billy is still asleep when I slip from the bed, pull on one of his flannel shirts, and pad to the kitchen. I make coffee and cup my hands around the warm mug. It's chilly in the apartment, and I check the current temperature and forecast high for the day. It's thirty-seven with a predicted high of fifty-four and clear skies. I guess I'm not going to get my wish for a white Christmas today.

Sighing, I move to the window overlooking the street. It's early yet, and everything is quiet.

We spent a peaceful night last night curled up in bed, watching *It's a Wonderful Life*. As a child, it was never my favorite, but now I've fallen in love with its simple message.

Staring out the window, I can't help thinking about how the club has affected my life, and what my life would have been like if it hadn't existed. There's condensation on the glass, and I draw my finger through it.

Billy and I have had a wonderful few weeks together, and I am truly happy, but still... a piece is missing. It's hard for me to admit it, but I'm well aware what that piece is.

I know Billy feels the same. The club's been such a big part of both our lives, and now it's gone.

The day Billy walked out of the clubhouse without his cut, he said he had to get a new plan. That it was all good, that he was fine.

I don't think he is fine, but he's trying. For me. For us. And that means the world. Still, I feel like he's floundering, like we both are. Oh, we try to put on a brave front and happy faces. Fake it 'till you make it, they say.

That's what we're doing.

I want to think eventually the pain of losing that part of our lives will get easier, but with both our father's and my brother in the club, I don't see a way. It will be a constant reminder that we're outsiders.

Billy comes up behind me and wraps me in his arms, nuzzling my neck. His mouth moves to my ear.

"Merry Christmas, baby."

I lift my palm to cup his cheek, twisting my head to kiss him. "Merry Christmas."

Billy steals the mug from my hand and takes a sip, then meets my eyes. "You okay?"

"I'm wonderful. What time are we meeting your parents?"

"Ma said four. That okay with you?"

"Of course. What restaurant are we going to?"

"Golden Dragon on Third Avenue. They've got the best wontons. Mama Wu loves her wontons." He grins, and I wrap my arms around his waist, laying my head against his chest.

"I love you, Billy."

He kisses the crown of my head. "I love you more, Melissa."

"Not possible." I close my eyes and listen to his heartbeat. I never want to lose him.

"Hey." He rubs my upper arm. "I've got something for you."

Pulling back, I meet his eyes. "We agreed. No gifts."

“Sorry. I broke our rule. It’s nothing big, so don’t be mad.”

He bends and grabs a small box from under the tree—one I hadn’t noticed.

It’s a white box about the size of my palm and tied with a gold ribbon. I pull the ribbon free and lift the lid. Nestled inside white velvet is a necklace with a fine gauge chain, held together in front by two connecting hearts, one silver and one gold.

“It’s beautiful.”

“When I first saw you, you took my breath away and still do every single day. I love you, baby.”

I hug his neck and press my cheek to his, whispering in his ear. “I love you, too. Thank you for the beautiful gift. I don’t have anything for you.”

He tugs on my hand, walking backward. “Come on. You can show me your appreciation in the shower.”

I grin and happily follow.

At 4:00 pm, we ride to the Golden Dragon on Billy’s motorcycle. He finds a spot on the street and parks. Climbing off, I spot Red Dog’s pickup truck a few spots down.

Billy removes his helmet and hangs it off his handlebar, mine along with it.

Nabbing my hand, he steps up on the curb. “You ready?”

I nod and he leads me inside.

The place is decorated with ornate carved wood panels in a definite Asian style. There are dragon statues in gold and jade around the room.

The hostess approaches with a smile. “Two?”

Billy lifts his chin toward the back, where I spot his family at a big round table. “We’re joining that group.”

“Of course, follow me.” She leads us to the table and sets menus in front of us.

Red Dog stands and kisses my cheek. “It’s good to see you, Melissa.” Then he gives Billy a backslapping hug. “How are you, son?”

“Real good.”

I lean over and hug Mary, who cups my cheek.

“You look very pretty, sweetheart. Is my son treating you well?”

I smile. “Of course. He’s very good to me.”

“Good.” She pats my cheek. “Sit.”

I wave across the table to Mama Wu, and she nods and grins.

We order, and the waitress brings us drinks.

“How’s your bike running?” Red Dog asks Billy, and they talk about carburetors.

“When do you go back to school?” Mary asks me.

“Wednesday.”

She shifts her eyes from me to Billy and back. “So, what about Billy?”

“He’s coming with me. He’ll stay with me and Harley.”

“What about his apartment?”

“We’re going to keep it for now. I’ve only got a few months of school before I’ll be out again for the summer.” I shrug. “In the fall, I’ll probably commute. It’s not far.”

“I see. Sounds like you’ve got it all worked out.”

“We do. Billy found a job as a mechanic about halfway between his apartment and the University, so that should work out well.”

“That’s wonderful.”

“Yes, it is.”

Our meal is served, and the conversation breaks off. Billy lays his hand on my leg and squeezes, giving me a wink.

That’s all I need to put a smile on my face. Just a touch and a wink, and I melt a little every time.

The wine flows freely, and Red Dog holds his cup up for a toast. “To family. I hope you all know how loved you are. I think the New Year is going to bring us all joy and happiness. Cheers.”

“Cheers,” we all repeat.

I meet Billy’s eyes, and he leans in and kisses me.

“It’s going to be a great new year, baby. I promise.”

I grin. “Absolutely.”

“Oh my God,” Mary hisses.

We all follow the direction of her eyes and see Rosalie stalking toward us, a look on her face that clearly says she’s here to make a scene and ruin our meal.

“Fucking hell,” Billy mutters and rises to his feet to deal with her, pointing to Mary. “Stay in your seat, Ma.”

Red Dog waves him back in his chair. “Sit down, son. I’ve got this.” Then he rises and turns to face her, folding his arms. “What do you want, Rosalie?”

There’s a smirk on her face as she glances around the table. “What a quaint little scene. All the family gathered together. How sweet.”

“There’s more love at this table than you’ll ever know, Rosalie. You need to hear this and hear it well. I love my wife with all my heart and soul. You, nor any other woman will ever come between us again. Mary is the only woman I’ve ever loved, and our love is strong. Ain’t nothing gonna break it. That’s a fact. I’m sorry for leading you on and hurting you all those years ago. That was wrong. You deserve better. I’ve let you have your shots at me, but now it’s time to let the past go and move on. Find yourself a man who loves you like you deserve to be loved. Give this nonsense up. It’s Christmas day, so I’m not going to threaten you, but I will warn you. You mess with my family, you mess with me, and you do not want to mess with me again.”

Her eyes shift to Mary and then Red Dog, and she scoffs. “You deserve each other.”

Red Dog takes a step toward her and she takes a step back, then turns and stalks out.

A man at another table starts applauding and Red Dog waves it off. “Sorry for the interruption, folks.”

Mary rises from her chair and wraps her arms around her husband. “Thank you for that, honey. I know how you feel about me, but it’s nice to hear you publicly declare it.”

He dips his head and kisses her. “Shoulda done it long time ago. I’m sorry I didn’t, love.”

“Hey, lovebirds. Can we get back to Christmas dinner, now before someone tells you to get a room?” Billy asks with a grin.

They break apart.

“Smartass,” Red Dog snaps at him, and takes his seat.

Before she takes her seat, Mary leans over my chair, her arm on my shoulder. “See that fierceness he has to protect his woman and loved ones? It runs in the family.”

Then she pulls back and winks at me.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

NO ONE EVER

Billy—

It's the day before Melissa's classes resume, and we're leaving today. It's early, and she lies on her stomach next to me, sound asleep. I roll and trace a fingertip down her bare back, following her spine and pushing the sheet as I go until I reach those two sexy dimples at the base.

She makes a sound that tells me two things. One, she's not asleep, and two, she likes what I'm doing.

I pause to give her perfect ass a squeeze, then continue on to dip my fingers between her legs and find her wet for me.

"Umm. That's what I love, sweetheart."

She meets my eyes with a slow smile. "What's that? The fact that all it takes is a single touch from you to turn me on?"

"Exactly." I hold her eyes and rub circles around her entrance, then go in search of her clit to give it some attention.

Melissa licks her lips, and her eyes slide closed.

"Look at me," I say, and they open. "I want those beautiful eyes on mine." My fingers stroke through her slick, slippery lips, and she presses into them, eager for more. I watch her reaction, then dip into her opening to draw all that wetness and spread it all over her clit. She sucks in a breath and bites her lip. My hooded eyes move from her pussy to her face, and I flip her to her back, then slide two fingers deep inside her, searching and finding that spot that has her whimpering and

bucking. I add my thumb to the mix, rotating over her clit in tight circles.

She trembles, her breasts bouncing.

“Oh, God,” she stutters.

“You like this, baby girl? You like my fingers inside you?”

“Yes, yes.”

I tease her clit again and again, and she whimpers in pleasure.

I move down the bed, letting my mouth replace my thumb, and she thrashes wildly, lifting her hips off the bed to follow my mouth, seeking more.

“Christ, baby, you taste so fucking sweet,” I grunt, licking and giving her what she wants. “I want the taste of you on my tongue.”

I watch her face as I continue to torment her clit with my mouth and curl the two fingers inside her, pressing and stroking until she begs for release.

“Please, Billy. I’m so close.” She’s practically fucking my face, rubbing against me in desperate, frantic motions.

“Nothing and no one in this world will ever keep me from this sweet pussy again, understand?”

“No one. Ever,” she swears.

I suck hard on her clit and press on that magic spot, and she explodes, crying out.

I walk Melissa to her car and throw her suitcase in the back, then pull her hips to mine and kiss her.

“You won’t be long?” she asks.

“Nah, just want to pack up some things to bring with us. I’ll be up in a couple of hours.”

“Okay.” She drops another peck on my lips and climbs behind the wheel. “Don’t be too long.”

“I won’t. Promise.” I slam her door and wait while she backs out and drives off. Shoving my hands in my pocket, I turn to walk upstairs when I hear the rumble of a couple of motorcycles. Turning, I spot them coming down the street and wait.

Sure enough, it’s Marcus and TJ. They back to the curb and climb off.

Marcus pulls his helmet off, grinning. “Glad we caught you. Harley told us you were leaving today.”

“Yeah. Gonna stay with Melissa until she finishes the semester.”

TJ tips his head and looks at my apartment window. “What about this place?”

“Gonna hang onto it. We’ll be back here when she’s through.”

“Makes sense, I guess.”

“You wanna come up for some coffee?” I invite.

“Yeah, sure,” Marcus replies.

We troop inside.

“Heard you got a new job,” Marcus says as I pass him and TJ both a mug.

“Yeah, Harper Brothers in Alameda. I start next week.”

TJ leans against the counter. “That’s great. I know you always talked about having your own shop when we were growing up.”

“Maybe that’ll come in time.” I stare into my cup. “Right now, I’ve got to concentrate on getting us on our feet.”

“Sure, sure,” Marcus says. “I know how that goes. Things are tight at the beginning, but hey, that’s when you spend most of your time in bed together, so living on nothing isn’t a big deal.”

“Hey. That’s my sister you’re talking about.”

Marcus laughs and slugs him in the arm. “Let that go, bro. That train’s left the station.”

TJ downs his coffee. “Well, I don’t want to hear about it.”

“When you leaving?” Marcus asks.

“Just need to throw some food in the fridge away and load up a few things. What are you two up to today?”

They both shrug.

Marcus finishes his coffee. “Thought about goin’ for a ride. Maybe grabbin’ a beer with you.”

I jerk my head toward the street. “Help me load up and ride to the university with me.”

They exchange a look.

“Unless you need to stay close to the club.”

“We could tag along.” Marcus sets his mug in the sink.

TJ does the same. “Yeah, sure, that sounds good.”

A couple of hours later, the three of us pull into the apartment lot.

When I open the door and walk inside with the guys behind me, I immediately notice the quiet. I find it odd that Melissa didn’t meet me at the curb or at least at the door,

especially when I'm sure she would have heard our bikes.
"Melissa?"

She doesn't answer, and I check the bedrooms. The place is empty.

The guys stand with their hands in their pockets.

"She gone?" Marcus asks.

I walk down the hall to the living area. "Yeah, guess so."

"Give her a call," TJ suggests.

I check my phone for any missed calls or texts, but I've got nothing. I hit her number and put the phone to my ear. She doesn't pick up, and it goes to voicemail. "Babe, I'm at the apartment. Where are you? Call me back."

I end the call and walk into the kitchen but stop short. The fridge door is open and there's broken glass on the floor. Things are scattered everywhere, like there was a struggle.

"Oh, fuck," I hiss.

"What is it?" TJ stands behind me, and his eyes take in the mess.

"Something happened. Something's wrong," I say, my heart pounding in my chest. I try to think clearly, try to come up with an explanation.

Marcus appears and takes it in, then meets my eyes. I'm sure it's a flashback to when he found Brandy taken from his apartment. He sees my panic and lifts his palms. "Okay, calm down. It's probably nothing. Maybe she cut herself. Maybe she went to the ER."

I shove them both out of the way and race to the window, scanning the lot for her car. It's there, a couple of spots down.
"She didn't take her car."

“Maybe Harley drove her,” TJ suggests, already pulling his phone out. “Let me call her.”

While he does that, I backtrack through the apartment, looking for anything I missed.

TJ dashes down the hall, stopping at the door to Melissa’s bedroom, his hands on the frame. “Harley isn’t with her. She hasn’t been able to get ahold of her, either.”

We stare at each other, and the answer dawns on us at the same time.

“Jason Biggs,” we both say.

“Come on. I know where his fraternity house is.” I shove past him and down the hall.

“What’s going on?” Marcus asks.

“Jason Biggs is at it again. Let’s go,” TJ says.

Five minutes later, I barge in the door, Marcus and TJ at my back. We surprise a couple of fraternity brothers who are watching tv in the living room.

“Hey, dude. What the fuck? You can’t just barge in here.”

“Where is he?”

“Where’s who?” a taller one asks.

“Jason Biggs,” TJ snaps, flexing his fist. “He took my sister.”

“Who’s your sister?” one asks, and I grab him by the collar and slam him against the wall.

“Where the fuck is he?” I growl.

He puts his hands in the air. “Jason is in London. He left before Christmas with his parents. He’s staying until June. He’s doing a semester of international studies. Finance. I swear. We did a video call an hour ago. He was on the London Eye, for fuck’s sake.”

I release him and step back. “So, you’re saying it wasn’t him?”

“It wasn’t him, what?”

“Someone took Melissa Austin from her apartment. Jason’s been harassing her. If it’s not him, you know anyone else who took an interest in her?”

“I’m sure a lot of guys were interested in her, but hurt her? No, man. I don’t know anyone who would have hurt Melissa. She’s a sweet kid,” the tall one says.

I turn and stalk outside, running a hand through my hair. I do the only thing I can think to do. Call Harley. “Hey, girl.”

“Did you find her?”

“No.” My eyes hit the horizon. “Something happened at the apartment. The kitchen looked like there was a struggle. The guys think she may have cut herself and gone to the health center. Where is it?”

“Three blocks west on Devon. Is that what you think happened?”

“I don’t know. Were there any other guys interested in her? We checked on Jason Biggs. He’s in London and has been for weeks.”

“Not that I know of. Those instances all stopped after you beat the shit out of him.”

“I’m checking the health center. If you don’t hear from me, meet me at the apartment.”

“Okay. I’ll try calling around. Do you think we should call the campus police?”

Her words give me pause. I’ve been raised my entire life you don’t turn to the police for help. Ever. You turn to the club. I clench my jaw. If I can’t track her down, I know I’m going to have to call Cole. “I’ll meet you at the apartment.”

I disconnect. “Let’s roll.”

It takes about ten minutes to find out she’s not been admitted into the ER. I’m getting a sick feeling when we pull up at the curb in front of the apartment. Harley comes running out.

“Did you find her?”

I shake my head, climbing from my bike and ripping off my helmet. I drag a hand through my hair and pace. “I don’t know her schedule. Is there anywhere else she’d have gone?”

“I can’t think.”

I pull my phone and make the call I’m dreading. It’s picked up on the third ring.

“Yeah?”

“Cole. Melissa’s missing.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

REVENGE

Melissa—

The sound of motorcycle engines carries to me. Pain explodes on my scalp as a hand fists in my hair and drags me from the chair to the window. My hands are tied behind my back, and there's duct tape across my mouth. Through the blinds, I see Billy, TJ, and Marcus pulling up to my building across the street. I try to scream, but it's muffled behind the tape.

Laughter rings in my ear. Sick, twisted laughter, and I tremble.

“They can't help you now, Ms. Austin. They don't have a clue.”

He shifts, and his face comes into my view. I look into the eyes of Professor Ling.

His laughter comes out in a maniacal way.

“This was too easy. Scheduling a meeting to discuss your application to the psychology program and then happening upon me going to my car.” He sneers. “Oh, Professor Ling, I didn't know you lived right across the street in those apartments.” He mocks me in a ditsy voice.

God, I trusted this man. Thought he was a mentor. Now I'm at his mercy.

“It was even easier to get you to agree to invite me into your apartment to discuss it instead of us both driving all the way to campus. Of course, I had to make you seem like it was

your suggestion, but you fell for it hook, line, and sinker. What an idiot girl. Naïve. Probably just like your mother.”

My eyes flare. Why is he doing this? And what does he know about my mother?

“The taser I used was a little poetic, but I couldn’t help myself.”

Poetic? What does he mean?

My eyes shift to Billy and fill with tears.

“Go ahead. Look. They can’t help you. They don’t even know where you are. Even you came confessing to me how scared you were. Ironic that you were confessing your fears to your monster.”

I look at him, bewildered. The terror creeps up. I glance around the room, seeing the framed picture of my family that’s been missing from my apartment. He’s been my stalker, and no one knows. No one even suspects. “What do you want with me?” I try to say behind my duct tape. It comes out muffled, but he gets the gist.

“Oh, I’ll tell you. After all, what’s the fun in all this if I don’t get to tell you why you’re going to suffer?” His eyes glint with excitement that gives me the chills.

Oh my God. This man is deranged. I glance again at the framed photo of my family. The one he stole from my room. He plans to kill everyone.

His eyes follow. “Yes, it was me who took it. When I saw that idiot frat boy, I knew he’d be the perfect cover. Then you had to call in those bikers. They were with you every time you weren’t in class. I had to bide my time. Watch you throw yourself at that one.”

My stomach churns at what he may have witnessed through our window.

“Slutty college girl, that’s what you are.”

I try to speak again, and he cocks his head, then drags me across the room and shoves me in the chair again. “I’ll take the gag off if you promise not to scream.”

I nod.

He reaches to the tape, but pauses, as if he’s rethinking it. His eyes narrow. “Try anything, and I’ll slit your throat. Understand?”

I nod again.

Professor Ling peels the tape off slowly. Once I’m free, I lick my lips. “How did you know who I was?”

“I didn’t until I saw that guy pick you up last spring break.”

I frown, thinking. “TJ?”

“Yes, then I did some research, and lo-and-behold Cole Austin had a daughter. I matched your high school yearbook picture, available online, and knew it was you. Then I couldn’t resist getting my revenge.”

“Revenge for what? What did my father do to you?”

“You don’t know?” The fact that I don’t know pisses him off, and he paces around the room. While he talks, I glance around, trying to find a weapon or a way out of this.

“Does your father murder so many people he can’t keep track?”

“I don’t know what you mean?”

“Cole Austin murdered my father. We never found the body, but my uncle knew where my father was going the day he disappeared. They were in business together. He always knew what happened.”

“Why didn’t he do something years ago?”

“Because he was in prison after that. He got out last year. He told me on his deathbed who had killed my father. Made me promise to avenge him. I never figured I’d have a way to do that. Then along came you.” He runs the tip of the knife down my throat and grins. “Maybe I better gag you again.”

“Why did my father kill yours?” I ask.

“My father, Wu Ling, did business with a man named Chucky, who introduced him to Cole Austin. They were supposed to do a business deal. The way I heard it, things went south, and Austin killed my father and stole his merchandise. After that, Chucky disappeared, too. Word was Cole and his club killed them both in an ambush.”

“I don’t know anything about what you’re talking about,” I tell him. But I do. My mother told me before I left for college the story of how my father saved her from a white slavery ring, and then set up the man who sold her so he could kill him. In the process, he freed a van full of other kidnapped women bound for the same fate. She’d wanted me to know the story she’d hid from me her whole life because she wanted me to take my safety very seriously. She even told me one of the girls in the van became Crash’s ol’ lady, Shannon.

“You’ve heard of the expression *what goes around, comes around*? Sometimes it takes a long time. You see, princess, you’re going to pay for the sins of your father. Then I’m going to take care of your mother. Maybe I’ll make your father watch. I see there are other children.” He points at the photo. “You have two brothers. I’ll track them down, too. By the time I’m finished, your father will want to put the gun to his own head and pull the trigger.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

WHERE IS SHE?

Billy—

I'm sure right this minute, Cole has the entire club scrambling, and I know they'll descend soon. I can't wait that long.

"Harley, where else would she go?"

"I don't know." She stares down the street, then yanks her phone from her pocket and begins scrolling. "Wait a minute. She told me last week she'd made an appointment with her psychology professor about her application into the program. Yes, here it is. 11:00 am, Professor Ling."

"Where's his office?" I snap.

"Let me check." She does some more scrolling and typing. "Graham Hall. The Psychology Department is on the second floor. Come on. I'll show you where it is."

She climbs on the back of TJ's bike, and we ride across campus.

It takes a minute to find it, but there's only a receptionist at a desk.

"We're looking for Professor Ling. Is he in? It's urgent."

"He's not here."

"He was supposed to have a meeting with my roommate earlier today. She's gone missing, and we're trying to track where she might have been today."

"When was the meeting, and what was her name?"

"Melissa Austin at 11:00 am."

She taps on the keyboard to her computer. “I’m sorry, but he had no appointments today. In fact, it shows he called in sick.”

“Is there any way we could check with the head of the department?”

She stands. “Let me see if he’s available.”

As soon as she walks away, Harley dashes behind the desk and looks at the computer screen. Then she clicks a picture. Dashing around, she grabs my arm.

“I’ve got it. Let’s get out of here.”

“What did you get?” I snap.

“His home address.” She pulls her phone out and reads it. “Holy shit.”

“What? What is it?”

“He lives in the building across the street from us. 812 Avalon, apartment 213.”

Marcus and TJ and I connect eyes.

“You carrying?” I ask Marcus, knowing damn well he’s got more than one stashed on him. He nods and pulls a 9mm from a shoulder holster under his cut. Without a single objection, he hands it over to me.

“Let’s move.” We run to the bikes and race across town.

Two blocks down, lights flick on behind us, and I look in my side mirror to find campus police on our asses. I glance at Marcus, and he waves me forward. He and TJ slow and pull over for the cop, but I keep going, repeating the address and apartment number over and over in my head.

I coast to the curb half a block down, not wanting to announce my arrival. Then I run full out to the building. It’s an elevator building, but I use the stairwell, taking them two at a

time. I slip in the fire door and move silently along the hall, searching for 213. I hit the jackpot with the third door on the right. I pull Marcus's weapon and press my ear to the door.

I hear muffled crying and an angry voice. It's got to be them. Trying the door, I find it locked, so I back up two steps and blast the lock, then I boot it open and rush in, my gun up and ready.

Melissa's tied to a chair in the dining room. Ling has a knife to her throat.

"Stay back. Drop your gun," he demands.

I look at Melissa. She has tears in her eyes. I know one thing for sure. There's no way I'm dropping the gun. "Do you trust me, baby?"

She nods.

Before Ling gets a clue to what's coming, I pull the trigger. The blast blows the back of his head out, blood and brains spraying the wall. He's dead before he hits the floor.

I drop to my knees and cup Melissa's face. "Are you okay? Did he hurt you?"

She shakes her head, almost too hysterical to speak. I grab the knife off the floor and slice through the zip ties restraining her. Then I take her in my arms.

"You're okay. Thank God, you're okay."

"You came."

"I always will."

Marcus and TJ burst in, followed by Cole and the club... all but my father.

Cole's eyes are wide, and his face is tight with fury and, yes, terror. I don't blame him. I know how he's feeling. It's

how I felt when I came through the door and saw that knife at her throat.

I release Melissa, and Cole hugs her, cradling her head in his hands. “Thank God you’re safe.” Once they have their moment, he pulls back and asks me. “Who the fuck is he?”

I shrug, but Melissa tells him.

“He’s Ling’s son. He said you killed his father years ago when you saved Mom and Aunt Shannon.”

Cole’s chin pulls to the side, and he frowns. “Ling’s son?” His eyes shift to Crash, who moves to the body.

“Jesus Christ. After all these years?”

A look of pure torment washes over Cole’s face. “This was because of me? Because of the club? He was going to make you pay for what I did?”

“He was trying to hurt you, Daddy. He was going to kill us all.”

“My God.”

“That’s revenge served cold, huh?” Crash comes to him and leans in. “I get the monumental pain of this moment, boss, but we’ve got to clean this up and get rid of the body.”

“How the fuck are we going to do that?” I lift a hand to the bloody wall.

“We tell the police the truth. He tried to kidnap me. He was going to kill me,” Melissa says.

Crash folds his arms. “Sweet pea, Billy killed a man. They aren’t going to care.”

“You don’t know that. It was self-defense,” she insists.

Cole cocks his head. “Was it? They’ll shoot that defense down in court, and when they do, they’ll put Billy away, probably for a decade at least. That what you want?”

“Of course not.”

“Then we do this my way.”

“Cole, I fired my gun twice. At the door and again here.” I hold my hand out at the body slumped on the floor. “Someone must have heard it.”

Cole jerks his chin at TJ. “Check the halls. See if anyone’s snooping.”

I notice none of them have their cuts on. Even TJ and Marcus have taken theirs off at some point. Maybe, if no one heard, we’ll get lucky. But if anyone saw anything, the jig is up, and I’ll have to take my chances with the law.

The men keep the door closed, busted lock and all, and we all wait quietly. I long to take Melissa in my arms, but Cole does it instead, murmuring against her temple as he rubs her back.

TJ comes back and shakes his head.

We wait another thirty minutes for sirens and flashing lights to descend on the building, but none ever do.

I’m beginning to think we might get away with this.

Cole jerks his chin at me. “Take Melissa and leave. Try not to draw any attention to yourself. Go to the clubhouse.”

I nod and hold my hand out to her. She takes it, and we slip out, walking slowly to the stairwell. We try to look normal, and I wrap my arm around her shoulders. We walk the half block to my bike, and I roll slowly away, trying not to draw attention.

I notice the club van parked down the street, along with several bikes.

God, I hope this works.

We walk through the clubhouse door and find my father. I glance around, seeing he's the only one left behind. "Why didn't you go with?"

"Twisted my damn ankle the other day. You both okay?" He limps over and hugs Melissa, and then me. "Cole called. He said they're going to hang tight until darkness, then move the body. They're cleaning the apartment and repainting the wall."

"What are they going to do with him?" Melissa asks.

Red Dog shakes his head. "That's not for you to know, sweetheart. You forget everything about today, understand?"

She nods and wraps her arms around my waist.

"Come on. You both look like you need a shot of liquor."

We move to the bar, and my father goes behind it, unscrewing the cap on a bottle of Fireball for Melissa and tequila for me.

We down our shots, and then we wait.

Eventually, Red Dog tosses me the keys to one of the rooms. "Get some rest. I'll wake you when they're back."

I guide Melissa up the stairs and down the hall.

Thank God the room is clean, and the bed is freshly made. Dad doesn't spend much time here anymore. I guide her to the bed and kneel, slipping her shoes off, then meet her eyes.

"You want to take a shower?"

She shakes her head, so I stand and tuck her under the covers, then kick off my boots and lay beside her. My arm goes behind her, and she cuddles against me. Then it all spills out.

"I was so scared, Billy. I thought he was going to kill my whole family. And when you came through that door like

some action hero, I thought he might kill you, too.”

“I’m glad you trusted me.”

“I knew you’d never do anything that would endanger me.”

She tightens her hold on me, and I kiss her forehead, cupping her face. I don’t want to admit how terrified I was.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

BROTHERS

Billy—

It's 2:00 am when there's a knock on the door, and my father pokes his head in. Melissa dosed off about midnight, but I've been awake, staring at the ceiling, thinking about how differently tonight could have gone.

"Come on," Red Dog whispers.

I slowly remove my arm from under Melissa and sit up, pull my boots on, and follow my father down the hall.

Coming down the stairs, I see the club has returned.

Cole whistles. "Church. Now."

I watch the men file past until it's only TJ, Marcus, and me. I join them at the bar.

"How'd it go? What happened?" I ask.

"We got lucky. I think a lot of people haven't returned to campus yet. The building seemed pretty empty. Anyway, we cleaned the place up and got rid of the body," TJ says.

"How? Where?" I ask.

Marcus and TJ look at each other. Then Marcus replies. "That's club business, Billy. Sorry."

I roll my eyes. "I'm the one who blew the back of his head off. I'm the one facing life in prison, but sure, club business. Right."

They both grin, then TJ clears his throat. "How's Melissa?"

“She was pretty shaken up, but she fell asleep around midnight.”

He extends his hand, then pulls me in for a back slapping hug. “Thanks, man. You saved her life. I owe you one. We all do.”

His voice is choked up, and I nod. I didn’t do it for him, or Cole, or the club. I did what I did out of the all-encompassing love I have for that girl. “I just want her happy and safe.”

“We all do.”

“So, what happened when you blasted through the door?” Marcus asks.

“He had a knife to her throat. Told me to drop my gun. There was no way in hell I was doing that. I looked her in the eyes and asked her if she trusted me. She nodded, and I blew his head off.”

“Christ, you’re a cool one.”

“My hand was steady until I dropped to my knees and cut her loose from the chair. Then I felt the tremors set in. Tried not to let her see, but Christ, that shook me up.” I glance around. “Where’s Harley?”

“We took her home. Shannon probably knows by now, which means she’s going to call my mom, and I expect any minute that door is going to fly open, and she’s going to rush in here looking for her baby girl.”

“Probably so,” I murmur.

Marcus goes behind the bar and pours us all a shot of tequila, then lifts his glass.

“No matter what happens now or in the future, I want you to know I consider you my brothers, and I always will. Hell, both your mothers raised me like I was their own. So, to me,

we're good as blood. I'll stand for either one of you any day of the week."

"Same." I lift my glass, and so does TJ.

"Absolutely."

We all down them and slam them on the bar.

Jake walks into the room and emits a sharp whistle. "Come on."

TJ and Marcus start to follow, and I hang back.

Jake lifts his chin. "You, too, Billy."

My stomach drops, but I follow, preparing myself to get reamed out for what happened. The three of us have kept the whole stalking thing from Cole, and I'm sure there's going to be hell to pay.

We file in, and it's déjà vu for me. I can't help but relive the last time I was here, standing at the end of the table and taking off my cut. Every man turns to look at me. I'm aware I'm the only one in the room without a cut on.

I find the courage to connect eyes with Cole.

He lifts his chin, talking to all of us. "The three of you should never have kept this stalking thing from me."

I knew that was coming.

"But I appreciate the lengths you all went to keep my daughter safe." He rises and comes to stand in front of me. "You saved my daughter, Billy. I owe you one."

"I didn't do it for you. I did it because I love her. She's everything to me. I chose your daughter, and I'd do it again in a heartbeat."

He studies me, and I refuse to look away under his scrutiny. Instead, I tighten my jaw.

He holds out his hand. I shake it, and he pulls me in for a back slapping hug. He turns and jerks his head at Green, who is standing near the end of the table. Green comes forward and passes the leather he's holding to Cole.

Cole holds it up. "This is yours, if you want it."

I pull my chin to the side. "Why?"

He arcs a brow. "Because I made a fucking mistake. I didn't look past the circumstances to the man. But I swear to God, you ever lie to me again, it'll be the last thing you do."

I stare at the cut in his hands. He's holding it out to me, but I'm not sure I'm ready to get back on that rollercoaster. I exhale a long breath. "More prospecting?"

His chin comes up. "Put it on, and you'll find out."

I look at Green, then my father. They both hold their tongue, but I know they want me to accept it. But there's one thing stopping me.

I meet Cole's eyes again. "There's something I need to say before I put that cut back on and all that comes with it."

Cole shifts on his feet. "What's that?"

"You make things right with your daughter. I can't be in this club if she's at odds with it."

He doesn't reply, but he nods once.

I glance at TJ and Marcus. TJ nudges me, and I slip it on. It feels right. It feels good, and something inside me settles for the first time in weeks.

Cole moves to the head of the table. "I'm calling for a vote. Do we make these three men our brothers? Show of hands."

TJ, Marcus, and I look at each other, eyes wide. None of us expected this tonight. A reaming out? Yeah. A reward? Hell

no. TJ grins and motions for me to turn around and look. I glance at the table and see every hand in the air.

“Motion passes.”

My father approaches the three of us. He grins and holds up three center patches. Those prized Evil Dead skulls.

Cole also comes around, and Red Dog passes him one. Cole hands it to TJ and gives him a hug. Then he presents Marcus with his, doing the same. Finally, my father hands me mine, and hugs me tight, slapping my cheek.

“Proud of you, son. Now I get to call you brother.”

I look around the table. I have a club full of brothers—men who will have my back through thick and thin, right or wrong, do or die.

Green comes over and takes my hand in an arm wrestler’s hold and meets my eyes. “I’m proud as hell of you, Billy. You earned that. Now it’s up to you to defend it, and never let it touch the ground. Better get a needle and thread and get to sewing.” He pulls me in for a hug.

“Thanks for being my sponsor, Green. And thanks for believing in me when no one else did.”

He grins and throws his arm around me. “Let’s go get drunk.”

The room empties, and we head to the bar.

I stop short when I see Melissa standing in her mother’s arms.

Her eyes drop to the cut I wear.

I swallow and move to her, trying to read her face. “Babe, we need to talk, I—”

My words are cut off when she moves to me, her arms locking tight around my stomach, and her head presses to my

chest.

I cup her head and feel wetness on her cheek. I push her back, and look at her face. “Are you angry?”

She shakes her head and emits a sob that turns into a laugh. “Not angry. I’m happy. It looks right there.”

I hold up the center patch in my hand, and her eyes get big.

“You’re in?”

“I am. But only if you’re good with it, and I told your father he had to make things right with you.”

“Melissa?”

I turn, and he’s standing behind me, his eyes on his daughter.

“All these years, I never knew how you felt. I never want you to feel second to this club. Forgive me?”

She nods and moves into her father’s embrace. He cups the back of her head, his eyes sliding closed. They stay that way for a long minute, and he whispers something to her, but I can’t hear what he’s saying.

It doesn’t matter; the visual is all I need. My girl has her father back. I glance at the patch in my hand. I was willing to give this all up for that girl, and I would have lived a happy life with her, but I have to say, it feels fucking fantastic to have them both.

This MC is a family—my family—and I’ve got a dozen brothers.

Green approaches and holds a shot out to me. Then he grins. “One for all, and all for one, right?”

I laugh and click my glass to his. “Evil Dead, ride or die, brother.”

“Brother,” he says the word like he’s trying it on for size.
“I like the sound of that.”

EPILOGUE

MEANT TO BE

Melissa—

“It’s time.”

“What?” My eyes bug out and my gaze drops to Sara’s very pregnant belly. “Now?” We’re at Crash’s rooftop deck, soaking up some sun and getting in some girl talk. All the girls from the club are here.

She makes a grimace and grabs her stomach. “Yes, now.”

“Slow down. Breathe. Let’s time your contractions, honey,” my mother suggests, always the cool headed one.

My eyes connect with Brandy’s. Both of us know the club is miles away on a run.

Shannon takes Sara’s hand. “Are the pains sharp?”

“They feel like a really bad cramping.”

“When did they start?”

“Not long after we got here.”

“Why didn’t you say something?” Crystal scolds. “That was hours ago.”

“I didn’t want to spoil the fun. We haven’t all gotten together in so long.”

“Well, no wonder you’ve barely been talking. You were miserable, poor thing.” Mary pats her shoulder.

“Here comes another one,” Sara grits out, her hand squeezing Shannon’s.

Mom looks at her watch and waits until she's through and it's passed. "They're lasting fifty-one seconds and coming every three minutes. How long have they been this strong?"

"Since I got here."

"So that's been almost two hours." Shannon confirms and meets my mother's eyes.

"I think she's right. It's time to go to the hospital."

"I need to call Green," Sara says, but my mother takes the phone from her hand and passes it to me. "Melissa can call him. Let's get you to the car."

They help her to her feet from the Adirondack chair and suddenly her water breaks, fluid running down her legs.

"Oh, no. I'm so sorry," Sara whimpers.

"Nothing to be sorry about. It'll be easy to clean up out here. We'll just hose it off." Shannon puts her arm around Sara, and she and my mother guide her to the door.

"I'll drive," Mary says, holding up her keys.

"I'll handle cleaning this up," Crystal calls after them. "Don't worry about a thing, honey. We'll make sure Green gets to the hospital in time."

After the door closes, it's just me, Brandy, Harley, and Crystal.

I quickly dial Green. It goes to voicemail. I try Billy, but his does, too.

Crystal tries Wolf but shakes her head. "Okay, look, girls. No need to panic. They're probably riding and can't hear their phones.

"Do any of you know where they were going?" Harley asks.

"No clue," I say, looking at Crystal. "You?"

“Wolf said something about the cabin. They were going to clean it up for the Memorial Day bash.”

My brows lift. “The cabin up at Lake Mary? That’s over five hours away.”

Crystal shrugs. “They left at ten this morning. It’s almost three. They should be there any time now.”

“And if Green leaves immediately, he’ll still not get here until after eight tonight.” Harley’s hands hit her hip. “Will he miss the birth of his first kid?”

Crystal holds her palms up. “It should be fine. First babies are notorious for taking their sweet time.”

“Let’s hope.” We get to work cleaning up.

About fifteen minutes later, I try again.

Billy—

We’re flying down the highway when Green suddenly slows. He looks at his engine like he’s trying to figure out what’s wrong. The bike starts jerking, and the motor dies. He coasts to the shoulder, and the rest of us circle back.

“What the fuck’s wrong?” Cole asks.

“I’m out of gas.”

I coast to the exit ramp about fifty yards down and spot a gas station around the trees. I roll along the shoulder. “There’s a station at the exit.”

Cole grins at Green. “Guess you’re pushin’ it there, brother.”

We all ride there and wait. Green makes it to the ramp, then jumps on his bike and coasts down the ramp and onto the lot, making it to the pump.

He yanks his wallet open and jams his card in the reader.

“I’m getting a bottle of water,” Cole says, striding off.

“It won’t take my card. Give me yours.” Green holds his hand out to Red Dog.

“Fuck no. Besides, I’m overdrawn.”

“Did you put it in face up?” Wolf asks.

“Yes, I’m not a moron.”

“Debatable.”

Green gives him a look of death.

Red Dog leans against his bike, his arms folded, and lifts his chin at the car on the other side of the pump. “Ask that pretty girl. Maybe she’ll help you out.”

“Are you serious right now?”

“As a heart attack.”

Green turns. “Wolf? Help me out.”

“I can’t, bro.”

“Can’t or won’t, asshole?”

“No, really. I don’t have my wallet. Left it at home.”

“You lying piece of shit. Give me some money.”

Standing behind Green, I pull out my own, but my father waves me off and twists to Green. “You’re gonna get nowhere in life with that attitude.”

“Come on. One of you has to have some money. Sara’s about to pop, and I’m gonna miss the birth of my first kid.”

The woman at the pump leans around it. “Your wife’s having a baby? How much do you need?”

Green’s face lights up. “You’re an angel. Five bucks will get me home.”

“No, no, no. Sweetheart, you gotta make him earn it. Dance for the lady, Green.”

“What?” He whirls on my old man.

“Dance. Dance. Dance,” Wolf chants and pulls up a song on his phone.

“Are you serious? You’re killin’ me, Wolf.”

The lady at the pump grins and shrugs. “Guess you have to dance, sweetie.”

Green glares at Wolf. “I seem to remember being very supportive when you were the one going through this.”

“Which time?” Red Dog jokes.

“All the times,” Green snaps. “Fine.”

Green starts to dance to the driving beat, but Red Dog holds up his hand. “No, no. Give her the whole experience.”

“We’re at a gas station, Dog.”

“Lady’s waiting,” my father answers.

“Not to mention Sara,” Wolf adds with a grin.

“Fucking fine.” Green rips his shirt off, revealing his rock-hard body. Then he starts making moves Magic Mike would have been proud of.

Cole walks out of the gas station with a bottle of water. “What the fuck is he doin’?”

“He’s dancing for gas money.”

TJ, Marcus, and I start laughing, and Green glares and points at me. “Your time’s comin’, young one. Just wait.”

Cole lifts a brow. “Shut the fuck up, Green. I’m not ready to be a grandpa, for God’s sake.”

When the song ends, the lady tucks the five in the waistband of his jeans. “Nice moves.”

“Thanks, darlin’.” He pulls the bill out and kisses it. “You’re a lifesaver.”

“Well, that’s a new low, Green. Even for you,” Cole states. “You ready to get this shitshow on the road?”

“Yes, boss. Just give me a minute.” Green dashes inside to prepay his pump.

We gas up and are finally back on the road.

We make it to San Jose, but before we get to the exit for the hospital, lights are flashing behind us. I glance in my mirror. There’s a cop coming up fast. We all slow and get in the right lane, hoping he’ll blow by our pack, but he gets right up on our ass.

Cole makes the motion, and we all pull to the shoulder.

We stay on our bikes, but Cole and Green climb off.

“Officer,” Cole says. “My brother here is trying to get to Covenant Hospital. His ol’ lady’s having a baby.”

“If I had a dollar for every time I’ve heard that excuse...”

“I swear to God.” Green puts his hands together like he’s praying.

“Oh, really? When was her due date?” the officer asks sarcastically.

“It’s not for a couple of weeks. She’s early, and that’s not good. Please let me go.”

“Let me see your license. If there are no warrants, I’ll let you go.”

Green digs it out and hands it over.

We all sit, waiting. I hit up Melissa and text her a photo of the cop behind us. A picture is worth a thousand words, I figure.

It doesn't take long for her to reply.

MELISSA: ARE YOU F-ING SERIOUS. THE DOCTOR JUST KICKED US ALL OUT OF THE ROOM. IF GREEN DOESN'T GET HERE IN THE NEXT TEN MINUTES, HE'S GONNA MISS IT.

I climb from my bike and hold my phone up to Cole, showing him the text.

“Christ.” His hands land on his hips, and he stares at the cop. I can tell he's debating telling Green to get the fuck out of here, cop be damned. He looks at Green. “You want to risk it?”

“If it'll get me there in time, fuck, yeah.”

Green throws his leg over his seat just as the officer climbs from his squad car.

Cole lifts his hand, signaling Green to hold up.

The officer holds the license out to Green. “You're clean. You serious about the ol' lady having a baby?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then I'll give you boys an escort. Follow me.”

As he gets in his car, Cole and Green exchange a look, and Cole shrugs. “You got lucky, brother. Let's go.”

With lights flashing and sirens wailing, we pull up at the maternity entrance, and Green runs inside, leaving us all in the drive.

Cole stands and goes to shake hands with the officer. I hear him promise the guy free drinks at the clubhouse tonight before the guy laughs and drives away.

The rest of us stroll inside in a pack of leather, turning heads.

We load onto the elevator and take it to the third floor.

The girls are waiting when the doors slide open.

“He make it?” Cole asks.

“I think so,” Angel answers, hugging her old man.

I give Melissa a hug, and she pulls back to look in my eyes, cocking a brow.

“You better not be late to the birth of our baby,” she orders.

I make an X over my chest. “Cross my heart.”

“Baby? What baby?” Cole snaps, his face paling.

Melissa laughs. “There’s no baby, Daddy. Chill out. I’m talking about in the future.”

Everyone moves off to the waiting area, but I snag Melissa’s hand, and we hang back. Pulling her to me, I kiss her and press my forehead to hers, grinning. “Maybe you *should* tell him there’s a baby.”

“He’d have a heart attack. No, scratch that. He’d kill you, then have a heart attack.”

I chuckle. “It’d be fun, though.”

“When we really do have a baby, you can tell him. How about that?”

“Sure. I’m holding you to that.” I kiss her lips again. “You decide yet if you want a big biker wedding or something small at a church?”

She cocks her head. “I was thinking maybe we sneak off to Vegas.”

I shake my head. “We do that, I won’t have to worry about your father putting me six feet under. Your mother would do it for him.”

She giggles and tugs at my hand. “Come on, let’s join the rabble.”

“The rabble? Cute. Does your father know you call his MC rabble?”

“How about horde? Is that better?”

Green dashes up in scrubs and tugs his mask down. “I’m a father! It’s a boy! Whose got cigars?”

The guys all rush him, enveloping our brother in bear hugs. The hoots and hollers attract some looks from the nurse’s station, but none of us give a shit.

Cole slaps him on the shoulder. “You may be the last of the original members to reach this milestone, Green, but you did it. Gotta say, if you’d become a father in your younger years, I’d have worried about that kid.” Cole looks at me. “But I think now that I’ve seen you’re capable of guiding a boy to manhood, I’m not worried as much.”

“Hey, leave my manhood out of this,” I joke, lifting my hands.

Green hugs our president. “Thanks, man. Coming from you, that means a lot.”

“How’s Sara?” Melissa calls out.

“Radiant. Happy. Though she really wanted a girl.”

“There’s always next year,” I tease.

Green’s head swivels to me. “Bite your tongue, Billy.”

Wolf slaps Green’s shoulder. “Congratulations, brother.”

“Thanks, Wolf. Got any words of advice for me?”

Wolf tilts his head, considering. “Having children is a lot like life at the clubhouse—nobody sleeps, everything’s broken, and there’s a lot of throwing up.”

A week later, we’re all at the clubhouse, celebrating Green and Sara’s new baby.

I step behind Melissa and wrap my arms around her, pressing my cheek to hers. “Have I told you lately you’re my everything?”

She tilts her head, and I kiss my way down her neck. “I’m always up to hearing it again.”

“I can’t imagine my life without you, babe. You were made for me.”

Cole whistles, quieting the group, and lifts a shot glass in the air. “Congratulations to Green and Sara on the birth of their son.”

“Hear. Hear.” Glasses and bottles lift into the air.

“In the end, it’s all about family and the next generation comin’ up and claiming their spot. So, Green, Sara, everyone... here’s to the next generation. May they be wiser than us.”

“Hear. Hear.”

Cole downs his shot. I connect eyes with my father. He grins and gives me a wink, then downs his own shot.

I hold mine up in a salute to him, then do the same.

Life is good. I’ve got a patch on my back, and my girl by my side. I lean down and kiss her, as happy as I’ve ever been.

Things are right in a way I always dreamed they'd be.

Melissa turns in my arms and kisses me, and I know in my heart I was right all along.

This girl was always meant to be mine.

I hope you enjoyed BILLY.

Here's a teaser from the next book in the Sins of the Father series...TJ

TJ—

Marcus, Billy, and I are in the Sturgis shop of Brothers Ink to get our official club tattoo at our one-year mark. My brothers, Billy and Marcus, already sit in chairs with their artists.

I hear the snap of gloves going on behind me.

“Guess that leaves you to me, handsome.”

I turn and meet the eyes of a breathtakingly beautiful girl.

She smiles. “Hi. I’m Gigi, the boss’s daughter.”

My eyes flick to Jameson, the famous artist who’s prepping Billy’s skin with an alcohol wipe. The artist is so famous he’s called the King of Ink.

He glances up, his gaze laser sharp. “You’re Cole’s son, aren’t you? You have to be. You look just like him.”

“Who is Cole?” Gigi asks before I can answer.

“Evil Dead’s president, sweetheart. So, you better do a good job.”

She grins like the gauntlet has just been thrown down.
“Oh, I’ll take real good care of him, Daddy.”

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